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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 11

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 11

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 11.

Words of Caution

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

Dedication

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

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

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

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

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MR. JAGUAR

By K.A. Merikan

Photo Description

Two men lie on a bed locked in a passionate embrace. Completely naked, oblivious to the world around them, they share something special, a bond they couldn't possibly have with anyone else.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I feel there is so much emotion on the bottom's face in this photo. I want to know what the story is behind these two guys. The author can write anything they would like, as long as the story includes the following:

1) I love enemies-to-lovers and best friends-to-lovers stories. I don't care which route you go, I'd just like it to be a story from one of those genres.

2) I love angst! Angst would be very much appreciated.

3) It has to have an HEA. I'll leave the rest up to you. Tell me who they are, why they are so in love, how they got to this point, and where they are going from here.

4) No gratuitous sex or PWP, but like the picture shows, I'd like this one to have some seriously hot smexin'.

5) Would prefer this one not to have any BDSM.

Sincerely,

Stacey Jo

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: enemies to lovers, cinderfella, reunited, geeks/nerds, blue collar, businessman, bullying, escort, first time, high school crush

Word Count: 33,604

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MR. JAGUAR

By K.A. Merikan

Chapter 1

The heat made Mike boil in his uniform, so even though his boss had told him not to, he pushed the top of his coveralls down to his hips. Mike was pretty sure the old pig was just jealous his employee looked so much hotter than him. Not to mention both Vega's wife and their daughter, Vanessa, were making eyes at Mike, which couldn't be going down all that well with the guy. Vega probably only kept Mike on because he couldn't find anyone else who'd do the job for the slave wages he was willing to offer and live in the ancient motel by the gas station as well.

Mike carried a crate of beer into the small convenience store where Vega sat behind the counter, sweating, farting, watching TV and fanning himself with a newspaper. Without a word, Mike made his way toward the fridge to stack it full of beer. When he left home three years ago, he never thought he'd end up working at a shabby gas station in the desert, in a dead-end job, and with no one to fuck. No, when he came out and his family showed him the door, he was sure what awaited him would be a gay paradise, a never-ending parade of hot, tight asses and eager throats. Instead, he was stuck in this dump, barely scraping a living, not able to save up for anything, not able to afford a car, even though he kept fixing other people's.

Life just wasn't fair for Mike Miller. Wasn't a hot mechanic every gay guy's dream? Thanks to the free gym Vanessa let him use at the motel, he never got out of shape after high school, unlike some of his former teammates, but that wasn't helping his chances when he didn't have a quarter to his soul and never met anyone. Hell, if things kept up the pace they had slogged at for the last twenty-seven years of his life, maybe he should knock up Vanessa and become the proud heir to Vega Gas & Motel?

There wasn't much traffic at the moment, but Vega wouldn't let him have a moment's peace, so he pulled out a rag and started pretending to clean the fridge door of the ever-present dust. He could kill for a cold beer right now. His throat was slowly turning into sandpaper while his skin couldn't have been more wet without getting into a shower stall.

From outside, he heard the low hum of a car, but when it came to an abrupt stop, he knew they had a customer. Mike groaned but just kept stacking the beer in the fridge and enjoying the cool breeze coming from between its cold walls. It was like standing in the door to Narnia. He crossed his fingers for the

customer pumping his own gas, paying Vega, and disappearing from sight. But no, the hoarse, cigarette-infused screech grabbed the back of Mike's neck to haul him back to the door like a disobedient puppy.

"Hey, you! There's Mr. Jaguar waiting for his lady friend. Chop, chop!"

Mike rolled his eyes and put a cold beer against his forehead for a sec before closing the fridge. "I'm going, I'm going. Can't he pump his own gas? Rich asshole." He walked along the shelves, but just as he was about to put his sunglasses on, he saw the Jaguar in all its glory. Sleek and designed for speed like the animal it was named after, the convertible almost blinded him with sunlight reflecting off its silver body. Mike's eyes already strayed to a slim figure leaning against its side. Mr. Jaguar didn't look like someone who belonged in a beat-up place such as this. Dressed in a pair of well-fitted, cream-colored slacks and a white shirt, he was the male version of the bombshell blonde customer even Vega would rush out to pump gas for. The presence of such a woman here was as elusive as the possibility of a meteorite striking Vega through the roof. Mike would take the meteorite, hands down. Or Mr. Jaguar, who combed his dark hair with his fingers and looked at Mike through a pair of pitch-black shades.

Mike was drawn out of the convenience store as if the guy were that cold beer he dreamt of. He'd rub him all over his body, not just the forehead. He put his sunglasses on as well, not really even dreaming the guy would be gay anyway. But stare he could, even at a straight guy.

"What can I do you for?" Mike asked, walking up to the car and shamelessly running his fingers along the side of the Jag's door. He'd sell his soul for a machine like that. The customer's mouth opened slightly, as if Mike's invisible finger pressed on the middle of that plump lower lip. There was just a shadow of dark stubble on his cheeks, which only accentuated the customer's angular cheekbones. *Sharp as razor blades*, thought Mike, but it did nothing to stifle his excitement. It wasn't often that he met a man this hot in person. Slim, but the rolled-up sleeves revealed toned forearms covered by a dusting of black hair. The customer stared at him in silence, eyebrows gathered into a deep frown over the sunglasses.

"I ain't got all day, you know?" Mike pouted and put his hands on his hips. He wasn't going to take shit from Mr. Jaguar, no matter how hot he was. And he was *so* hot. Mike imagined himself grabbing the guy and fucking him on the hood of the car. He'd get to bury his dick in a piece of hot meat and caress the body of the car as well.

“You seem familiar.” Slowly, the customer raised his hands and took off the sunglasses, revealing a pair of narrow, expressive eyes. They were as blue as the sky above them.

Mike gave him another once-over, from the stylish leather shoes, to the catalog-trimmed hair. “I’ve never left the county, so I doubt it,” he said, but stood a bit closer, hoping Vega wouldn’t see it from his farting chair. What if the guy actually *was* gay? Maybe being “familiar” was meant as a pickup line? Why was he so bad at this kind of stuff?

“I used to live around here,” said Mr. Jaguar, giving Mike a long look. “Didn’t you go to Alberta High School?”

Mike frowned and took a step back. “Yeah, why?” He pulled his sunglasses off and combed his fingers through his brown hair. Fuck. He should have combed it that morning. Was this the moment he should say something like, *I’d remember someone as hot as you from school* and they would both laugh before going round the back for a quick blowjob? Mr. Jaguar did have nice lips that now broadened in a smile.

“Mike Miller, am I right? The quarterback.”

Mike gave him a crooked smile. *Mike Miller, the quarterback*. That did sound nice. Too bad it wasn’t high school anymore, and you couldn’t live off being a mediocre football player. He’d been good in school, just not good enough for a scholarship.

But Mike had to focus on the problem at hand. He couldn’t link those blue eyes to a name at all. “Yeah, long time ago,” he said and held out his hand to the guy, hoping Mr. Jaguar would save him from his misery and introduce himself. He didn’t even take the hand Mike offered.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked with a small smile.

Mike crooked his head to the side and rubbed his hand against his sweaty stomach as if he’d never held it out. This was getting truly annoying. “Not really, no.” He shrugged, trying to keep his cool even though goose bumps of shame were crawling up his back. A motherfucker he was supposed to know from school pulled up in a Jag, and he had no choice but to pump his gas. Perfect. Another perfect day in the life of Mike Miller.

The customer sighed and gave a shallow nod. “I will help your memory. I’m the guy you cornered in a shower stall. You switched on the icy cold water for a good laugh with your teammates,” he said, forcing his lips into a smile.

Any hint of a grin dripped from Mike's face like sweat. This couldn't be happening to him. There they were, the school's resident gay nerd and him, about to pump his gas. This had to be the guy's dream come true. A prophecy written in the stars. It could have only been worse if Mike were fat by now. He didn't even remember Mr. Jaguar's name all that well. Only the nickname he got after an unwanted outing during a slideshow presentation.

"Lovelace." Like the actress in *Deep Throat*. Mike groaned and took another step back. His life had reached a new low.

"It's James. And certainly not 'Lovelace'," whispered... James, who looked nothing like the thin, shapeless teen with longish hair Mike remembered from school. "But I am happy that I was entertaining enough to be remembered."

As angry as Mike was with this meeting, he couldn't help but have his skin throb at the knowledge that this guy was in fact gay. Mike put his hands in the pockets of his low-hanging coveralls and swallowed. James was the first real gay guy Mike had ever known, and he had been trying to hook up with him even when James had been an ugly duckling. None of his attempts ever worked out the way he wanted though. Being in the closet didn't help either. Like that shower stunt. That was an epic fail. Mike had this fantasy that it would all work out like in a porno. He'd get James wet, have him undress and... stuff would happen. Instead, the whole fucking football team came into the locker room and wrecked the mood.

"Yeah, whatever. You'll always be Lovelace to me." Mike summoned a grin. Okay, so maybe he was as poor as dirt, but at least he could still have some satisfaction over this guy. Mr. Look-at-me-I've-got-a-Jag.

James put the sunglasses over his eyes and frowned. "I'll get some coffee. Wash the car," he said and started walking toward the store.

Mike spread his arms to the sides. "You've got to be shitting me!"

"The key's inside," said James, showing off his tight ass, or at least that was how it seemed to Mike. Those pants fit James perfectly.

Mike looked back to the Jag. For a split second, he imagined jumping in, showing Vega the finger and driving off never to return. With the added bonus of leaving James without a car. Mike knew he wouldn't do it though. He wasn't a criminal, even if it would make his life so much easier.

Mike took a deep breath and stroked the side of the door again. The car was so pretty, no matter whom it belonged to. It actually took Mike a while to get

into the driver's seat, shyly as if he were courting a virgin. The upholstery was soft, cream-colored leather, and the seat was a dream to sit in. He'd never had the chance to actually drive a vehicle so polished, new, and classy. Yes, that was the word. There was no fish tank in the back, no television set, or big speakers, but everything inside was of highest quality. And it smelled of a cologne that very much spiked Mike's senses.

He carefully drove the car into the garage where he washed the cars. At least there was shade here. Even the short drive was as smooth as spreading soft butter all over toast. Mike scrutinized the car when he got out, and in fact, it wasn't half as shiny as it had seemed to him at first glance. Like the hot guy who then turns out to be all too familiar.

That was his life. He either met no gay guys, or tempting gay guys who'd never suck him off. Grumbling under his breath, he prepared the necessary supplies and started working the soapy sponge over the beautiful exterior. It was only when he glanced toward the open doors that he noticed the already-familiar silhouette of James. God knew how long he had been standing there and ogling Mike with his gay eyes!

"You don't have to supervise me. I know what I'm doing." Mike rinsed the soapy sponge in a bucket of clear water and then dipped it in the soapy water again.

"I know," said James as he sipped some coffee out of a paper cup. It gave Mike some satisfaction to know that the coffee powder in the store's vending machine was past its due date. "I'm just enjoying the view."

Mike actually stopped moving and looked back at James while polishing the wet metal. He could feel his stomach muscles move with a deeper breath. Good thing he was tanned because heat rose to his face at that comment. "I bet you had a crush on me in school, didn't you?" Mike tempted his luck. "How's being gay working out for you?" he asked, but rinsed the section he just washed with a hose, as if the encounter didn't affect him at all.

"You were one of the guys I was jerking off to, yeah." James slurped his coffee and leaned against the wall. "Being gay is lots of fun. How is being straight working out for *you*?"

Mike frowned, words stuck in his throat. When did Lovelace get all this confidence? Then again, it probably came with the same money that got him the gorgeous Jag and designer sunglasses. Imagining this grown-up James jerking off made Mike stall with his answer even longer as he dropped to one

knee with a brush to scrub the wheel. "Good," he finally choked out. God, he was such a loser. "With these abs, I get pussy all the time."

"Yeah, I can imagine. They are quite the dream, especially with sweat beading all over you." James smiled and stepped closer, resting his hand on a wooden chair.

Mike felt a sudden need to pull on the other half of his coveralls, instantly countered by the urge to get naked altogether. "It's a car wash, not a peep show." Mike gave him a glare and scrubbed so hard that it got his muscles aching.

James put the cup on the seat and pulled out his wallet. A green note rustled in his hand, and he started playing with it in his fingers. "You could strip for me."

Mike's stomach twisted, and he almost dropped the brush to the floor as he stared at the hundred dollar note. Was it beneath him? Probably not. He was in a position where he washed his clothes with Vanessa's to save up on going to the Laundromat. "More," he spat in the end and looked around the empty garage and to the wavy air over the asphalt far off on the road.

James snorted. "For a strip? You're already half naked."

Mike swallowed and rinsed the wheel with the hose. "I bet you really wanna see my wet-dream cock though," he said with a lot more confidence than he actually had right now. James's shoulders had such a nice shape to them. He couldn't get over how much Lovelace had grown.

"I don't know. Maybe you're advertising something not worthy of my attention?" teased James. He picked up the cup and kept on drinking.

Mike turned off the water and stepped closer, with his heart going up to his throat. James terrified and excited him at the same time. "Okay, a hundred for a strip, a thousand for a naked car wash?" He knew he was pressing his luck (and humiliating himself in the process), but no one would have to know it ever happened, and Mike could actually save some money for once. That was of course if he didn't become an alcoholic after this traumatic experience.

James slowly sat down on the chair and crossed his legs. The smile never once left his face. He was enjoying himself like a cat playing with a tormented mouse. "I can give you two hundred for a jerk-off."

Mike swallowed, painfully aware of every drop falling from the hose to the floor. Sure, he'd want to touch James. He'd do it for free or even pay for it if he

had any money, but when James put a price on it, it felt a lot more dirty than the Jag he was tending to. Was this really all he was worth? He looked at the concrete ground and nodded. It wasn't like he'd hate it. It wasn't like he was being asked to eat pussy or even blow the guy.

"I'll close the door," he muttered breathlessly, shame and arousal mixing in him like a badly made Jägerbomb.

James nodded, relaxing in the chair. "You know, the one reason I was always sorry I didn't do sports at school was that I was missing out on ogling cocks in the shower."

Mike pulled down the garage door, painfully aware of the coveralls sliding down his hips. For a moment, they were surrounded by darkness, but when he switched on the light, everything became painfully real. After a quick wash of his hands in the small sink, Mike rubbed his nape and slowly approached James, unsure how to go round the deed with James sitting. "You should have said you wanted to suck off the whole team."

James drew in a sharp breath, which sounded very prominent in the silent garage. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, right. All the straight players getting off on a *fag*."

"Maybe there were some gay ones." Mike shrugged and walked up to James. Without further ado, he bowed down, put his hand on the back of the chair, over James's shoulder, and reached for his fly with the other. Sink or swim. He hadn't been with a guy in three years, and he was not letting this handsome birdie out of his grasp.

But it certainly wanted to fly. James gasped and scrambled out of the embrace, stumbling to the wall. The cup fell to the floor, having left a brown trail down the leg of his pants. "What was that?" whispered James, his throat squeezed so tight, it sounded like a wheeze.

Mike frowned and straightened up. "You wanted a handjob. You thought I wouldn't do it? If this is some fucking joke to you, then it's not funny." He clenched his hands into fists.

"No!" It sounded as if James was spitting the word out in distaste. "I wanted *you* to jerk off. Christ!" he uttered breathlessly.

Oh. So Mike wasn't even good enough to touch Mr. Jaguar, only worth ogling. He chewed on this thought for a while as it left a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. He took a deep breath and stepped back, feeling like an idiot. "Okay, whatever, I can do that," he groaned.

James swallowed, but stayed by the wall, crossing his arms on his chest. "Okay." He looked too hot for his own good.

Mike swallowed, trying to fight feeling like dirt under James's designer shoes and backed off, sitting his ass on the hood of the Jag. "How does it feel to have your dream come true, Lovelace?"

Even in the dark corner James hid in, there was no mistaking the way his Adam's apple bobbed at the comment. "I didn't get anything yet."

Mike groaned, but he supposed it was time to show off the goods. He pulled the zipper of his uniform down in one quick move. On hot days like this one, he didn't wear anything underneath, so that was it. His cock was right there, on show in the bright lights, already filling. He looked up to James, imagining how it would be to have those plump lips around it.

Mike was big—they both knew he used to easily push James around—he was hot, and his cock was pretty damn good, and yet, it felt so strange to be undressed under someone's scrutiny, for their sole enjoyment. He would get his pleasure, but it was obvious his orgasm would not be truly *his*. There was complete silence as he revealed himself, the wet metal warming up under his buttocks. James made no comment, no move, nothing. He was just staring at him like a living camera.

Mike tried to seem casual as he slid his hand down to his dick, slowly coaxing it to life. Was two hundred bucks worth losing his dignity like this? He wasn't all that sure anymore. But then again, hadn't he lost all self-respect last week when he had to clean up Vega's vomit from the floor in the convenience store? Oh God, he shouldn't be thinking about Vega and vomiting right now. Instead, he focused on James again. On his angular cheekbones, blue eyes, on the veins on his toned arms...

Mike spat into his hand and started pumping his dick with a groan. James exhaled and took one step closer, which was just enough for the light to reach his face. His lips were half open in contrast to the eyelids, which were lowered over the eyes, giving James a dazed look.

Mike took a deep breath, quickening his strokes. He supposed it was all the power he had left over James. Not much in comparison to a Jag and a full wallet. He looked down to his own cockhead with a groan before darting his gaze back up at James. Mike's stomach muscles danced with every deep breath and grunt. His body tingled with intermingling sensations of shame, powerlessness, and excitement. This was a real gay guy watching him, being excited, coming closer... what?

James was slowly stepping up to Mike, his hands firmly clasped at the back of his neck, but with the front of his pants tenting, there was no doubt about what James thought of the ordeal.

"It's an extra five hundred if you wanna suck me off," Mike rasped, hoping James would actually take him up on the offer. His gaze wandered down to the front of James's pants again, and he sped up the jerk-off. But James stepped back, all the way into the semi-darkness and watched Mike's illuminated body in complete and utter silence.

Mike was losing momentum, too ashamed of what he'd offered, and even more ashamed that it got rejected. Rich fuck. He looked down to his dick and started pumping it with a new ferociousness, trying to forget James was there. He liked watching his own cock anyway. The way the cockhead kept popping out of his fist. Mike imagined doing it to another guy, and the visuals always helped. It didn't take long for him to come with a grunt, spurting all over the concrete and panting for air. He rubbed the hood of the Jag with satisfaction, imagining it belonged to him.

Slowly, he looked up, to the ceiling with tubes and cables dangling around because there was no one who bothered with bringing order, or even doing some dusting. There was still nothing coming from James's safe corner.

Mike let himself catch some air before standing back up. He stretched, trying to seem all chilled and casual. He looked up at James and zipped up his coveralls. "Happy?"

"Yeah, it was quite entertaining," said James, stretching out his hand, with two bank notes that Mike had earned with ten minutes of work.

He had to walk up to James to pull them out of his hand, which was the pinnacle of this experience. "Did you pull up here just for this?" he groaned and pushed the money into his pocket.

"No, I still want my car washed," said James, putting his hands into his pockets, on both sides of the bulge in his pants. He smelled of arousal, and all of a sudden, gaydar-less Mike could tell.

"Sure, why not. Why not watch how badly I did, huh?" Mike walked back to the buckets, trying to ignore the burning shame. "'Look at me, I used to be the school loser and now I've got a Jag'," he muttered and dipped the large sponge in the soapy water.

James sighed. "You must really hate it, don't you?"

Mike's pulse sped up, and he could feel the vein bulging out on his neck. Even the orgasm he'd just had couldn't soothe his nerves when James rubbed his success into Mike's wounded pride. What else was James gonna make him do? Polish his fucking shoes? The worst thing was, for enough money, Mike would do it. He could deny it to himself as he washed the hood of the car, but he'd do a lot to get out of this dump.

"You must hate lusting after me this much." Mike caught on to the only leverage he hoped he had.

James snorted, all nervousness gone from his voice. "You're just one hot fish in a sea of plenty."

Mike didn't dare look up at him, afraid his cheeks were so red by now that it would show. "You're a dick," he muttered and squatted to wash the car door. The vehicle wasn't filthy, more covered in dry dust than anything else, so the wash was going smoothly.

"Then we have a lot in common," said James.

"You don't know shit about me." Mike rubbed the silver surface with rising anger. What right did this bastard have to strut in here like this, boss him around, make him feel like dirt, and stand there like a Popsicle Mike couldn't lick?

"Maybe I should."

"Oh yeah?" Mike groaned. "Why?"

James started walking along the wall, past the car. Mike didn't raise his head, but he watched James's torso through the windows. No chance of seeing the face though.

"Plain old curiosity. I always liked gathering new information."

Mike's blood boiled, and he stood up, unable to take it anymore. He squeezed the sponge in his hand and looked into James's eyes. "Of course you do. Once a nerd, always a nerd. I'm stuck in a shit job with nowhere to go, and I'm not some asshole, I'm an okay guy. I just needed someone to give me a chance, but no one will." He took a deep breath, shocked at how much it shook him to spurt it all out. "And I am that gay player who just wanted a blowjob from the only gay guy he'd ever known. Fuck this shit!" He threw the sponge into the bucket and went for the door. He was so done. Even he had some limits. He kicked a broom on his way.

“What was that?” James’s voice was loud and clear, just as his footsteps on the concrete behind Mike.

Mike groaned and rolled his eyes. “You heard me, so now fuck off.”

“You’re gay?” James grasped Mike’s shoulder, pulling him back.

Mike took a deep breath and forced himself to turn around but pushed the hand off. “Yeah, I’m fucking gay.”

James watched him, wide-eyed. “Why didn’t you say anything?” he uttered, crossing his arms on his chest.

Mike pouted and mirrored the gesture. “Why? So you can mock my sad life even more?”

James blinked and slowly swayed his head from side to side. “Well, for one, I might have sucked you off. I’m not having a straight guy touch me. That would be gross.”

“You would?” Mike’s brain blocked out all the other information.

James shrugged, looking away. “Yeah, why not?”

“I don’t know, ’cause I’m now some loser you don’t want to have anything to do with? Oh, and ’cause you hate my guts?”

“I don’t think I hate you as much as you hate your job,” said James, suddenly looking up into Mike’s eyes. It seemed that he’d even gained an inch in height.

Mike pulled out the two hundred bucks. “Well, now at least I have some cash to drown my sorrows in. It’s not so easy to get out of here. What did you do to get all of this?” he pointed in the general direction of both James and the car.

James frowned. “If you’d like to join me for the weekend, you can hear all about it. Would two thousand be enough for your time?”

Mike swallowed, looking into those gorgeous blue eyes. “I—Is this some crazy sex thing?” he asked, losing more ground with every passing minute.

James rolled his eyes. “Of course it’s not. You want a chance? Here it is. I want to go within the next twenty minutes, so make up your mind,” he said with a grim expression.

Mike’s heart was pounding so fast he was sure he’d get arrhythmia and die soon. “And what am I supposed to do for you?”

James swallowed hard but kept his gaze level. "Pretend to be my date during a conference I'm attending."

A few rusty cogs slowly turned in Mike's mind. Ha. So there *was* something missing in Lovelace's life. "Two thousand and a ticket to Vegas."

James snorted. "Why, you want to start out as a professional stripper?"

Mike glared at him. "No. I just always wanted to go. It seems like a good place for a new start. I could be a bartender or some shit."

"Some shit' sounds more like it," said James, but spread his arms with a sigh. "Deal."

"Stop trash-talking your date then. Fuck," Mike growled and pulled up the garage door, still hardly understanding the deal he'd just made.

"Wash the soap off before you go?" James nodded to his car, but his eyes had a different glint to them. Something had changed, but Mike couldn't put his finger on it.

Chapter 2

This had the potential to turn out to be the worst decision in James's life.

He kept pressing the button on his MP3 player, in search of that one song that would calm him down or give him an energy boost, but it just wasn't coming. What was he thinking? He was way too old to enter the same river twice. The guy was a bully, and James could still remember being afraid of going to school because of him. Why would he even consider offering Mike Miller money for a date that was to last three days? *Three days too long.* The arrangement didn't even include sex because James was uneasy about the idea of paying someone for this kind of thing. He might have grown up, he might have polished himself, but some things just refused to change.

But God, Mike was still hot and tempting like a deep-fried Mars bar. James dared to think that maturity looked good on his high school crush. Watching him masturbate was to James like a visit to the Large Hadron Collider for a scientist. It made James feel privileged, even though he knew there was nothing special about what happened in the garage. Other than Mike turning out to be gay.

And there Mike was, that big hunk of beef, with his chest covered with a white tank top that still exposed every ridge. With orange shades, low-hanging jeans, and a big duffel bag thrown over his shoulder, he looked like the wet dream he'd always been to James. Even more so now, all grown-up, chunky and wide-shouldered. He'd probably had a quick shower as well, because his brown hair was damp and sticking to his face. Mike looked so happy with himself, James could hardly believe it. It seemed the guy didn't need much. He threw the duffel bag into the Jaguar's trunk in passing.

James wanted to make a snarky comment, but his lips were sealed. His gaze followed Mike into the convenience store. Through the large window, he watched him make his way to the counter, to the gray-haired man with a permanent scowl.

James saw Mike slam a bill on the counter, and the old man gave him some in return. Mike put all of them in his wallet and when he pointed outside, James felt their eyes on him. He froze, unsure whether he should smile or start the car and flee.

Mike's boss got to his feet and slammed his fist against the counter, his face becoming a mask of anger. James suspected Mike would not get any references

after that stunt. But then it got worse. James's eyes went wide when Mike started shouting something in the store and showed his boss his middle finger. All hell broke loose, the older man aggressively reached over the counter, and Mike backed off into a stack of toilet paper, sending all the rolls to the ground. James could hardly believe his eyes when Mike started picking them up just to send them flying at his screaming boss.

The only sensible thing that came into his mind was to break the fight apart by asking Mike to get into his car. So he pressed the horn. Mike turned to him and barely managed to duck when his boss threw a TV remote at him. He grabbed a few more toilet rolls and ran out of the convenience store. James was wrong. Mike hadn't grown up one bit.

He just stared at the scene. Was there a hidden camera somewhere? Was this all an elaborate plot to make James seem like a joke? He called out Mike's name, desperate to flee. His stomach was cramping with nerves already.

"I'm coming! Just gonna show this motherfucker what I think!" Mike yelled, running toward the car. But he wasn't the only one who rushed through the door. His boss was right on his heels.

"You better fucking come back and fix that or I'll call the cops!" the man screamed, shaking a cell phone in his clenched fist. He moved like a chimpanzee, hopping from side to side on his short legs as he ran through the parking lot.

James inhaled a huge gulp of air and started the car. Was this the moment where he got accidentally killed by a phone thrown at someone else?

"Fuck that!" Mike screamed and sent a roll at the man's head. It was perfectly aimed at his forehead and bounced off, leaving a long trail of paper on the ground. "Fix your own shit, old bastard!"

Any thoughts of death by phone dispersed like a childish whimsy when the station owner pulled out a gun. Mike jumped into the passenger seat of the Jag, not even bothering to open the door.

"What the fuck did you say, Miller?" the man screeched at them, waving the gun in the air.

James stepped on the gas and drove forward at full speed. He was hypnotized by the asphalt in front of him. His insides were one big mess of twisted anxieties, as he expected a bullet to shatter his rearview mirror any second.

Mike knelt on the passenger seat and threw roll after roll until he ran out of ammo. "Fuck you, Vega! And by the way, I fucked Vanessa!"

The station owner exploded with gurgling screams, and James accelerated the speed. In the last moment, he realized he didn't know whether they could safely exit the station, but the road was empty.

"Wh-what was that?" he uttered, overwhelmed by the heat that descended on him along with relief.

Mike sat back in the passenger seat with a self-satisfied grin, and crossed his arms on his chest. "Nah, I never fucked his daughter, just messin' with him."

James slowed down, trying to bring his heart rate back to normal. "I just... why did you have to make him so angry?"

"I slaved there for three years. You have no idea what a dick he is." Mike exhaled and started looking around James's car as if it was his own. At least the speeding air provided much needed coolness to James's head.

"Yes, but... how is that helpful? It's never a good idea to burn your bridges." James sighed, leaning back against the soft backrest. This whole thing was a terrible idea. Terrible.

Mike shrugged. "What do I care? I'm going to Vegas."

James frowned and looked back to the road. Now he had some idea how Mike ended up like this. There was no chance whatsoever that a person of such unpredictable character would ever get promoted. Anywhere.

"If you say so."

"So yeah, what's this conference? I'm actually looking forward to it now. I'm all pumped and stuff." Mike grinned at him from behind his shades.

This was so far outside of James's comfort zone that he didn't know how to react to Mike's behavior. "Well, it's about drugs and supplies for doctors," he eventually said, hoping it would be clear enough for Mike.

"Cool. So what do you want me to do? Call you 'sweet cheeks' and 'honey bun', and shit?" Mike put his hand out the car door, not even looking to James.

"Don't be ridiculous. Who does that?" James sighed. "You must know how people in relationships behave."

"I suppose, but do you want us to be more like the Obamas, or more like the Kardashians?" Mike pulled his top off, not bothered by anything. That sudden

flash of skin was distracting enough that James had to force his gaze off the tanned torso.

“Christ, definitely *not* like the Kardashians,” growled James, feeling his temples pulsate. “I don’t know... Obamas but less official, I guess?” He wanted to smash his head against the steering wheel.

“I can be the perfect boyfriend, don’t worry.” Mike waved his hand dismissively. “Could we stop at the Walmart in Alberta? I wanna get something to drink. There will be no other stores for a while.”

James counted to ten, desperate to calm down his galloping heart. “I won’t believe it until you prove it to me,” he muttered. After what he’d seen at the station, they definitely needed some trials before he could show Mike to the public.

“Starting now, my sweets?” Mike opened the glove box and started rummaging through it.

“Try harder. I need you to be classy. Like the wife of a wealthy plastic surgeon,” said James, though he already knew he bet on the wrong horse.

“Oh, so I’m a trophy boyfriend. Do I have a job or do I just sip martinis and fuck on demand?” Mike took out a pack of chewing gum and passed some to James, as if it was his to give.

“Don’t say that. I said classy. Do you even know what that means?” growled James, frustrated.

Mike went quiet and frowned, though his eyes weren’t visible behind the shades. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. “No fucking, only ‘making love’.”

“And that, you don’t talk about things like that with my business partners. Be supportive, nice, and tender,” said James, lowering his voice at the last word. What had he brought upon himself? This couldn’t possibly succeed.

Mike sighed. “Still as boring as ever, Lovelace.”

Heat rose in James’s chest. He had enough of this. “This is the addendum to our agreement. Each time you call me ‘Lovelace’ from now on, I will subtract a hundred dollars from your honorarium.”

Mike punched his arm. “This is so unfair!”

James tensed at the violation of his personal space, but he did feel a creeping satisfaction at Mike’s displeasure. This time, it was James who held all the cards, and he wouldn’t hesitate to play them. “I will not tolerate you insulting me.”

"I wasn't. I was just..." Mike didn't seem to know how to end his sentence so he just gestured in the air. James had no idea how people like him survived. "You're getting off on this, aren't you?"

"On what?" asked James, even though he knew well what Mike meant. But he would not back down from the ban on 'Lovelace'. This nickname was a token of the past he wanted to bury under a shopping mall so huge that no one would ever dig it out.

He'd earned it after one of the pictures from his teenage porn stash somehow ended up replacing the picture of a microscope in a presentation James delivered during class. It was of a guy deep-throating a monster cock and since then, Mike would not let it rest. Now James was starting to get the idea why that was. So, instead of protecting a fellow gay man, Mike called James with the nickname derived from *Deep Throat*. Not to mention the number of jokes about cocksucking James had had to bear. It had been a nightmare.

"On having luck in life. You want me around just to feel all high and mighty. That's fine. I can deal with that." Mike pouted and ran his fingers through his hair.

James frowned at the road ahead. He couldn't deny the truth in Mike's words, but he wouldn't be explicit about enjoying it either. "Let's just rehearse. Try behaving like my boyfriend."

"Sure. But... can you behave like *my* boyfriend for a minute?" Mike asked as they turned into the side road, leading to Walmart. It was on the outskirts of their hometown, and James hadn't been here in ages, so he didn't mind.

"That's the idea. We both pretend."

"Good." Mike shifted in his seat as they drove into the parking lot. "See that guard? Park next to him," he said and pulled out his wallet.

James shrugged and drove up to the empty places close to where a middle-aged security guard was making his rounds. James knew something was up the moment the man frowned at them. He was buff, but with a slight beer belly protruding over the waistband of his pants.

"Hi, Dad," Mike spoke and leaned over James to look at the guard. "How's it going? We'd be glad if you paid extra attention to our car. It won't take long."

James felt a rush of heat to his face. *What?* What was this? He looked between Mike and the stern face of the guard. Was this really Mike's father? What was going on?

“What the hell is this, Mike?” The guard spoke with a frown as deep as the Grand Canyon.

“I just thought I’d come over and let you meet my boyfriend. We’re going to Vegas later on, so I won’t be around.” Before James knew what was happening, Mike leaned down and kissed him. Hard. Mike’s lips were slightly dry, but oh so hot and soft. He tasted of minty chewing gum and beer. James heard a ringing in his ears, and for a moment, he was somewhere else altogether, looking into a sky full of shooting stars.

When the kiss ended, he found himself clutching Mike’s belt, and quickly pulled the hand back, gasping for air. Mike left him so lightheaded. James didn’t know whether he should drive away or stay here.

“Get out,” Mike’s dad said in a cool voice. “You’re a disgrace.”

“What?” Mike cocked his head to the side, chewing that minty gum loudly. “I need to park my Jag somewhere, you know,” he said and unbuckled James’s seat belt. This was madness.

“Mike, don’t provoke him. What if he damages the car?” whispered James as he opened the door on his side. What was wrong with this guy? Why was he making enemies at every corner?

“He won’t, there’s cameras.”

James frowned but didn’t comment on it. “If you just wanted a drink, we could have grabbed something at a gas station.”

“I want something special.” Mike got out of the car and paced over to James’s side to... open the door for him, with his father still looking on. Now it was getting surreal.

“Er—thanks,” uttered James, praying he wouldn’t stumble or hit his head on the way out. His chest was so tight he had to fight for air. It felt nice to have someone be so gallant toward him.

“You wanna get something too?” Mike asked and put his thick, firm arm over James’s shoulders. It was unbelievable that Mike Miller would be doing this in his home town. James had definitely missed some memo.

The arm was draped over him like a heavy cloak that made him more handsome, more desirable. His gaze darted lower, to Mike’s bare torso, and he took a shivery breath. It had been too fucking long since a man did that to him. That was why he was getting all fidgety like some teenage virgin. But Mike’s

smell was now so intense, so close, evaporating in the sun and clinging to James's skin.

"Maybe."

"Cool." Mike led them inside, completely ignoring the frown on his father's face. James went cold when Mike slipped a note into the man's chest pocket, but nothing happened.

"Hey Donna, how's it going?" Mike asked a woman who put her hands over her daughter's eyes as soon as she saw them.

"What are you doing?" asked James, trying not to look around too much. The stares he could feel on his skin were making him too self-conscious. Like when his secret passion had been revealed in the dark classroom all those years ago.

"Chill out. You're so hot. Everyone's just fuckin' jealous. I'm giving this town one last 'fuck you'," Mike said as they got to the liquor aisle.

"Just... relax. Please, don't throw anything at anybody. I can't be arrested tonight." James inhaled and slowly raised his hand to touch the palm resting on his shoulder. That was what he used to do with his first boyfriend back in college. He loved playing with thick, manly fingers.

"I'm cool, sweetie. No throwing stuff, got it." Mike leaned down and kissed him again. James was thanking all deities ever conceived that the place wasn't packed. He only heard some people gasp from the side, like a choir of bigotry.

"The fuck are you doing?" hissed someone, and James's head jerked up like a bobble-headed dog's. His eyes darted straight to a blond man in the store uniform. His chest was moving the crate of wine he was holding. Oh, no. Was this another person Mike wanted to show the middle finger to?

"I'm celebrating an anniversary with my boyfriend, show me your most expensive wine," Mike commanded as if he were the king of Walmart.

"You're so messed up, Mike," the blond groaned and put down the crate. His fingers squeezed into fists.

James swallowed hard. He could play this game too. "Red, if you please," he said, for once looking straight into the guy's eyes. If he chose to attack James, Mike would surely come to the rescue, like a good pretend-boyfriend.

Now the man sneered at James as well.

"You heard my fiancé." Mike gestured at the guy. "Chop, chop."

The blond shook his head, but did actually reach to a top shelf. "Did you rob the food stamp bank or something?"

"I can't see how this is your business," said James, leaning into the warmth of Mike's body. He missed being close to someone else like that.

"Exactly." Mike nodded and hugged James tightly. "But if you want to know, I'm paying cash." He pulled out his wallet and waved it at the man. "Just like I did for my new Jaguar."

James chuckled and covered his mouth not to sound too loud. He didn't know whether it was the stress of being a part of this scheme, or whether it really was that funny. "You sound like you're trading in drugs."

"What the hell is going on with you? Not enough to be a fag, now you gotta be a drug dealer as well?" The guy passed Mike three bottles of red wine, his face only one shade lighter than the alcohol.

"My boyfriend's just kidding." Mike gently poked James with a bottle. "He's such a funny guy. And has a great ass as well. Has your wife ever agreed to anal? You should try it."

James felt his knees go soft, all his senses telling him it was high time to turn around, get into the Jag and drive cross-country to never ever meet any of the people who could possibly hear this. He pinched Mike's finger. Hard. *Classy, my ass... wait, that didn't come out right. Fuck.* James looked at the floor and followed the directions of his therapist. He was on a sunny beach, and all he could hear was the breeze and seagull screams.

"Shut your fucking face or I'll tell our dad all about this, and you'll be sorry," the guy said.

"You think I care? The old man can go fuck himself." Mike hugged both the bottles and James closer. "I'm going to Vegas."

"Good. Just where a freak show like you belongs," the man snarled.

Even with the wine in hand, Mike managed to show his brother the middle finger. "Enjoy your life without anal, Kevin." Mike turned around and pulled James along to the registers.

No seagull would be enough to protect James's mind from that. He let out a shuddery breath. "If you use this word in public ever again, I am going to kill you. I'm gonna tell my birds to chop you to pieces."

Mike looked to him and pushed his sunglasses up to his forehead. "Which one? 'Fuck'?"

James stared at him, for a moment unable to voice his thoughts. “‘Anal’, you idiot. I don’t want anyone to think about my ass that way... I mean... not straight people,” he added after a moment of hesitation.

“You don’t like anal?” Mike frowned. “That’s too bad.”

“I do, but that’s not the point!” hissed James, simmering in his own shame. “I don’t want you to talk about it to... people.”

“I’ll be like a Disney princess, talking about your ass only to animals.” Mike grinned as they approached the registers. “Can I do you later?”

James drowned in the thick mixture of embarrassment and excitement. It rushed through his body like a river after breaking the floodgates. He didn’t know what to say. He had no idea what he was even thinking. His life was spiraling into madness.

“I bought you wine after all.” Mike winked at him and put the bottles in front of the cashier. He let go of James, who wasn’t even sure if Mike was serious anymore. Should he just play along? He wasn’t all that sure if he could keep up with that filthy mouth. He stepped past the registers and looked through the window, to his car, which was now shinier than ever. He had to admit Mike did a good job.

As soon as Mike had spent almost all of the money he’d earned jerking off, he put that big, hot hand on James’s hip and gently nudged him to the door. James wasn’t the type of guy who hooked up with random hot guys, but the gesture still made him feel all melty inside. Would they actually do *it*? He wasn’t sure it was a good idea. What if Mike just wanted him for the money? He did seem awfully happy to show off and spend it all.

“Whoa, that’s some chill I’m getting,” Mike muttered and pulled his hand away when they got to the car.

“What?” James blinked and looked at him, stuffing his hands down his pockets. Within a single hour, he’d fallen into an alternative universe. That was the only plausible explanation for what was happening to him. At least Mike’s dad was nowhere to be seen.

“I don’t even deserve an answer, just a sneer?” Mike sighed and got into the passenger seat as soon as James opened the car.

“What are you talking about?” James sat down next to him. “It’s you who was talking about my ass in public.” He looked the other way.

“But then I asked you when we were alone again.”

James clasped his hands together, his whole body stiffening, but the skin of his buttocks seemed a lot more sensitive than usual. What sorcery was this? "I... thought you were joking."

"I haven't done anal since senior year when I did Tiffany Jordan, of course I wasn't joking."

James groaned. He did *not* want that mental image. His mind suddenly went numb, and he raised his head to look at Mike. Could that mean he, James the sex-deprived nerd was far more experienced than Mike the hot mechanic? "What?"

"You're really making me work for it, aren't you? Let's go." Mike sighed and put his top back on.

"I just... don't get it. You seem so eager... what do you mean that was the last time?"

Mike went silent for once and just watched James as he started the car. From the corner of his eye, James saw Mike giving the finger to the man in the uniform, who just had to be his dad. He chose to ignore it.

"You're all hot and gay. Why wouldn't I be eager? I'm your boyfriend after all," Mike muttered with less energy than before.

James drove toward the highway on the other side of the retail park. He would never trust GPS again. Then again, it was thanks to GPS that he met his date for the conference, so maybe the weekend wouldn't be all that bad. He hoped so.

"But... you're hot and gay, too. No boyfriends?" He glanced at Mike's handsome profile.

Mike shrugged. "Where? At Vega's Gas & Motel? I went to a gay bar in Austin once. I got a blowjob."

James had to force his jaw shut. This was *not* happening. No way in the hell. "No... hookups? Nothing?" he asked, unable to control his shock. This was so... sad.

"I only came out three years ago." Mike opened one of the wine bottles. "You know our town. Not much opportunity there. You know that gay radar thing? Mine must be defective."

"Internet?" whispered James and quickly took the turn. He'd almost missed their exit.

“Man, stop nagging me. I don’t even have a car,” Mike grumbled and took a swig of wine, straight from the bottle.

“Sorry, it’s just... you’re so hot,” whispered James, intent on reaching the hotel as quickly as possible, though it would still take at least an hour.

“I’m just one hot fish in a sea of plenty,” Mike repeated the words James had said to him earlier that day. He leaned against the door and took his shades off, and looked everywhere but at James.

Chapter 3

The ride passed mostly in awkward silence, with James talking about random stuff once in a while. At least he explained how he'd become a proud owner of a high-class sports car. Mike didn't understand all the technical details but it turned out that James, who now was an engineer, was the inventor of a portable laboratory machine. It was small, relatively cheap, and was gaining popularity in medical centers in small communities. Mike *was* impressed, but the strange atmosphere didn't disperse even as they pulled into a parking lot by a shopping mall only ten minutes away from their destination. James's comments on how weird it was that Mike didn't have hookups made Mike all sorts of uncomfortable. So he didn't. So what? It didn't mean he didn't want to. It just never worked out for him. Now, he not only felt like a failure at being straight, but a failure at being gay as well. Not to mention he was kinda queasy about giving blowjobs, even in his imagination, which probably made him an epic failure at being gay. He bet super-gay James gave mean head, that he knew how to deep-throat and shit.

James cleared his throat. "I thought you'd like to dress for the occasion. What do you think?"

Mike frowned at him. Why would Lovelace care what he thought? "I'm yours for the weekend. Dress me in what you want."

James frowned and looked at the steering wheel. "I want you to be comfortable. This way you'll feel more at ease in your role. I'm sure we can compromise."

"I don't like suits all that much. But they're probably the shit in your fancy air-conned hotel?" Was this supposed to be his *Pretty Woman* moment or something?

James sighed, unbuckling his seat belt. "You don't have to be dressed up like you're attending the Oscars, you know."

"I don't know." Mike got out of the car, no longer sure what pretending to be James's boyfriend entailed. "I'd prefer to wear a shirt without a jacket. Oh, and those rimmed glasses." Maybe James would be more willing to fuck if Mike looked smart?

"That would be great. And we could get some jeans and casual stuff as well if you're up for it." James gave him a broad smile. He raised his head and froze,

but eventually put his hand on Mike's nape. "So... shall we train while we're at it?"

"Y-yeah, sure." Mike slid his arm around James's waist. It had a nice firmness to it. He always thought it would be amazing to have a rich boyfriend who'd just give him stuff, but in this situation, he wasn't all that sure anymore how he felt about it.

James's eyes darkened, but he looked away with a low chuckle. "I keep forgetting how long your arms are."

Mike frowned. "What is that supposed to mean? Is this some abstract flirting? Because I don't get it."

"No... it's just that I haven't dated for a while. You're getting scratched by the rust on my love joint—God that didn't come out right either," moaned James. He pinched the bridge of his nose as his cheeks burst with redness. That fair skin was one of the qualities that had made teasing him so easy.

"Well, it's not really a date, so you can chill out and tell me what you want. Unless you want me to oil your 'love joint', or some shit." Mike led him toward the door to the mall. It felt weird being gay in public, like every single pair of eyes around them was on him. The Walmart act had been a great stunt, but now it was all becoming a lot more real.

James sighed. "Okay, lesson one: never say stuff like that outside of our hotel room." He walked up to the mall plan and narrowed his eyes, apparently looking for something specific.

"You said 'love joint'," Mike muttered. He didn't know what James wanted anymore.

"Yeah, that was terrible. Let's just forget it and move on to some classy dating." James looked up from the plan, and his hand closed around Mike's. "Do some shopping, and then we could have coffee."

"Classy." Mike laughed nervously, feeling his hand sweat. All his mind could think of was that he was holding a guy's hand in public, and it wasn't for a crazy, adrenaline-infused stunt.

James's hand was smaller than his, less meaty but oh-so-warm. He couldn't remember ever holding a guy like this. Even the air conditioning in the mall would not stop the warmth spreading through his body. He was stared at. He was judged. It was all happening now. *He* knew it was an act, but no one else did.

“So, imagine that I am playing cards with some of the people from the conference. I win. What do you do?” asked James. “Show me.”

Mike took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Good job!” He patted James on the back. “Err... Get 'em, tiger?”

James blinked. “Try again.”

Mike let out a guttural rasp and lowered his voice. “That was great, I'm gonna fuck you *so hard* tonight if you win more cash.” He leaned closer and nuzzled James's ear.

James pressed his mouth shut and looked at the floor. It took him a good thirty seconds to compose himself and speak again. “I am being serious. You can't say things like that in public.”

“I'm just trying to be an encouraging boyfriend. You like to be fucked, I provide that service.” Mike chuckled, imagining they were all alone, not surrounded by prying eyes. He was surprised no one actually said anything. At least there weren't that many people around.

“That's not what I want from you. I want you to be my date. Kiss my cheek and tell me I'm doing great, or something,” he grumbled.

Mike swallowed. It wasn't his fault he didn't know how to handle a guy. “Give me another example. And let's move somewhere.”

“We're going to the department store.” James nodded toward a large entrance at the end of the corridor, and it looked like an expensive place. “Another example? What situations are you worried about most?”

“I-I don't wanna embarrass you when your conference friends come,” he choked out, following James's lead. When did someone like Lovelace get so bossy, anyway? “Like, what kind of people are your friends there? Are they chilled out, very serious, or should I be joking around with them, fraternizing?”

James led him into the store and down the alley leading through the ladies apparel department with beautiful mannequins in the newest brand collections. He sighed. “They're not my friends, and that's the whole point. I'm openly gay, and not all of them approve of that. That is where you come in. I need you to be this dream guy who they can all see is a catch, even if they're straight.”

Mike nodded slowly and squeezed James's hand tighter. “For them to imagine that if they were gay, I'd be the trophy boyfriend?”

“Yeah, but better than some of their dumb wives,” muttered James. He raised his head to look at Mike with a small smile. “I just don’t want it to be too explicit. You know, Obamas.”

Mike smiled back. “Gay Obamas, promise.”

James bit his lip and nodded. He’d become so handsome over the years that it was not straightforward, but Mike could see the resemblance to James’s teenage self. Even as an ugly duckling, James had great bone structure, high cheekbones and a straight nose. And then there were the plump lips that held the promise of a great blowjob.

“So what are we getting?” Mike asked and started browsing through the shirts featured at the front of the men’s department. “Oh, and why are these guys not your friends?”

James snorted as he picked one garment out before putting it back on a round rack. “We just share certain interests and pretend to be friends. I don’t think I fit in with them, but it’s hard to explain.”

Mike couldn’t believe James actually had frenemies. “That sounds surprisingly similar to high school. But aren’t those your nerdy friends or something?”

James stopped, staring at a tall mannequin in a grey suit. His brows gathered together, and he nodded. “Now that I think about it, yeah. I guess I’m still the nerdy gay guy.” He cleared his throat. “I’d say you need one white shirt, and at least one of a different color.”

“I look good in gray.” Mike looked up at the mannequin. He wouldn’t wear something like that on a daily basis, but he was curious how he would look in a suit this fine. “And you’re not a nerdy gay guy.” Mike looked James up and down. The guy was so sleek looking. “You work out, don’t you?” Mike wiggled his eyebrows and poked James’s stomach with his fist.

James stiffened, but it only lasted a moment. “Yeah, every other day. There’s a twenty-four hour gym in my apartment building. Choose the shirts you like, and we’ll just try them on.”

“‘We’ll try them’? Are you gonna help me put them on?” Mike said, grinning at the prospect. “I like you so big and firm. I wanna see *you* try stuff on.”

James chuckled. “We’re sharing a hotel room, so you’ll get your chance to see it all in the flesh. Now pick whatever you like, and we’ll go from there.”

Mike just stood there for a moment, shamelessly imagining James naked. Would he have a dusting of hair on his chest as he did on his arms? Mike had no idea what it would be like to touch a firm chest instead of a soft one, but he couldn't wait to find out. He picked up four different shirts, afraid to even look at the price tags, and they made their way to the fitting rooms.

"Hey, what about the rest? Pants? T-shirts? Underwear? Take your pick. I want to be proud of my date," chuckled James, following him.

"How much can I choose though?" Mike looked into those gorgeous blue eyes framed by black lashes, and his heart skipped a beat. He'd die if he shared a hotel room with James and didn't fuck him tonight.

James shrugged. "Just pick what you like and later we'll decide what looks good on you."

"How rich are you exactly?" Mike eyed him, piling more clothes over his arm. He'd be lying if he claimed not to be jealous. James seemed to have everything Mike could possibly wish for. He was smart, rich, handsome, and drove a Jag on top of it all.

James snorted. "'Rich' enough. Now tell me how you would ask me to give you salt at the table."

Mike looked to the clothes in his hand, feeling heat creep up his neck. "Are you trying to mock me? You must think I'm an idiot."

James frowned. "Just tell me what you'd say."

So this was the price Mike would have to pay for the clothes. "Jamie, could you pass the salt please?" He felt like a trained monkey.

James stopped, glancing at him with slightly widened eyes. "That... yes, that was really nice." He scratched his nape and went on toward the denim section.

Mike followed, watching the shape of James's wide shoulders, nicely pronounced by the slim fit shirt. He wasn't as big as Mike, but almost as tall and with nice, narrow hips. Mike could only imagine how glorious that ass had to look. He'd bury his face in it and sleep there. He frowned at the thought, unsure if that was weird or not. It was another man's ass after all.

"Surprise me," said James, glancing toward a wall of shoes. "Come up from behind me and surprise me."

Mike frowned. That wouldn't be much of a surprise, would it? Yet, he put the clothes down on a shelf for a moment and took quiet steps toward James,

trying to imagine they were a couple on their honeymoon. He slid his arms under James's and hugged him from behind. "You like any of the shoes, Jamie?"

James leaned back into him with a soft sigh. "Yes. You should get some to match your new clothes."

"Choose some for me then." Mike nuzzled James's ear. "You have such excellent taste."

James sighed and slowly turned in his arms. He had a confident smile, but the redness on his face spoke volumes. "After we decide which clothes to take, all right?"

"Sure, anything you want. I don't mind." Mike smiled at him even though he could feel someone's gaze stabbing him in the back. James would not be thinking Mike couldn't do his job properly. The fuck was up with that? Asking for salt. Did James really assume Mike didn't watch television, or something? Okay, so maybe Mike wasn't Mr. Proper, but he could pretend to be if he wanted to. Hell! He could be the boyfriend of the year if he wanted to. All pliant and adoring. Whatever.

"Who do we have here? Isn't that our resident genius?" asked a deep, masculine voice, and the expression of bliss melted off James's face like a pile of snow under a radiator. He turned around to look at a tall man in a sharp gray suit, much like the one they'd seen on a mannequin minutes earlier. Tanned, blue-eyed, with teeth like expensive porcelain (which they probably were), and tiny wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. Come to think of it, the guy looked a bit like a mannequin himself. He smiled at them like a television host. "I see you have company this year."

James's arms turned into wood under Mike's touch, but his voice didn't betray tension. "Oh, hi, Richard. Picking something up last minute?"

"Oh, Savannah wanted to buy some new shoes before the conference," he said and gestured to a young blonde girl in the shoe section. In her high heels, she was as tall as Mike, but probably one third of his weight. "And you don't have to call me Richard, just call me Rich." He kept up the ridiculously wide smile and held his hand out to Mike. "And you are?"

"Mike." He shook Richard's hand, still unsure what tactic to go with, but he never took his arm away from James's waist. "I came straight from L.A. so I need some new clothes for the weekend."

Richard gave him a long once-over, which only made Mike more aware of the crappy fabrics he was wearing.

“So, you’ve known each other long?” he asked, and James cleared his throat.

“We met shortly after the last conference.”

“But it was love at first sight.” Mike grinned and gave James’s cheek a peck. If it was the boyfriend experience James wanted, that was what he would get.

Richard gave a slow nod, looking back to his wife. “Yeah, Tabitha Miles brought her husband last year, but the organizers hadn’t predicted there would be men in the partners’ activities. The poor guy ended up getting a facial.”

James leaned back, just enough that Mike could actually feel it. “Her husband is a lovely man.”

Mike grinned. “That’s what’s so great about being gay. I can go with James to all the activities planned for the men.” Maybe James knew how to be nasty, but Mike was not gonna let him down now that they were on the same team.

Richard chuckled. “Isn’t that a bit sexist?”

“He’s very enthusiastic about my work,” said James.

Mike shrugged. “I don’t know if it’s sexist, it wasn’t me who planned all the activities for the attendee’s partners with ladies in mind. I just came here to support Jamie in anything he wants.” He petted James’s nape and gave him another kiss. “I enjoy it as a short break from my work.”

“And what is it that you do?” asked Richard, stepping closer. He looked a bit like a Ken doll Mike’s cousin always placed at the bottom of the pile of Barbies.

“I’m a personal trainer. How do you think Jamie got into such amazing shape?” Mike laughed and pinched James’s waist.

Richard snorted. “So, is he a finished project now?”

James straightened his back, tensing again, but before he could answer, Mike grabbed at the bottom of James’s shirt and pulled it up to expose the stomach. “Are you kidding me?” Mike stroked the firm, flat muscle that tightened under his touch. He wouldn’t come up with a better excuse to do it if he tried. “This is rock solid. It’s just maintenance now.”

Richard gave them a wide grin that didn't even get near his eyes. "Maybe you won't get your ass kicked at paintball this time then."

James sighed. "I don't care much for paintball anyway, but we'll see."

Mike's eyes went wider, and he gave Rich a vicious grin. "Paintball? Bring it! Jamie, why didn't you tell me there's gonna be paintball? So cool."

Savannah paced over with two pairs of shoes in her hands. Her legs were so long she really did seem like a gazelle on the savannah. "My, my!" She grinned at them with a set of teeth as white as Richard's.

James cleared his throat and pushed down the shirt, covering Mike's hands. "Nice to see you again. Are you enjoying yourself?"

Savannah hugged her husband's arm. "It's going to be insanely boring, but he knows how to convince me to come with him."

"I heard the hotel has a spa and sauna," Mike said even though he had no idea if it did.

"I know, right?" Savannah chuckled. "We could go together."

"I just need to buy some swimming shorts for the pool. Unless you wanna go skinny dipping." Mike grinned at her and stepped a bit closer.

Richard pulled his wife back by the arm. "You can go skinny dipping with me. We could go now."

Savannah giggled and hugged him. "Let's go, but first, you pay for my shoes, sweetie." She kissed his cheek.

Mike exhaled. For a moment he'd thought Richard wanted to go skinny dipping with him.

"See you later," said James and squeezed Mike's hands where they were placed over his rock hard stomach.

Richard sighed and stepped back. "Enjoy your shopping trip."

"See you, Rich," Mike said with a grin.

James bristled up. "See who I have to deal with?" he hissed as soon as the couple got out of hearing range.

Mike pulled his hands away and picked up the clothes. "Yeah, he seems like an ass, but now you have an extremely cool boyfriend, so nothing to stress out about."

James sighed and turned back to him, stuffing his shirt back into his pants. "Yeah. You don't need much training, do you?"

Mike smirked, straightening up with pride. "Told you I could do it. I can even do a British accent actually."

James frowned, his plump lips moving like a dream whenever he said something. "You can?"

Mike cleared his throat for effect before changing his accent. "Yep, I love James Bond. I've seen all the movies, some of them a lot more than once." He looked at James to see if it had an effect. And as stoic as James tried to be, his eyes became very dark.

"You've changed," said James eventually.

"Huh?" Mike wasn't sure what to say to that. It wasn't what he expected. "What do you mean?"

James shrugged. "You're far more... socialized than I expected."

Mike switched to the English accent again. "What you mean, dear James, is that you expected a savage, yet you got the perfect gentleman."

James rolled his eyes. "Pushing your luck there."

Mike sighed and turned away toward the fitting rooms. Always fucking shot down. "Yeah, I'm probably still drunk with that expensive wine."

"You seem pretty sober to me." James shrugged. "Good job with this asshole by the way."

"I'm not gonna let him make you feel like shit for no reason," Mike said as they walked into the fitting rooms. "What's his problem, anyway?"

James followed him over the polished floor. "Bullies thrive out of high school too?"

Was that a dig at Mike? "I don't get it."

James snorted. "Just look at him. The popular kid twenty years later. Still picking on the geek."

Mike walked into one of the large cubicles, closed the door behind them, and took his top off. "I don't get you. You're hot and rich, why would you care? Even if you are a fag or weird."

James blinked. "Look who's talking."

Mike bit the inside of his cheek not to spit out curse words. Heat crawled up his spine. He turned around, pretending he was choosing the shirt to try on first, but really he didn't want to look at James all that much. Talking seemed like a minefield. Mike was just trying to keep it real. "Whatever, be the victim then."

"I'm not a victim, and I won't be called a 'fag'," growled James, pacing behind Mike's back.

Mike took a deep breath and counted to ten in his mind. "Sure, sorry, baby." He pulled on the expensive shirt. It felt smooth and soft against his skin, even though it smelled of nothing.

"There are more people like him out there, so we need to be wary during the conference." James cleared his throat, and Mike saw him behind himself in the mirror. He sat down in a chair in the corner, his gaze running up and down Mike's body. It was embarrassing and exciting at the same time.

"We'll be fine. This was a good test drive." Mike quickly buttoned up his shirt and turned around, spreading his arms. "This all right?"

James bit his lip and brushed his chin with a finger. "It's all right," he said, but with his eyes shining as they were, it was clear to Mike that the audience enjoyed the spectacle.

Mike unbuckled his belt in front of James, just to check out his reaction. He pushed his shoes off and unzipped his jeans. A part of him already fantasized about getting a blowjob here and now. He did good with Richy Rich after all.

James looked down at his wristwatch, all flustered. He then pulled out his smartphone and started browsing through it.

Mike huffed with frustration and put on the pair of smart brown pants which would go with the white shirt. A nice semi-casual style he'd never choose on his own. Maybe he should be more out there with his advances? If James was so socially inept, maybe he didn't notice the signs? The fucker paid to watch Mike jerk off but wouldn't look at him now?

"Are the pants good, baby?" Mike tried, playing along with the boyfriend experience.

James's thumb stopped on the touchscreen, and he slowly, very slowly, looked up. There was slight tension around his eyes, but he smiled. "Maybe a bit too tight around the crotch? We should ask for a different size."

Mike took a step closer, so his hips were just inches away from James's face. He put his hands on the wall, over James's head. "Or maybe I'm just packing too much?" he whispered.

James drew back fast, and he looked up, into Mike's face. "Don't. We're here to buy clothes."

Mike took a deep breath and backed away. "Okay, okay. So fucking boring. I just thought it'd be entertaining to have a quickie here," he moaned and started undressing.

"Public places aren't ideal for having sex," uttered James, clutching the phone in his hands.

"So, why don't you have a boyfriend? I bet guys hit on you all the time now." Mike changed into the other pants he'd brought.

James shrugged. "I'm busy. And you never know what people are after once you change your lifestyle to fit your earnings."

"What do you mean?" Mike put on a tie he took into the fitting room just for kicks. The last time he'd worn one was a good four or five years ago, for a job interview at Walmart. It had been nothing as classy as the silk one he now held in his hands.

James leaned back, turning the phone in his fingers. "I don't want someone who is interested in my bank account, or just in how I look."

"I think that's why we fell in love so quickly after we met, Jamie. We started talking, and there was just no way for me not to fall for your personality. You're so kind and giving. Makes me horny." Mike smirked to himself in the mirror. So maybe he wasn't classy, but this suit certainly was.

Chapter 4

Mike couldn't believe it when they left the department store with several bags full of clothes, shoes, underwear, and accessories that he couldn't have afforded in a million years. After James's declaration of what they needed to buy, Mike did not expect him to pay for everything that fit Mike, including a few very casual bits of clothing. James then took an overwhelmed Mike out for dinner, and had no qualms about paying for expensive food, so Mike had lobster, caviar (which turned out to taste shitty), venison, and downed it all with champagne. James took care of it with a platinum credit card. Mike found that over good food, even conversations with a weirdo like James weren't a chore. They easily slipped to the topic of cars, and James confessed he only got the Jag because the Mini Cooper he was driving last year had not been appreciated as much as he had wished. Which translated to James being discreetly mocked for his car choice. He learned to love the Jag, but that was no surprise, it was a fucking *Jaguar*.

The hotel was a far cry from the seedy motel Mike had left only hours before. With marble floors and elegant leather chairs in the lobby, it was like something out of a movie. There were even artworks on the walls. Not posters. Actual paintings. In his new suit, Mike felt like he could own the place. The tired old duffel bag he'd brought didn't suit him anymore, so he got the bellboy to take it to their room. All he needed was a martini, and he could be James Bond himself. A gay James Bond. He liked that.

The bellboy opened the door for them, and James pulled Mike into a large living room decorated in creamy colors. A set of leather furniture stood next to large, floor-length windows. Between two armchairs was a small table with a vase of fresh flowers, and Mike also spotted a modern painting hanging over a bar. There was even a large flat-screen television.

Everything was of such overwhelmingly good quality that Mike could hardly believe he was here. He walked up to the window and put his hands on the glass. For a while he just stood there, looking down at the bright lights of the city at night. *Suck this, Vega*. Mike didn't even know when instead of looking through the glass, his gaze started following James's reflection. Like a spy for the CIA, watching his target in secret.

James pressed a bill into the bellboy's hand, and the man left them alone in the gorgeous apartment. This wasn't even all of it. Mike's eyes followed

phantom-James until he disappeared into the adjoining room with just his small suitcase.

Mike smiled to himself and turned around to follow him. If this wasn't the time to get all hot and bothered, Mike didn't know when that time would come. He bet a place like this had a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. He posed himself by the door frame and smirked at James. He knew he looked better than ever, and felt like a million dollars in his leather shoes. "Hey there."

James smiled at him, meticulously putting pairs of folded underwear and socks into a drawer that faced a single king-sized bed. "You look great. I can't wait to see their faces tomorrow."

Mike supposed it was a good start, so he walked into the room nonchalantly, with his hands in his pockets. Champagne was still bubbling in his head. "Wanna check out the Jacuzzi, baby?" The huge bed with a leather-covered headboard looked almost equally tempting.

James blinked. "You can go if you want to relax."

Mike loosened his tie. "I'd rather spend some quality time with my boyfriend instead," he said and walked up closer to James. Did he really need to spell it out to James? 'S-E-X'. 'A-N-A-L'.

The drawer slammed shut, and James glanced at him, narrowing his eyes. "Mike, we seem to have a misunderstanding here. Sex is *not* part of the deal, you don't have to pretend anymore, and you're free to have a good time while no one sees us."

Mike bit the inside of his cheek, unsure what to say. James had this way of making everyone uncomfortable. "Why do you have to treat me like trash, huh?" Mike growled in the end and took off the suit jacket, which all of a sudden felt fake. Like he was playing dress-up.

James crooked his head. "I don't understand. I asked you to be my date for the conference. That doesn't include sex. I'm not having sex with random guys."

"Something wrong with me? You wanted to watch me jerk off, but you don't wanna touch me? I don't get it." Mike spread his arms with growing aggravation.

James took a step back, but his face remained stoic. "That doesn't mean I want to do anything else. I don't understand why you keep suggesting we need to have sex. I don't know you as anyone but a guy who kept putting me down back at school."

Mike hardly believed what he was hearing. "That was years ago! Who cares? You were hot for me then, you're hot for me now, so it only made sense to me that we'd have sex. Look at me. What kind of fa—homosexual are you?" Mike pointed to his body.

James's Adam's apple bobbed, and he looked away from Mike. "It matters to me. Just... go use the Jacuzzi if you want."

Mike pulled off the silk tie and threw it on to the bed. "You think you invented some fancy-shmancy machine, and you're so much better than me?" He could feel that tingle of anger simmering in his veins.

James snorted and shook his head with a dismissive gesture. "Really? Well, it was me who invented it. All those people who came here for the conference, all they can do is market it. That's it. Is that not good enough for you?"

"I'm not the one avoiding sex, so I suppose it's good enough for me. The Jag helps as well." He gave James a crooked smile, but the moment he said that, James's eyes turned icy.

"Why would *you* be good enough for me then? What have you achieved in your life?"

Mike was so shocked by the attack, that he actually took a step back and stalled. He wanted to say something about being hot, but it got stuck in his throat when he remembered James had already told him Mike was just one of many pretty faces. "I—I can do shit," he uttered.

"You can fix cars, probably." James shook his head. "But you couldn't secure a related job that would actually pay reasonable money. I worked my ass off after high school to get where I am. What did you do?"

Mike swallowed the bile rising in his throat. This was beyond unfair. "I wanted to do stuff," he hissed. "You have no idea what I've been through! And I *can* fix cars. And other stuff as well."

James took a step closer and spread his arms wide. "'Stuff'? I wanted to do stuff too, but I had too much work to party all the time."

"Oh, I bet you had no time to party at the university your parents paid for. You live in a fantasy world. It wasn't like that for guys like me!" Mike took big breaths, feeling attacked in the most personal of ways. In a way someone like Vega could never reach him.

James wrapped his hands on his nape with a low chuckle. "I did not, and if I hadn't made it, I would still be indebted. It's all my work. What did you do?"

You're not an idiot, so why aren't you in a supervisory position somewhere? You're what, twenty-seven?"

Mike felt the heat on his face and nervously played with a button on his new shirt. "I couldn't do what I wanted. My family washed their hands of me the moment I came out. Nothing like yours! You have no idea what I've been through!" He raised his voice even though he hadn't intended to. "I was homeless, I had no money, and nowhere to go. You must be so fucking happy with yourself. You get to pay Mike Miller to be ordered around all weekend. Fuck you."

James frowned. "That's right. For once, Mike Miller's doing as I say, not the other way around. And I am enjoying myself."

Mike clenched his fists in anger, but they had nowhere to go if he wanted to get his money on Sunday. He could feel the fingernails bite into his palms. "Here I am then," he rasped out, trying not to scream and punch. "Your fucking entertainment. The idiot who made nothing of himself in life."

James swallowed, keeping his eyes level. "We're both tired. Let's go to sleep."

Mike curled his lip into a snarl. "You do what the fuck you want. I'll go take a bath." He turned around before his eyes started stinging too much. He'd never felt so humiliated in his life. The only thing still keeping him here was the promise of a sum of money that could help him start a new life. James was such a privileged fucker. None of Mike's dreams ever had any chance to be fulfilled. It didn't matter what he'd wanted to do after high school, he never had the money to try.

He walked into the bathroom as fast as possible and didn't even turn the light on at first, looking into the mirror in the darkness that was only broken by a bit of light coming through a small window. He was taking deep, long breaths as the other Mike Miller gritted his teeth, fighting the stinging heat rising in his head and chest. It was only after several minutes that he hit the light switch, illuminating the walls covered by a golden mosaic. The bathroom was huge, with a bowl-like sink on the counter, a spacious shower stall, and behind it, a large bathtub in the corner.

Now that he was in here, he wished he'd taken the wine from his duffel bag. Then again, would drinking make him even more of a loser in James's eyes? He took deep breaths as he opened the faucet. He wasn't even sure what was worse, this day, or the day his brother found gay porn on his computer, and

Mike decided to come clean about who he was. Bad fucking decision. He had thought it was a good time to come out, even when his father created a shitstorm and threw him out. Mike was too busy imagining all the gay sex he'd have in defiance of his family. But nothing like it ever happened. He never met anyone. He was never able to recognize who was gay and who wasn't. Not to mention how badly it freaked him out that he might hit on a straight guy and end up being mocked to the end of his life. The anxiety was such a mood killer he couldn't bear it. Before Mike knew it, he'd ended up at Vega's gas station to make ends meet, and that was the death of his sex life. He sure as hell fantasized about things that he could do, things that could happen, but with no money, no car, not even a cell phone, fantasies were all he had.

Fantasies of 'what if'. What if he'd gotten to fuck that ugly duckling gay boy at school? What if they'd managed to have a secret arrangement?

When the water filled the tub, he took off the clothes that didn't suit him anyway, and folded them neatly before slipping into the water. The immersion got him all breathing hard again and trying not to cry. He wasn't scum. It just never worked out for him in life. He should have stayed in the closet. It would have been so much better if he had just stayed a bachelor who flirted with girls in public but never married one.

He never had much luck, but this "chance" James graciously offered him was turning out to be a mere power trip, a way a grown man could get back at a guy who teased him at school. How ridiculous was that? First, James offered Mike all those nice things, clothes that made him look good, and then it turned out it wasn't enough to make Mike even remotely attractive to him. Maybe the fucker had planned this all along, who knew? What Mike despised the most was the way James looked at him when he was telling him what kind of scum Mike really was in his eyes. That gaze had been so cold but filled with satisfaction, as if James had just achieved something he had been waiting for his entire life. Mike could bet the sonofabitch would sleep like a baby tonight, and all that after Mike had gone beyond himself to prove how much he was worth.

He called him "baby" and "Jamie" all day. Gave James compliments, most of them real, and was as polite as he could get. It sickened Mike to think that James had probably been laughing at him all day. Mike took another deep breath and put his head under the hot water. A tiny part of him was embarrassed to have imagined being someone James could fall for. What a stupid fucking idea. They probably wouldn't get along anyway, but when he'd seen James,

standing by that Jag, in those shades and the white shirt, in the middle of nowhere, Mike had thought he'd seen a mirage, that was how much he was attracted to James. He was almost as tall as Mike, had that masculine figure, with wide shoulders and narrow hips... Mike wanted to touch him so bad, yet hated him so much at the same time. The shame of being gay never really left him, no matter how confident he claimed to be. It was all a wall he put up not to get hurt by the homophobic comments. When he thought about James's body, about the strong stomach he'd touched, or about kissing his stubbly cheeks, the shame never left, but it did become easier to bear with the prize being so delicious.

He pulled his head from under the water with a gasp. He needed to finish off this weekend on a good note, find himself a boyfriend in Las Vegas so they could fuck like bunnies. He was so done with living like a monk.

He only left the tub when the water was turning cold, but he did all he could to stay in the bathroom a little bit longer. Looking into James's eyes again was among the last things he wanted to do. On top of being mocked, getting sexually rejected as well was no fun at all.

He eventually wrapped the fluffy hotel towel around his hips and pressed on the door handle. He was surprised to see darkness in the bedroom, even more so when the ray of light from behind him fell on James's legs that almost reached the edge of the bed. Mike leaned out of the bathroom and switched off the light, burying the bedroom in semi-darkness. Now that his eyes were getting used to it, he stepped closer to the bed where James was lying on his side, curled underneath the bedspread, as if he fell asleep waiting for his own bath time. Thank God he'd left the other half of the bed empty because Mike would rather not sleep on the floor.

He was dubious about wearing the CK pajama pants James had gotten him, but he still pulled them on because otherwise he'd have to sleep naked or just in his briefs. Mike gave one last long look to the bright lights behind the window and slipped into bed with his back turned to James.

Only two days left.

Chapter 5

The light coming through the window was like a dusting of flour all over Mike's face. James stared at him, unable to move, his body still rigid after a sudden awakening. He didn't want to fall asleep last night. With every minute of Mike's absence, his anger was giving out to a blob of guilt that was growing inside his stomach and making him gag. He had been such an asshole. What was wrong with him? He had never been a bully, so what had changed? Was it enough that now he had the upper hand over Mike? He didn't want to be this kind of person, and every time he remembered Mike's eyes growing wider, his paling cheeks, the way he seemed to have lost his usual ease of speaking, James's stomach clenched with cold guilt.

Slowly, he slid one leg from under the bedspread and pushed himself closer to the edge of the mattress. The last thing he wanted was to wake up Mike. He wasn't ready to face him yet. He needed to take a bath and come up with a strategy. He needed to apologize, there was no doubt about that, but how was he supposed to do it when Mike refused to apologize for all the shit he had done? With his stomach in his throat, James managed to put one foot down on the wooden floor, and then used it as leverage to slide the rest of his body off the mattress. His breathing became shallow just from the stress of watching Mike asleep so close to him. Was the guy only wearing underwear under the comforter? His chest was bare, his meaty pectoral muscles exposed by the covers. Even with guilt pulling him away, James imagined himself resting his head on the fleshy pillow of Mike's chest.

James couldn't help himself and peeked under the comforter, face flushing with heat. Mike was wearing the Calvin Klein pajama pants James had gotten him yesterday. Gray plaid and that thick elastic band over the hips, just low enough to reveal a tiny bit of ass. James quickly let go of the comforter and tiptoed to the bathroom, pulling off his shirt on the way. He closed the door and took a deep breath, hugging the warm fabric to his chest. A faint floral smell was thick in the air, making the situation even more alien. James hated flowers, except for cacti, and he would never have his own apartment smell like that. He briefly wondered whether Mike liked it, and slowly smelled his shirt. Revolting. Of course, being so nervous and angry, he had sweated like a pig and the evening's argument hadn't made that any better. He tossed the shirt to the floor and slowly climbed into the shower stall that could easily fit three average-sized men if they were desperate to save water.

He braced himself for the shock of cold water, and it came all too soon. He so deserved it. A whole day of enjoying the little kisses, touches, and pet names. *Jamie*. Only his mother called him that. Even his long-term boyfriend had insisted on using James's full name, and yet it sounded so sweet coming from Mike. Every time, his warm voice trickled down James's neck, back, chest, and dribbled off his cock, like the rivulets of water that were now cascading down the arch of James's limp dick and into the drain at his feet.

It had been so hard when those sweet words and gestures pulled on both his dick and his heart, and he had to resist. There was no way he would get involved with someone like Mike Miller, who would probably trample all over him once he got what he wanted, just like back in high school. People didn't change, and James was the proof of that. He might have improved his shell, but inside, he was still the same awkward guy whose body froze whenever Mike Miller growled at him. Unfortunately, he also still got flustered and hot every time Mike Miller was close. He was enveloped in a bizarre, never-ending *déjà vu*. He needed to keep things the way they were. Mike would get his money, and James would tell himself that he got over both his fear and lust for the man. It would be officially over.

James took his time washing every nook and cranny of his body. Despite all the time spent ruminating about Mike, and the rollercoaster of yesterday, his head remained empty even as he pressed the door handle and left the bathroom.

Seeing Mike in just a pair of white boxer briefs with a background of glorious sunshine wasn't helping him think either. It was as if the sun was there just to welcome Mike in the morning and caress his muscular body. James had no idea what Mike had to be thinking of him now. The moment James came out though, Mike turned his head to him for a split second before continuing to dress without a word. He put on the light-brown slacks they chose yesterday so that Mike could impress James's nemesis.

James cleared his throat and quickly rushed to the closet. "Hi," he uttered, and as soon as his back started tingling, he knew Mike had to be looking back. He exhaled and looked at the clothes he came with. And to think he had been so sure of himself when he packed them. Now it didn't seem like it was good enough.

"Which shirt do you want me to wear?" Mike asked as if he thought James believed he wasn't good enough to have an opinion. "The tea-colored one or the white one?"

It was all James's doing. He swallowed hard, unsuccessfully trying to cover himself with a sharp blue shirt. "Take the one you like."

All the reply James got was silence and a rustle of fabric. He took a peek at Mike in the mirror and saw him in the white, soft cotton shirt with rolled up sleeves. Mike was tying the slim brown tie and looking like a million dollars. It was as if the shirt had been made for him. Or maybe it fell in love with Mike's shape, from the wide shoulders and bulky arms to the defined stomach, and decided to hug him.

James swallowed and walked over to him. He wanted to give him some advice on the tie, but his breath caught in his throat the moment he touched the soft brown silk.

Mike looked right into his eyes in a way that felt very much like a punch, but didn't say a thing, pulling his hands away and letting James do the tie.

James gritted his teeth and finished the tying, before slipping the end of the tie between two buttons over Mike's breastbone, so that it wouldn't loosely hang out. "Looks good on you," he whispered.

"Like the trophy boyfriend of a millionaire should." Mike gave James a crooked smile.

James cleared his throat and quickly made his way back to the closet. "I'm good-looking enough to not call my boyfriend a trophy. Not like that fucker Richard. I bet Savannah's bored to death when she's not out shopping with his credit card," he growled, slipping on the shirt.

Mike put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the doorframe. "She seems to like fake teeth."

"Too big for her mouth, right?" James swallowed. "Last year, she told me she had them done in L.A. in the same clinic as her favorite celebrity."

"Anne Hathaway? That girl has a lot of teeth."

"No idea," said James but couldn't hold back a smile. He buttoned up the shirt and reached for the boxer briefs, suddenly stopping with the underwear in the air. Was he supposed to slip it on under the towel as if he were on a beach, or just let the towel fall down and show Mike the ass he worked for at the gym?

Mike saved him the trouble. "I'll just wait in the lounge."

"Sure," said James with fake confidence. "You can order something to drink on me. And your key card is on the shelf by the door."

“Nah, I won’t drink. I wanna be sharp,” Mike said, already walking out.

James opened his mouth but decided not to encourage him to at least get coffee. He dressed in a fitted gray suit with a pink and blue tie. He used to be dubious about being flashy but since he hired a stylist to help him shop, more people were checking him out. Men and women alike, and he appreciated that. He didn’t want to be old and boring like some of the salesmen at the conference.

He stuffed the few things he needed into his pockets and made his way to the elevator, already hating the idea of breakfast.

“Hey there, James!” he heard from behind him. He would always recognize the loathsome voice of Rich Carrington. “I was just telling the guys about your husband.”

James stopped mid-stride and turned around to look at three men in sharp suits walking straight at him like a pack of hungry wolves. He prayed not to sweat, that would betray him completely. “Ah, he’s my boyfriend. I don’t like making rash decisions,” he said with a smile, knowing Rich could read this as a poke against his hasty marriage.

Instead, he saw a tiny wrinkle on Richard’s forehead that would probably be a frown if his face weren’t infused with Botox. “Oh God, how insensitive of me. I forgot you still can’t marry in Texas.”

He saw the guys next to Richard smirk as if they were evil twins. They always followed Richard, like pilot fish, waiting for what scraps the shark would leave them.

“Give it a few years,” said James, trying not to sound as if it came through clenched teeth, even though it did. He wondered what excuse could be plausible enough to get away without making himself look like a coward. He couldn’t think of one.

Instead of stopping for the chat though, Richard walked up to James and embraced him with one arm, which felt more like getting strangled. “You should have breakfast with us, that’ll cheer you up.”

“Exactly, James. You’ll be able to give us all the insight into the new features of your invention,” said one of the other guys. James didn’t remember his name, but he could swear it was something like ‘Darby’, or ‘Harold’. He wondered whether they had been born with those names.

"I will be giving a presentation on it tomorrow. There is no reason for me to bore you guys with technical details first thing in the morning," he said, forcing a smile.

"Nonsense, there's nothing like coffee and engineering to wake a man up," said one of Richard's disciples. James actually wondered if they needed to reach a level-up by brown nosing to get teeth as paper-white as Richard's.

"Alister is right." Richard patted his friend on the back. "We want to be ahead of our game, James," he said as they walked to the elevator. "What time is your presentation tomorrow?"

James straightened his back. He wouldn't act as if he were in a cage with three sharks. Even though he was. He, a defenseless diver among the wildlife. "Noon in the main conference room," he said, keeping pride out of his voice. It was the best slot of the day.

Alister whistled as the door of the elevator closed. The sound was piercing in the confined space. "Well done! If the upgrade of your car is anything to go by, it is going to be great."

James closed his mouth. What was a smart answer to that? "It's a great car."

"Yeah, though I think you could do better. I can show you my new baby. Just got her last month," said Alister with a smug smile.

"True, true, I can vouch for it. Gotta keep up with the times, James." Richard chuckled with that fake laugh of his, and James had never been as happy that the elevator door opened as he was now.

"I don't see a reason to buy something just because it's new," he said, bristling.

"Ah, that didn't come out right," said Alister, raising his hands in the fakest apologetic gesture in the history of mankind. It reminded James of a time in high school, when he publicly called Mike out on being homophobic, and all he heard was that "Lovelace" was just a joke, harmless. And just as he thought of Mike, there he was, in the lounge, chatting to a group of women, and looking nothing like the hot and sweaty mechanic James was faced with yesterday. Okay, so there was still a hint of that in Mike's rugged features, in his big hands and veiny forearms, but he looked more like a model who accidentally crossed paths with James.

"Anyway, I promised my boyfriend I'd eat with him, so I guess we could talk after breakfast."

“Go on, go on.” Richard laughed. “I suppose you have to plan your tactic for paintball. Or is *he* your tactic?”

James had to press his nails into the flesh of his hand not to punch that tanned sonofabitch in the face. He knew the perfect comeback would eventually come, but it was not this minute. “So, is your wife playing this year?”

Mike noticed them and excused himself from the conversation at the table with a smile. James's stomach tensed even more. He could only hope Mike wouldn't find too much common ground with the sharks.

“Savannah? Gods, no! She's too gentle for that. She's more of a homey type, ready to soothe my battle wounds.”

Alister gently nudged Richard with his elbow. “And tend to all your needs, huh?”

“I prefer getting hurt together and licking our wounds together,” said James.

All he got from Alister was a deep frown, but Rich picked up for his fellow predator. “So you both lick out each other's wounds? Or do you only lick Mike's?”

James felt his feet freeze to the floor, while his mind went into complete chaos. Fuck. Why couldn't he think of anything to say? But there it was, Mike's strong arm wrapping around his waist.

“What's all this licking I hear of? I hope it's not about pussy, because that's kinda gross.” Mike grinned and gave James a kiss on the cheek.

James melted into his fake boyfriend and looked up at him with a smile that came straight from his heart. “No. I wouldn't do that to you.”

And for once, it was Richard without a snappy comeback.

Mike smiled back at James, but then looked to Richard. “Savannah was asking if you could bring her some jam for the pancakes. She told me you always make sure she has everything she needs. So sweet.” He gently nudged Richard's arm with his fist and turned around, leading James away with him. Something James couldn't manage on his own, simply walking away, achieved so easily.

Tension left James like yolk dripping from a soft-boiled egg. He looked up at Mike and squeezed his hand. “Thanks. I didn't know how to break free there.”

“Yeah, you looked like you were under siege.” Mike snorted and led James along to the restaurant where all the delegates were having their breakfast. “Is there anyone you want to sit with?”

James let out a shaky breath. He did! But he didn't have the courage to approach the president of the biggest pharmaceutical company in this hemisphere. And there was the man, at a table by the window, chatting with two colleagues over pancakes in a stylish breakfast room. “The guy in the corner, but I'm not sure if he'd want to be disturbed.”

“Let's go find out.” Mike pulled James along without a hint of shyness. James forced himself to calm down and let out a long shaky breath, walking along. He couldn't help but glance to the handsome face of his fake boyfriend. Why were those things so easy for Mike when James struggled with every move in such company? His thoughts were cut short when they reached the table, and all the men sitting by it raised their heads to look at them. Within less than a single minute, Mike had introduced James to everyone and they were enthusiastically invited to sit. Mike was smooth like that. And once they started their breakfast, James realized not all popular people at the convention were sharks.

Chapter 6

James hardly contained a shriek when red paint sprayed all over him the moment a bullet hit the side of the tree he was hiding behind. The yellow team was cornered behind a slope of terrain but fought on like they were in a trench, and this was the moment that would allow them to come home alive. Lying in the dirt, with the gun clutched to his chest, James was overwhelmed by the chaos around him. Everyone was shouting, both on their and the enemy's side, bullets were bursting all too close. He was uncomfortable in the protective armor and rough coveralls, and he hated it all with a passion. The only thing keeping him in the game was the will to prove himself to the sharks, who were fighting behind enemy lines. At least he didn't have to cooperate with them.

What he couldn't quite understand was that Mike had been by his side at all times, as if yesterday's argument had never happened. He was in his element, taking down quite a few guys from the red team. There was a silly sense of pride in James that it was his boyfriend who turned out to be the best shooter on the team, even if he was his just for the weekend.

Mike pulled at James's arm and saved him from yet another red bullet, hugging him close to the plastic armor on his chest. "Keep looking around," he huffed with that focused voice as if it was really life and death at stake.

James closed his eyes for a moment, melting into his warmth like a lump of butter tossed into a hot pan. It felt good to have someone at his back at all times, looking out for the things James was shit at, even if they were forced to crawl in dirt.

"It's just... so much is going on," he uttered, even though all he wanted to say was: *Don't you want to go home?*

"Hell, yeah." Mike didn't even look to James, breathing hard under his helmet. "Eyes around the head, like a spider."

James cringed. "Thanks for the mental image."

"Hey, guys," hissed someone from the bush next door. "They ceased fire. Let's go!"

"Do we even have a plan?" muttered James. They should take the enemy from both sides, not creep away in a group like a flock of sheep.

"The plan is, shoot the motherfuckers!" Mike yelled, followed by some enthusiastic cheers. God only knew when he got a chance to fraternize with all

those people. Mike let go of James and ran first, looking like a character from Gears of War in his black plastic armor.

James realized he'd be left alone if he didn't move so he pulled himself up and ran after the rest of his team, with the fogged up goggles taking at least a third of his vision. He bent in half and ran as fast as he could, eyes focused on Mike's ass two yards ahead of him. His head was pulsing with heat and stress. He'd already scored a minor wound, and it hurt like fuck.

Suddenly, more red bullets exploded on the trees and on the ground around James, making him stumble. A choir of aggressive yells from behind them betrayed all. They'd been ambushed from behind by a small group of soldiers from the red team. It was the same tactic James had wanted to go with. Why did no one ever listen to him? He smashed right into Mike and fell into the dry dirt, with a cloud of brown dust blowing up around him. The enemy was approaching fast.

James fumbled with the gun and before he expected it to, a yellow bullet shot out of his weapon and burst on the hip of one of the attackers. The guy fell with a growl, but it didn't stop any of the others. For some reason, James kept shooting everywhere but where he should. The one time he scored was apparently just a lucky coincidence. His body went more rigid and hot with every second as the soldiers in goggles came closer and closer. This was war. He would 'die'.

James shut his eyes. There was a shot, a groan... but not his. Someone pushed him down, and when he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Mike, scowling underneath a big red splatter on his helmet.

"Fuck," Mike groaned, falling to his knees.

Members of the other team were already rushing to squash what was left of Team Yellow.

James scrambled to his feet, fueled by rage that threatened to explode and burst a hole in his chest. He sent a series of bullets straight at the approaching group, which was enough to stop their progress, but his blood ran cold when the gun made a blunt sound, and James realized he was out of ammo.

"Fucking fuck."

"Duck! To the ground!" Mike yelled at him as he himself fell.

"Shut up, man! You're dead!" screamed one of the enemies from behind a tree.

James pressed his lips shut and ducked for a triangular shape on the ground. He picked up the stone and in one sharp movement pulled it across his neck in the gesture of throat slitting. He then dropped to his knees and fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes, gurgling like his own blood was choking him. If one didn't count the stones and other shit under his back, this was way more fun than shooting and trying not to get shot. He reached out to Mike's helmet and gathered some paint, only to smear it all over his own armor. There. He was so done.

He rolled his head to the side and met Mike's wide open eyes. "Why would you kill yourself?" Mike gasped and pulled up his red-stained goggles.

James stared at him, ignoring Team Red's soldiers who ran past them in pursuit of remaining members of the yellow team. He swallowed. "Can't live without my boyfriend?"

Mike stalled, but only for a second. "Pretty dramatic I suppose. Let's get out of here if we're done."

James got to his feet first. "You're not hurt, right?" he asked just in case. After all, Mike had given his fake life for him, and James still couldn't quite get his head around it.

"Nah." Mike rubbed his forehead as he got up. "Nothing to hurt inside there, right?" He snorted and knocked on his head.

James swallowed and picked up his gun. "Thanks for saving me, but aren't you disappointed? You seemed to be having fun."

Mike shrugged and led him along at a steady, slow jog. "I'd rather win, but it was an impulse. Not gonna regret it. What's done is done."

James sighed, following him without question. This day stirred all kinds of emotions in him. Had Mike Miller really changed? As promised, Mike had always been beside him throughout the day, helping him make friends and always ready for little tender gestures. This last move really wasn't like something the guy James knew from school would do. He didn't know what to do with the fact that he started feeling oddly at ease whenever they were together. He cleared his throat.

"Maybe we could wait in that hideout close to the base?"

"Lead the way then." Mike walked by him, playing with his plastic gun. The paintball armor only made him look bigger and more impressive, which reminded James of the times when he used to go sit on the bleachers by the

school's football field. He loved watching the players in their huge gear and tight pants, especially Mike, who didn't need anything to look impressive.

"Do you still play?"

"Nah, I only work out." Mike shrugged, his expression completely unreadable.

James swallowed hard. "You seemed to love it so much, that's all..."

"So what? Was never good enough at it. Always fucking mediocre. Nevermind, really, you said it yourself, we don't need to act when we're alone." Mike rubbed his forehead with a groan and they could already see the little wooden shack in the middle of a flat, grassy field.

James's mouth screwed shut, and he stuffed his hands down into his pockets, glancing at the dry ground beneath his feet. Of course Mike still remembered yesterday. Who wouldn't? The more James thought about what he'd said last night, the more he felt like crap.

They got to the small wooden hut accompanied only by the rustle of ground under their shoes and birds chirping in the trees. Mike never looked at James once. The guy was a terrific actor if he was able to perform the way he did throughout the day, fooling everyone that he was deeply in love with James. It was so convincing that even James was on the verge of believing.

"Is anyone there?" shouted James as he approached the low door to the shack.

"Oh, come on, it's empty." Mike kicked the door for emphasis, and it swung open with a creak. Mike walked in without a second thought, but had to turn and bow his head to fit in the tiny door.

James followed him with a sigh. There were some empty bottles and trash in the corner, but otherwise, the shack was completely theirs, so he got to his knees and started getting the uncomfortable gear off. The air had a stuffy quality to it but wasn't unpleasant. At least they were in the shade and didn't have to run around.

Mike sat on the floor and took off his goggles and helmet. "How long is this supposed to go on for?"

James shrugged. "No idea. I died within the first fifteen minutes last time."

Mike looked to the ceiling, to the floor, to the wall, to his boots, anywhere but at James, like he meant even less than back at school when Mike thought it was fun to bully him.

James cleared his throat and sat cross-legged a few feet away, forcing himself to face Mike. This couldn't go on. He needed to apologize, but if Mike wouldn't accept, then he had every right not to.

Mike's gaze finally fell on him. "Are we gonna be singing 'Kumbaya' or something?"

"I'm sorry." James let out a shaky breath and tangled his fingers together. "I should have never said what I said. It was inexcusable."

The frown on Mike's face deepened. "What? What are you on about?"

"You know what I'm talking about," said James, looking him straight in the eyes, and it was like walking through a hot field to the only source of shade within miles. "I had no right to judge you. I was an asshole."

Mike crossed his arms on his chest. "Whatever. You're rich and shit. You can do whatever you want."

James squeezed his hands on his thighs. It was so hard to stand the raw accusation in Mike's eyes. "No, I can't. I never wanted to be this kind of person, and I'm not this kind of person. You don't have to forgive me, but I am really sorry. I did work a lot, but I have also been lucky."

"Well, I didn't have such luck. It doesn't mean I'm never going to do shit. I was in a bad place." Mike sucked in his bottom lip and sat there, as tense as he used to be before important football games.

James sighed, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his thighs. In the cool light inside the shack, Mike looked thoughtful and serene. "What happened?"

Mike groaned and picked at a loose thread on his knee. "I had some plans, but never had enough money to do what I wanted after high school, so I went to work and tried to save up."

James bit his lip, relieved that Mike chose to talk to him after all. "What did you want to do?"

Mike shrugged. "Does it matter? After I came out, my family threw me out, and my brother stole all my savings, so I ended up at that fucking gas station. Doesn't mean I'm useless."

James stared at him, empty headed. "Your *brother* stole your money?" It was beyond James. His own family hadn't been thrilled about his sexuality at first but they came round. No wonder Mike was so intent on showing off to his father and brother.

“Hate the motherfucker. Thinks he’s all that just because he puts his dick in a pussy,” Mike growled and clenched his fists.

“That’s hardly an achievement,” muttered James, anger bubbling up in him. “Was it the money you were making when you were at school? In Choco Panda?”

“Yeah, and at Walmart after that. I wasn’t earning a lot, but I saved up a good chunk throughout the years. I didn’t, like, hate you at school or anything. I was just... I didn’t know how to approach you. I’m still shit at all this gay stuff.” He sighed and put his face in his hands.

James blinked, leaning back with air tiredly sliding through his windpipe as if it were blocked. “What does that mean? You and your friends did your best to turn my life into hell. I was this fucking close to leaving school because of you!” he growled, showing Mike his pinched fingers.

Mike’s gaze finally focused on him. “Huh? Because of a little teasing? Come on... I kept trying to get you alone.” He actually laughed. “This sounds so pathetic.”

James frowned. “It wasn’t ‘teasing’, okay? I didn’t care about being called names, but when guys like you actually approached me, I had no idea what you were gonna do. I’ve had my stuff taken, I’ve been knocked to the ground, I’ve been thrown into the trash, I’ve been kicked, and crowded.” He took a long breath when he ran out of air. It was all still there, buried deep in his mind but always ready to creep back into consciousness in the worst moment. Cold fear paralyzing his legs, nausea, and all the hate he felt when he hadn’t been able to do anything. “You don’t know how it is for a guy like me.”

Mike slowly reached out to him and hooked his finger on James’s. “I don’t. I’m sorry.”

The gesture was so surprising that James zeroed his eyes on their intertwined hands. Gradually, his heart was changing its pace to a gallop when the warmth from Mike’s single finger spread all over James’s bloodstream. “You made me feel like shit so many times.”

“I kinda... we did that to each other with the guys on the team, you know? It was normal.” Mike swallowed. “I think it just escalated for you because of that presentation. You were the only gay guy I knew, and I was so horny all the time. I didn’t even mind your hair, the glasses... I didn’t care.”

Something squeezed around James’s chest like a giant fist. “So you just wanted to fuck anyone, and you thought that I would do?”

Mike sighed and inched closer on his ass. "No, I thought that you'd want me. Don't judge me. I was seventeen, all I could think of was cocks, and asses, and fucking. I would have done a lot to get your plump lips around my dick." Mike pouted and squeezed James's hand as if it was a romantic compliment he was making.

James exhaled, surprised that in the weirdest way, it did make him feel better. "I can't believe I'm saying this but that's actually... quite sweet," he whispered, watching Mike's big, veiny hand over his. After a year of extensive training, James's wasn't all that slim either. He wasn't that nerdy kid anymore, but in his mind Mike would always be that big jock who had enough strength to take him down.

"I'm sorry for the nickname. It was kinda douchey," Mike admitted and sat closer, so their thighs touched.

James nodded. "It was. That photo was never supposed to get into that stupid presentation." He did his best to keep his breath even but to this day, he checked every single thing he showed in a slideshow or sent to someone else, at least three times. He reread his e-mails after pressing "send" out of fear that something incriminating somehow found its way in. He would never forget the roar of laughter and booing when his class saw that obscene photo on the screen. His feet were screwed to the floor. So much so that it was the teacher who closed the presentation for him.

Mike bowed his head and whispered into James's ear. "I got so hard in class when I saw it..."

James inhaled a bit of air. Mike's breath was like the desert air, circling around his ear like a viper. He turned his head, brushing his nose over Mike's stubbly cheek. Shame was the only thing that kept him from tracing the tiny needles with his tongue.

"I think that was why I came up with that nickname. I was obsessed with the idea." Mike sighed and slid his hand to the back of James's neck.

Was this really happening? James closed his eyes, breathing in the smell of dried leaves, paint, and fresh sweat that stuck to their coveralls. "And now you're calling me Jamie."

"I'm not seventeen anymore. This weekend was actually the first time I've ever been out in public. I thought I was gonna have a stroke or something." Mike laughed and... licked the side of James's face. A deep shudder went all the way from the tip of James's head to his toes, and he leaned closer, clutching

his hands on the fabric at Mike's back. It was as if his skin came alive, waiting for any and all sensations it could get a hold of.

"Was it? You chose not to come out in public because of the plans you had?"

"No, I just... I'm not that comfortable with the whole gay idea." Mike didn't hesitate to trace James's cheek with his lips though. "Vega wouldn't have employed me if he'd known, either."

"But you *are* gay," whispered James, hugging him even closer.

"Well, yeah. I'm a mess though. I've never had a boyfriend or anything. Pretending to be yours is actually quite funny. I get to say all sorts of shit I'd be nervous about otherwise."

"That *is* funny because the guy you pretend to be is the best boyfriend I've had," whispered James, sliding his hands to Mike's shoulders, and then down his chest. There, he said it.

Mike petted James's ear with his fingers. "It got me thinking that if I'm to be out in Vegas, I'm gonna be super-gay. No apologies to anyone."

"I know. I wouldn't ever want to change, even with all the bad stuff that happened after I outed myself." James sighed, enjoying the shape of Mike's pecs beneath his hands. They were so warm, even through the fabric.

"So what was your last boyfriend like?" Mike tensed, but never moved away.

James chuckled, moving even closer. "Very serious, very... proper." James didn't really miss him. He'd never really missed him.

"Oh yeah? A surgeon or some shit?" Mike petted James's hair and kissed the side of his face, but then slowly pushed James down to the dusty wooden floor.

There was no trace of resistance in James as he lay back and looked up at Mike's gorgeous chest, arms, face, all towering over him. "No, a physicist. He... didn't like it much when I started doing much better than him."

Mike grinned at him, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Ah, so that's why you picked up a piece of trash at a gas station." He didn't have any qualms against taking off the plastic vest and crawling on top of James with his whole weight. It took James right to the edge between safety and threat. Hair bristled at the back of his neck when he looked into Mike's eyes.

He shook his head. "No! I took you with me because you are hotter than any of their wives," he whispered breathlessly. There had been the pleasure of having Mike Miller under his heel, but it wasn't even close to being the main reason.

"So I'm not just 'a hot fish' after all?" Mike put his hands next to James's face, then slowly ground into his body.

James opened his eyes wide and shook his head. He spread his thighs wider to accommodate Mike. This confidence, this strength, the intensity in those green eyes was something he never got over. There would never be another Mike Miller for him. "Would you kiss me?" he whispered.

Mike's smile widened. "Would I ever..." He went for the kiss like there was no tomorrow, spreading James's lips with his tongue and grinding his erection against James's cock. The kiss pushed James's head to the ground and left him breathless as Mike's tongue explored every last inch of his mouth, forcing it open any time James wanted to close it. The experience only got him imagining if it would be the same to have Mike's cock thrust in.

He clutched at Mike's shoulders and wrapped his ankles over the small of his back. The molten lava that spread all over his body made him forget he needed air, but eventually he had to break the kiss. "Oh, wow..."

Mike groaned, steadily rubbing himself against James's ass. It was the sweetest massage in James's life. "I've wanted to fuck you so bad since the moment I laid eyes on you. I wanna be naked with you, see you come."

The declaration fueled a wave of lust in James, which he expressed with a deep moan he didn't even know he was holding back. It was as if he couldn't recognize his own body anymore. He nodded, clutching his hands in Mike's hair.

"Yeah? Can I do you here?" Mike rasped, staring into James's eyes like he was on fire.

That was a wakeup call if James ever heard one. He shook his head. "N-no lube," he whispered, moving his hands to Mike's cheeks. He still wanted to lick them.

"Fuck my life," Mike groaned. "Do you have some at the hotel?"

James shook his head. His hands were moving over Mike's face and neck like he was petting an animal.

“Well, we need to get some then. I want my *anal*,” Mike whispered the last word with a silly grin.

James chuckled as his face heated up. “You’re so filthy.”

“And you seem to love it. Then again, I’m not the filthy scum bag who pays guys to watch them jerk off.” He grabbed James’s bottom lip with his teeth and pulled on it.

James whined and tightened his thighs around Mike. “I’ve waited ages to see that cock. How can you blame me?”

“I can’t really. If I were you, I’d want to see my cock too.” Mike sucked on James’s lip. Pleasure turned into shock when Mike’s teeth bit into James’s flesh at the sound of a gunshot.

The heavy body above him tensed up. “Motherfucker!” Mike uttered and looked back, still arched over James. The moment James followed his gaze, he also noticed Richard’s face in the window, rifle resting on the windowsill.

“You outta your fuckin’ head?” Mike screamed and got to his feet, presenting James two massive red splodges on his back. “We were already dead!”

“Looked a bit too alive to me.” Richard chuckled.

“Very funny,” growled James, scrambling to his feet. He would not be embarrassed at a time like this. “He doesn’t have the armor on.”

He barely finished saying that when Mike was already climbing through the window to reach Richard. “You so tough, son of a bitch? Let me see how tough you are when I send all that porcelain in your mouth flying!”

“Mike!” hissed James, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him back. “He’s not worth it!”

“It’s just a game!” Richard yelled, already pacing away. “Chill out!”

Mike huffed and stayed put. “I’ll let him go, but I don’t care when this game ends. Let’s get some lube.”

“Why, you want to turn your aggression somewhere else?” asked James, molding himself to Mike’s body, which he was still hugging at the waist.

Mike turned in his embrace all of a sudden, as if he were burnt. “Yeah, yeah, all fucking night,” he said and kissed James’s aching lip.

James snorted and quickly gathered his equipment. He was horny and excited, but underlying all that was a growing tumor of anxiety. Things were moving so fast that he was about to lose an arm to the rollercoaster.

Chapter 7

Mike acted like a horny teenager on Viagra. He kept touching James on their way to the hotel, and telling James about all sorts of filth he wanted to do. Knowing that it was him, James Austin, who fueled those urges in Mike Miller, made all the workouts worth it. When they were changing into normal clothes, James noticed two massive bruises on Mike's back. He'd smack Richard himself for those. They stopped at a gas station to get the necessary supplies, and it felt like the distance couldn't get any longer, even though James was still on the fence whether he should be doing this or not. The moment he stopped the car in the hotel parking lot, it was a race to their room, and James prayed this night wouldn't be something he would regret to the end of his life.

He went in first, immediately kicking off his shoes. As usual, he pulled out his wallet and cell phone, and placed them on the shelf by the door, along with the keys. He was so nervous that each and every inch of his body was starting to ache with the tension in his muscles.

He hadn't yet decided on what he wanted to say when Mike grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him toward the bathroom. "I'll show you what you missed out on at school," he said in a low, raspy voice.

All thought left James's head at that tone, and with the tightening of the collar around his neck, he felt a pull at his cock as well. He could sense every bit of fabric rubbing against his skin.

A strange chill went down his spine when Mike pushed him into the shower stall, triggering a wave of memories so ingrained in James's mind that he couldn't help the fear mixing with arousal.

"You probably think I was just taunting you, don't you?" Mike said with his chest heaving.

James gave him a slow nod, too choked up to speak. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the gorgeous man in front of him, and he didn't want to. Mike was the only truly bright thing he'd experienced throughout the past two days.

"What I wanted was to turn the water on." The cold stream hit James's head, but it couldn't possibly cool the fire rushing through his veins. "And get you undressed." Mike took off James's tie and started unbuttoning his shirt.

James stared at him, hypnotized, even though the constant movement of big hands against his chest only fueled the deep lust gathering in his stomach. Would they do it here, in the stream of water that by now had turned warm?

"I dreamed of touching a man's body, so different from a girl's. Firm and hairy," Mike whispered as he pushed the wet shirt and jacket to the tiles, and trailed both his palms down James's chest. The sensation of rough fingertips rubbing against his skin, and Mike's smell were so striking it made James's knees weak.

"Yes," whispered James, touching Mike's biceps, which were still mostly dry as he was staying away from the warm stream that already had James completely drenched, with fabric sticking to his skin like warm, caressing palms.

"I imagined you all naked and helpless, just dying to suck my cock as soon as you were naked. I wanted to see your dick so much." Mike moved closer and unbuckled James's belt. "I bet it's gorgeous. Cut or uncut?" Mike's face was all flushed, and his fingers trembling.

That comment stirred something deep and primitive inside of James's brain, and he suppressed a moan. To think that Mike had been fantasizing about his cock was like a dream come true. "Cut," he whispered, glancing lower, to the hands that were roughly unwrapping Mike's prize. "I wanted to suck your cock back at the gas station."

"You could have." All of Mike's focus was on the pants he was unbuckling, and he gasped when James's clothes finally dropped to the tiles. He stepped into the stream of water and wrapped his arm around James's waist as his fingers found the cock he said he wanted to touch so badly. Mike bowed and left a sloppy kiss on James's neck with a groan.

James closed his eyes when his head fell back, and the water showered his face, completing the weightless pleasure Mike bestowed on him. "I wouldn't pay for permission to do this," he gasped, clutching to the warm, solid body next to his.

"How about now, for free?" The rough hand petted James's back, but quickly slid lower, as Mike clearly enjoyed exploring every inch of James's cock. Mike was panting. He squeezed the whole length of it with his fingers and swirled the thumb around the head, making James tremble.

James kissed Mike's chin and lapped at it, shivering when the stubble scratched his tongue. "Is this what you would have liked me to do back at school?" he whispered, unzipping Mike's slacks. He tried to savor every molecule of Mike's exquisite scent, even as it was mellowed down by water.

"Yeah, I wanted you to kneel for me in that shower." Each stroke of Mike's hand on James's cock evoked years of wet dreams about the school

quarterback. Mike gripping one of his buttocks was like a reminder of the lust-hate feelings James had lived with for years, and now he could finally complete the circle.

With a deep sigh, James pulled the large hand away from his cock and held onto Mike's wrist as he sank to his knees in the puddle of water at his feet. One look up to the toned god standing against the bright lamplight was enough to confirm to James that this was where he wanted to be. He couldn't hold back a smile that bloomed on his lips. "Show me."

Mike pushed his pants down, breathing hard, with water dripping down his face. James had already had the pleasure of seeing the beast in Mike's pants, but it was no less amazing to see it again, already filling, stiffening, ready for play, with water drizzling down its graceful arch. "Can you deep throat?" Mike uttered and leaned against the wall.

James felt a rush of heat to his face and nodded, looking up with a smile. None of his other lovers were even close to Mike's straightforward manner of acting, which he rather liked. "This is a challenge," he whispered, covering the shaft with both his hands. He gave it a slow pump. A moan left his lips when the thick cock twitched in his grip, and he leaned closer, all the way to the purplish head sticking out from between his fingers. He gave it a slow, languid kiss, shuddering at the smoothness of it when he imagined it sliding in, down the slick road of his tongue and into his throat.

"I don't wanna push too much, but I'd really love to feel it." Mike bowed over James and slid his hands to James's shoulders. "My teenage mind kinda imagined you could."

James chuckled against the cock and opened his hands to give the throbbing flesh a lick along the bulging vein on the underside. "I couldn't, believe me." It took some time to learn but he had been an eager student. It made him proud that he could now present the skill to Mike for the ultimate test. After all, Mike's cock was bigger than that of James's exes.

Mike unbuttoned his shirt to reveal cover-worthy stomach muscles. They were so well pronounced, for a moment James just stared at the droplets of water cascading down Mike's body, to his hips, and sliding all the way down his thighs.

"That cock looks so hot in your mouth," whispered Mike.

James smiled, feeling all giddy inside as he opened his mouth to suck it in. Keeping one hand at the base, he cupped Mike's scrotum with the other and

weighed the balls in his palm, gently squeezing. His mouth watered when the heavy cockhead rested on his tongue. He arched the muscle, raising Mike's dick in his mouth, just to feel its gentle slide against the palate, and sure enough, the pulsing pressure on his own cock became hardly bearable.

"That's so good, Jamie... suck it." Mike's big hand slid into James's hair and gripped it with delicious force.

James mewled into the cock and took it in deeper, making sure that the head got plenty of attention. He started alternating between bobbing his head over the delicious, musky cock, and caressing it with just his tongue and lips. He couldn't decide which felt better. Spreading his thighs to get some pressure off his own dick, James let his body take charge, and gradually he could accommodate more and more of the length. He was afraid of the shame of not delivering what he promised, so he took it slow, even though his throat ached to accept Mike's glorious shaft.

"Dream suck," Mike whispered and arched against the wall. "I knew you could do it," he rasped, his cock throbbing by James's palate, hot and stiff.

James whimpered and combed Mike's pubes with three of his fingers while still holding onto the base of the prick. Trembling slightly, he positioned himself carefully and pushed. The moment Mike's cockhead breached the invisible barrier and went into James's throat, James's toes curled with the ecstasy rushing all over his skin. It was all the way in. James buried his nose in the damp musk of the pubes and gently squeezed the balls in his hand. He loved this. He loved this so much.

His eyes went up to Mike, seeking his gaze. He needed the heavy palm on his nape again.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, I'm gonna come," Mike moaned, bent in half over James. Seeing his handsome face all flushed and tense only made it all more worthwhile. James's eyes glossed over, and Mike holding him in place with both hands was only making him tremble more.

It was a drizzle of warm chocolate covering all of James's fears. Was his blowjob so good Mike couldn't hold it? He would have smiled but as soon as he drew back to get some air, liquid heat hit the back of his throat, and he clawed his fingers into the meaty thighs at his sides.

"So fucking amazing." Mike panted, petting James's temples with his thumbs. He looked so beautiful and powerful with his face flushed in pleasure. "Swallow?" Mike looked down into his eyes, and James nodded, with the cock

still halfway down his mouth. He would if he hadn't done so already, even if just to make Mike happy.

He slowly withdrew, putting a hand to his throbbing throat. Imagining the wide dick still inside, he reached down between his thighs and squeezed his own cock with a low groan.

"Stop. I want to see you come when I fuck you breathless," Mike said with half-lidded eyes and slipped his hands to James's shoulders.

James sighed but didn't protest despite the need growing in his groin. He liked Mike in control of the pace. "You have a great cock," he whispered, pulling himself up to his shaky feet. One move was enough to lose the slacks, and he was naked against the hottest guy on the planet.

Nothing could spoil the moment Mike Miller clawed his fingers into James's ass and picked him up. He didn't have to suggest it, James instinctually wrapped his legs around his waist and hugged him close. Mike was still panting as he turned around and carried James all the way to the bedroom, kissing his lips and gently nipping at them as he moved along the wall.

Somewhere at the back of his mind, James was worried Mike would be too occupied with their closeness and stumble, but he was too taken with their chemistry to pay much mind to it. A sudden change in gravity brought a yelp out of his lips, but it died down once his back hit the mattress, with Mike's body falling over him like a tiger's. Hungry, the beast was ready to devour all James had to offer and suck the marrow out of his bones.

"You're so hot. I'm gonna get it up again in no time," Mike rasped, his fingers eager to explore all James's body still had on offer. "I'll just get the lube," he muttered, but didn't actually pull back yet. James cupped his face with a low sigh and grinned. He was ecstatic. Mike was doing something to him, and he had no idea how to respond to that yet. After all, it was a man he both knew and didn't.

"Yes."

When Mike backed off and got up, it was a sight to behold. Almost like the first time James had seen him grown-up, walking out of that crappy convenience store at the gas station, with his coveralls pulled halfway down, and wearing dark shades, his body glistening with sweat. James finally got a better look at Mike's ass, all round and beefy over those firm thighs. Even the bruises on Mike's back couldn't spoil the view as he walked back to the door like the majestic beast he was.

James swallowed hard, pushing back the covers without looking at them because he didn't want to take his eyes off that beautiful man. Nerves were getting the best of him, twisting and squeezing his stomach. This was Mike Miller. He was going to have Mike Miller inside him. His whole body shuddered with emotion as his eyes met Mike's from across the room, and the response he got was a hungry grin. Mike waved the little condom packet at James before making his way back. Slower, as if he was giving James ogling time, proud like a lion in the middle of the savannah approaching his chosen lioness.

James took a deep breath and reached out to him. The covers were too cold in contrast to his skin, he needed Mike to cover him with his warmth again. There was nothing he wanted more in the world.

"Turn around," Mike ordered, slipping to his knees on the mattress. "I've been waiting ages to properly see your ass." He had a lazy, self-satisfied smile on his face that James could imagine waking up to every day. The moment that idea came to his mind, it sank its clutches into his heart and refused to let go. This was way scarier than losing his virginity had been. It wasn't just about having sex.

James exhaled and slowly turned to his stomach, groaning when his cock slid against the fabric and sank into it under his weight. Mike's fingers traced James's back and all the way to his buttocks, until he parted them gently, awakening a deep, carnal need all over James's body. He was gasping, writhing on the sheet, grinding his hips in the air, and Mike was the only man who could satisfy him.

"It's so firm. I bet you do special exercises just for your ass." Mike snorted and ran his fingers along the crack.

James curled his toes and spread his thighs farther. "Guilty." He smiled and closed his eyes, absorbing Mike's warmth into his skin.

"You want guys to notice it at the gym and chat you up?" Mike laughed and drizzled some lube between James's buttocks. A shudder ran through James at the cool slickness, but he arched his back and moved his hips just enough to brush his skin against Mike's knee.

"I usually work out when no one's there. My gym's open 24/7."

"Why would you take away the viewing pleasure? Afraid that you wouldn't be able to help yourself?" Mike spread the lube between James's ass cheeks, teasing the anus with his thumb.

James pulled a pillow closer and hugged it. He angled his hips and started making tiny moves in response. The pressure felt so good. "I'm not into hooking up with random guys," whispered James.

"Good boy. Ready for a proper stud." Mike pushed his slippery thumb into James's ass and wiggled it gently. "So fucking tight..."

James yelped and squeezed his ass around the finger. Even with the lube it was rough, and he looked back at Mike. He needed more than that finger touching him. "Lie down?"

Mike smirked and plopped next to James, never taking his finger away and teasing the sensitive anus. "I love the idea of fucking a guy," he groaned and kissed James's lips.

"You seem to know what you're doing," whispered James, drinking in Mike's warm breath. He pulled closer, providing his arm as a pillow.

"I did it with girls a few times." Mike slowly pushed in another finger, stretching James and nipping at his lip from where his head was resting on James's bicep. The fingers were both solid and gentle, a calming presence in the most vulnerable spot on James's body.

He slowly moved his knee up, letting it rest against Mike's leg, and gasped against his mouth. "After you came out?"

"Before. I don't wanna think about it now though. I wanna think about your balls, your dick, your chest..." Mike groaned and pushed his fingers in farther.

James's whole body throbbed in response, and he reached down, curling his fingers around Mike's thick wrist. He pulled on it, pressing the digits in deeper, a delicious slide that made his brain scramble. He slowly turned to his side, pressing even closer to Mike. He was right between the heat of his lover and the much cooler air at his back. "You can feel it now."

Mike dove in for another long kiss and pushed James to his back. His half-lidded gaze made James yearn for another kiss. Mike pulled his fingers out and kneeled between James's thighs. "I wanna see you open up those legs for me." He ripped the condom packet with his teeth. His warm voice, the lust glazing his eyes were the key to James's heart, and he felt it turn.

In the nest of warm fabrics, James spread his knees, with his eyes trained on Mike. His lungs ached with every breath as if Mike still held his large palm over James's chest, even without touching him. It was calming and sweet where James sensed it against his ribcage. "You're not nervous."

“Should I be? Just because I’m a gay-virgin?” Mike snorted as he rolled the condom onto his dick. It was erect again and seemed even bigger than before. “I’m too horny to be nervous.” Without another word, he grabbed James under the knees and pushed his legs up to get full access to James’s ass. Having Mike’s weight on top was the sweetest strain imaginable.

James gasped, grabbing Mike’s shoulders. He felt so vulnerable. What if this all turned out to be some kind of elaborate joke? What if Mike only accepted his apologies to get into his pants? His body, however, had no doubts about what it wanted. His stomach fluttered, warm and throbbing with an itch only Mike could scratch. “Well, I am,” he uttered.

“How so?” Mike asked, nipping at James’s jaw as he slid his cockhead over the slippery hole, only teasing James for now.

James swallowed hard, looking up at him. He kept his hands on Mike’s shoulders, just in case he felt he needed to push him back a bit. “This changes things. Since yesterday, everything has been so crazy. Like I’m in the Twilight Zone with an alternative version of you. One that is actually easy to stand.”

“‘Easy to stand’? Wow, talk about encouraging. You really do know how to wow a guy.” Mike groaned, gently pushing with his cock, without actually sliding it in.

James gasped, trailing his hands up and down Mike’s thick, warm neck. “What I actually mean is... I think I’m gonna miss this,” he uttered, completely absorbed by the face above him. The world stopped at the edge of the bed.

“You think too much,” Mike said, and his cock pushed right in, emptying James’s mind of all unnecessary thoughts. He couldn’t even speak because Mike’s lips were on his again, that hot tongue penetrating him just like the thick dick.

James clutched at Mike, holding him tight in any way he could think of. Wrapped completely around the big, warm body, James slipped into blissful weightlessness that seemed to swallow him whole. He was completely open to Mike. Nothing hurt, and all he felt was that sweet tingle in his belly and where Mike was entering him. He wouldn’t be able to count to ten without making a mistake.

Mike pushed all the way in, pressing all air out of James’s lungs. The hard prick pulled back halfway, only to enter again, and again, and again. With James’s knees forced up high, Mike laid his whole body weight on top of him, grinding his hips against James’s ass at a rapid speed. He was like a warm cage

of flesh and blood that kept James from flying off the mattress with the cock pistoning between his buttocks, and the fervent yet gentle lips on his face.

James moaned, shocked by the intensity of sensations hitting him at once. He clawed his fingers into Mike's cheeks and clutched his thighs around his lover's eager hips. "Slow down," he whispered, his body trembling when Mike's hard thrust nailed his prostate.

"Too much for Jamie?" Mike rasped with a grin, but slowed down, the movements of his hips becoming languid, stretched out, but never stopping.

"It's been a while," muttered James, but a sharp pang of pleasure turned his body into boneless goo. "Much better... that's good." He cupped both sides of Mike's face and angled his hips for that spot to be hit again. Every time that big, glorious cockhead brushed over his gland, it was like a wave of warm sea washing over him and tugging on his cock. From the inside. "That angle... it's great," he whispered, gazing into the green of Mike's eyes.

"Oh, yeah? I can do this all night." Mike's voice came in a low rasp, just as sweet as the wave-like movement of his body over James. His cock was hitting that sweet spot inside James each time as Mike thrust into him faster again.

The sound that came out of James was halfway between a laugh and moan. "Don't make empty promises," he whispered and bit the tip of Mike's nose. Now that his body had adjusted to the intrusion, the speed became heart-meltingly sweet. He wished Mike could deliver what he promised because James needed this so much that he was prepared to endure any discomfort that could follow on the next day.

"No empty promises." Mike looked into his eyes, and the world slowed down, even with the heat between them and the thrusts still relentless.

James gasped, pulling Mike's face lower. Inch by inch, the heat came closer, Mike's eyes turned darker, and James was ready to come. He grabbed his dick and started frantically jerking off to the rhythm of Mike's thrusts.

"I wanna be the one who makes you come," Mike whispered into James's lips, sending his world into a spin. The penetration became slower, but strong and hard as Mike held onto James's hair. Each one was perfectly angled to nail James's gland. He had no idea how much Mike knew about guy on guy sex, but he certainly was a keen observer.

James had a thousand words to say to that, but as he looked into Mike's eyes, nothing came out. He nodded and pulled his partner down for a hungry,

desperate kiss. They were on fire. He was about to come with Mike Miller inside of him.

Mike wrapped his arms under James to pull him as close as humanly possible, and that was it for James. He came with a low cry, clinging to Mike so hard his joints ached. His eyelids fell shut, ragged breathing made him high on the air, and he simply let go. Bliss descended on him like molten lava, and it was like coming after being teased for years, all of his secret fantasies and hurts coming together in one glorious moment when tension left his body.

“Love the way you clench those muscles,” Mike blabbered, moaning into James’s ear with his last few thrusts. Having Mike between his legs without a hint of fear was such an overwhelming experience that James just clung to him, kissing his partner’s hot skin, lapping up the fresh sweat. He could hardly believe his luck. It was the greatest kind of closure he could ever get. He held Mike through his orgasm, gently petting and scratching the fiery flesh. Mike’s back was so tense and muscular James would love to kiss it all over, and then roll to his back for Mike once again.

Mike let out a shuddery breath as he pulled out. He took a moment to dispose of the condom but then was right back, pulling James into a tight hug. “I’ve never been with anyone like this.”

“Me neither,” whispered James, hiding his face in the crook of Mike’s neck. His well-used hole throbbed, as if already missing the cock, but the never-ending kisses Mike was pressing to his shoulder were making up for it.

James let his legs relax, and having Mike’s hot fingers explore his thighs was making it even better. Funny, he would have never taken Mike for a cuddler.

“I wouldn’t have known it was your first,” whispered James, holding him close. The gentle petting of his thighs was the sweetest massage.

“Was it good for you?” Mike looked up at him, his green eyes sincere and hungry for appreciation.

James swallowed. Was Mike Miller feeling self-conscious about his performance in bed? He smiled and nuzzled Mike’s nose, hooking one knee over his partner’s hip. Strange, throughout his long-term relationship, he never felt as at ease with his boyfriend as he did now, with a ghost from his past. A very fleshy ghost. He was naked in every possible sense. And he loved it. “I’m great, thank you,” he whispered.

Mike chuckled and covered them with a soft sheet. "The pleasure's all mine. Maybe I can provide it again tomorrow." His eyes had that dreamy look when he traced circles over James's forearm. It burned, as if he were marking James with some unknown signs.

"I could show you some tricks," whispered James, drunk on the sweetness that Mike was turning out to be.

"Like the throat one. You need to do it again because I don't think I got it the first time," Mike said. It didn't matter that they were both sweaty and sticky, James could stay like this for a long time. "I think I didn't even know how much I was missing out," Mike added, but even though the context was dirty, he sounded strangely serious.

James chuckled, hugged him close, and kissed his stubbly cheek. "Why, you want to learn that?"

"N-no," Mike uttered, but never backed away for a second. "I mean... It's about more than sex. It's about being close to another man. It's so much deeper. Such a connection." He licked his lips, watching James with a slight frown.

James breathed out, his chest constricting as he stroked Mike's cheek. "It's not something that always happens."

"I can imagine not everyone is so in sync with you." Mike never looked away, hardly even blinking.

James throat throbbed in unison with his heartbeat. "This was... kinda intense," he whispered, trying to stifle the burst of hope in his chest. Maybe he and Mike could get to know each other better?

Mike slowly rolled half of his body on top of James again. "It made me feel alive."

James gave him a frantic nod. "It's like... I've been crushing on you all this time, and now I finally got you."

Mike smiled back at him and stroked the side of James's body. "You did. You're a lot sweeter than I imagined."

James chuckled, heat rushing to his face. "No, I'm a dick."

"You definitely *have* a dick." Mike nuzzled his cheek.

That statement pressed a full on grin to James's face. He felt so comfortable with Mike, like they had no worries in the world. "So... was that the final push

into the gay lifestyle?" he whispered, a bit embarrassed with where the conversation went.

Mike snorted. "Yeah, I suppose there's no turning back. Anything can happen now."

James sighed and leaned in to kiss Mike's nipple. "What was the original plan? What did you want to do?"

Mike bit his lip and let out a deep breath through his nose. "It's stupid. I was saving up to get a helicopter license."

James stared at him with a growing sense of loss. It must have been a blow for Mike, who kept a job throughout high school, collecting the money, only to have it taken from him. He didn't know if it would have been enough to pay for the course Mike wanted, but it would have been a start, something Mike didn't have. Someone who changed so much, who was such a sweet, caring guy, deserved a chance. "It's not stupid."

"It is. I don't know what I was thinking. I kinda imagined it would get me into a different world. That I'd get to see things. Even if I was just an air chauffeur." Mike ran his fingers through James's hair.

James leaned into the caress and pulled Mike's other hand close, to hold it against his lips. "You would have been a great air chauffeur. You have a way with people."

"I have a way with Jamie and his ass." Mike laughed and pinned him to the mattress in one swift move worthy of a wrestler.

James gasped when his ass tingled, as if already conditioned to react to Mike's strength. There was no way he could disagree with that.

Chapter 8

Mike woke up as the happiest man alive. He rolled over to his side and pulled Jamie closer with a content murmur. He couldn't stop thinking about last night. It was a defining sexual experience. Exactly what he needed to know who he was, his place on Earth, and where he wanted to be until he died. Mike never had a realization he'd call "transcendent"—hell, he'd laugh at any silly hippie who used the word—but that was exactly what it was. Buried deep in Jamie and pounding his ass like there was no tomorrow while looking into those blue eyes and kneading the firm flesh of his thighs... There was no beginning and no end to what he could say about that.

Jamie's nose wrinkled, and he sneezed, his eyes snapping wide open as if the sound had woken him up. He blinked, looking innocent and empty-headed like a newborn baby. But then he blinked again, and his face glowed with a wide smile. "Hey."

"Hey." Mike grinned back, feeling all gooey on the inside, like a lava cake. He didn't know what else to say though. *Do you wanna do it again?, I love your ass?, Let's go to Vegas together and get married?* Nothing really seemed appropriate.

His chest tightened when Jamie leaned forward in a snake-like move and pushed his warm legs against Mike's. The hair on his thighs and calves tickled Mike's skin in the sweetest way possible. Touching Jamie was nothing like being with a girl, his skin wasn't nearly as smooth, instead it had lean muscle underneath, so pliant and accepting. Jamie's morning stubble was dark against his cheeks and chin, making him look even more masculine.

"I wouldn't want you to be late for the conference." Mike kissed him all over his jaw, and Jamie just spread out under him like a cat.

"Are you pushing me out of bed?" he asked, arching his back over the soft cotton sheet. The dark hair on his body was trimmed just right to lead Mike's eyes down, between Jamie's legs.

"Never. Would you like to stay like this longer?" Mike asked, and just stared at Jamie's beautiful cock.

"Yeah, we still have a bit of time. I don't have to watch some old men talking about sales." Jamie's warm hand found its way to Mike's ear and started brushing it softly, as if it were a tiny animal. Jamie was so tender when he touched Mike, like he meant every single gesture.

This wasn't exactly what Mike was asking about though. What he meant was if Jamie would like to hang around with him even after this weekend, which already made him feel kinda weird. Mike preferred to imagine Jamie forgot all about their arrangement and treated what they had like a real thing.

"You sure that doesn't turn you on?" Mike chuckled.

Jamie shook his head and leaned in, pressing his plump lips against Mike's. "I'd rather listen to you."

Mike slid his hand to Jamie's nape, to make sure he wasn't getting away any time soon and enjoyed the hot kiss. He closed his eyes, and he could devote all his attention to that soft mouth, the warm limbs that embraced him just perfectly. Mike's heart pounded so fast he was waking up already. "Wow, I win when my competition is old men talking about sales. I'm not very flattered," he muttered into the kiss with a smile.

"I'm not here to flatter you," chuckled Jamie but hugged Mike close.

Mike stroked Jamie's strong back, his insides all fluttery. "Oh, I forgot, I'm the one at your beck and call. You have a beautiful smile, Jamie. Your lips taste like candy, Jamie. You have the tightest ass ever, Jamie. I love how your skin smells, Jamie. Good enough?"

Jamie mewed into Mike's cheek and stroked the back of his neck. "Only if it's honest."

"I honestly loved fucking you." Mike trailed his fingertips over Jamie's ass. He would do a lot to slip inside again, feel Jamie's body close, kiss his fingers and toes.

"I know. I can feel that." Jamie laughed out loud, rolling in the covers.

"How so?"

Jamie stretched, lying on his stomach and gently spreading his thighs underneath the covers. For once, there was nothing that would restrict Mike's access to a guy, but it did nothing to satisfy his hunger. If anything, his appetite had only grown since yesterday, fueled by a nighttime quickie around three a.m.

"Well, I'm a bit... tender I guess."

Mike slid closer and kissed his ear. "I hope it didn't hurt? You should tell me if it did."

“Nah, it’s all right. You were very enthusiastic,” whispered Jamie, as if he had a reason to. But no one could hear them, alone and safe in the warm hotel room. “It doesn’t feel bad.”

“I’m still enthusiastic if you are.” Mike slid his hand to Jamie’s nape.

“Not enough time now,” said Jamie, rolling his head against it. “How about later?”

“Only if you do that thing with your throat again.” Mike grinned and slowly pulled back even though leaving the bed was the last thing he wanted.

Jamie’s laugh was followed with a pillow hitting Mike’s back.

“What? Just saying!” Mike chuckled and got up. He couldn’t remember when he last felt so at ease with someone. Even with his teammates at school, there was always that underlying fear of someone finding out he was gay, but with Jamie none of it mattered. The guy chose to sleep with him even with all the bad blood they used to have, and it felt like finding the missing puzzle piece he’d been searching for all his life.

“So offended,” chuckled Jamie, marching across the room toward the bathroom.

Mike followed close behind, just far enough to ogle Jamie’s ass. His life had gotten turned upside down, and he loved it.

Jamie’s presentation went great, even without gay porn thrown in. On the podium, when no one was able to startle him, he was the picture of confidence. And even though Mike didn’t understand half of the technical details explained, he did understand why Jamie’s invention was such a big deal and why he made so much money on it. Mike made sure to clap louder than anyone else once Jamie was finished with his speech. He didn’t whistle though. Kept it classy. Michelle Obama wouldn’t whistle.

Mike was satisfied to see that even Bitch Rich was making notes during the presentation. He couldn’t wait to tell Jamie.

Lunch was planned right after the speech so they made their way to the hotel restaurant. Jamie wasn’t shying away from discreet touches as they made their way through the buffet of delicious foods, and didn’t even comment when Mike got a bit too much on his plate.

Mike couldn’t stop looking at Jamie in a new way, as if his eyes had been opened to a whole new beauty in his new lover. Jamie looked so sharp as well

in his tailor-made suit, silk tie, and with a smile that could brighten up the whole room. All Mike wanted was to take Jamie back to their room and rub himself all over the stubble on Jamie's face.

As one of the first to arrive, they chose the same table as the day before. Jamie sipped his juice, looking to the buffet like he expected it to produce a magic rabbit, but Mike knew he was hoping to get someone pleasant to join them.

"The food's amazing," Mike said, making sure he wasn't gorging on his steak too fast. He leaned over to Jamie's ear. "Your presentation was all kinds of awesome, even without dick in it."

Jamie flushed and lowered his head with a groan. "I knew you would think of that! Just don't tell anyone."

With the day being so great, the last thing Mike wanted was to see Richard's smug face, and his sidekicks heading their way. "For fuck's sake, does this guy give up?" he groaned.

Jamie tapped his fingers on the tabletop, without looking up yet. "Richie?"

Mike nodded, just before their table was swarmed by vultures.

"What an amazing presentation, James!" Richard exclaimed, putting his tray with a salad and grilled chicken on the table. "Who would have thought you'd find so much energy for it after yesterday's lost battle."

"It kinda got cancelled out with two shots to Mike's back," said Jamie. He didn't seem as gullible as the day before, but his tone was polite as he dug into his steak.

"I'd call that a win. You two lovebirds were far too alive," Rich said, and his friend snorted.

Mike looked up at them with a frown. "We were dead by the rules of the game. And had our equipment off."

"Yeah, I'm sure James would soon let you examine him in the spirit of in-depth research," said Richard, chomping on his salad with a wide smile.

Jamie blinked, staring at him completely dumbstruck. And there it was, the treacherous flush spreading all over his face. Mike groaned internally, but smiled. He wouldn't give the fucker satisfaction. He put an arm over Jamie's shoulders. "Nah, with my war wounds so deep, it was Jamie examining me all over."

“That’s not what we heard,” teased Alistair with a grin. “James surprised everyone by changing so much we barely recognized him, but we didn’t know he also became an army wife.”

Okay, so Mike wasn’t all that keen on telling anyone someone fucked his ass, but the terrified look on Jamie’s face got him to jump in front of that bus. He was not having these guys tease his... lover? Fake boyfriend?

He leaned back in the chair with a wide smile. “Oh, man, you have no idea what Jamie can do to the prostate. If you knew, you wouldn’t be laughing. You should ask your doctor sometime. Who knows, maybe he’d open you up to a whole new world of possibilities. How do you think Jamie landed a guy like me? It wasn’t the science talk. It’s all in the prostate.”

The table went silent.

Jamie burst out laughing and covered Mike’s hand with his palm, which was damp with sweat but warm when it squeezed his fingers. “He thinks my geekiness is a bit overrated. But I’m not just that. You heard him, gentlemen.”

Richard looked a bit pale even under the layer of orange. He pointed to his phone. “Savannah called, you’ll have to excuse me,” he muttered and got up, quickly followed by his friends with excuses just as lame.

Mike was actually quite happy with himself, even if burning up under the collar.

Jamie covered his mouth, chuckling so hard his eyes were getting all wet. “Did you see their faces? You have traumatized them for the rest of their lives.”

“Good. Maybe they’ll piss off next time they think of coming around. I’m not gonna have them make fun of you.”

The smile froze on Jamie’s face, turning into something more guarded yet soft and tender. “I—didn’t expect you to do this. Thank you. There is nothing bad about bottoming, it’s just... that those guys don’t see it that way, and I can’t have them think of me as someone even weaker.”

Mike stroked Jamie’s arm. “I know. I mean, it’s not... uhm, my preference, but I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. I actually feel like it’s this, uh... privilege that you let me top.” After the failure on Friday, Mike had suspected that Jamie didn’t think of him as good enough.

Jamie bit his lip, keeping his eyes on Mike’s. Even with the noise all around, it felt as if they were alone. “I guess. I am quite picky.”

"You know how to make a boy feel special." Mike poked his ribs under the table.

"Right back at you," said Jamie with a chuckle, playing with his food on the plate.

"Would it be too much to ask if I could go take a nap instead of listening to the next presentation?" Mike nudged Jamie with his elbow.

Jamie grinned but shook his head. "Sorry, I'm here for a reason, but you're welcome to stay in the room if you're bored."

"Cool." Mike put the last piece of steak into his mouth. "I'll be back in a few hours, so we can have dinner with everyone and stuff."

"I'll walk you. I need a quiet moment after the presentation. The stress is a killer."

Mike leaned over to give him a soft smooch before standing up. "Oh, yeah, stress relief. I like the way you're thinking." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Jamie blinked and looked to the food remaining on his plate. It was clear he hadn't meant what Mike suggested, but he was still pondering on the possibility of going with it. "I suppose I could have a little something on the go."

"Or swallow on the go." Mike pinched Jamie's stomach and made a move toward the exit. He wanted to be back in that room ASAP.

Jamie followed him, but he was greeting people he knew as they passed through the dining room. Mike loved to see him smile like he did now, and it struck him that he had never seen it back at school. It felt good to have brought it out in him.

They went through the elegant corridor and to their room in silence but strangely, it wasn't awkward. Mike had his arm over Jamie's shoulders, and it was nice to just be. Not to mention *be* with the most attractive guy there.

Jamie leaned into him and opened the door with the key card. He pulled Mike in with a small smile. "We're a dream team, don't you think?"

"I'd hope so." Mike stroked Jamie's hair gently, not to mess it up.

Jamie closed the door, walked Mike all the way to the low table and sat down on a leather-covered stool. "I thought... since I'll be leaving you for the next few hours, this would give you some time to think about... well, something I want to talk to you about." The blue eyes looked up at Mike, wide and sincere.

“Um, yeah?” Mike frowned. It sounded serious. Did Jamie want to actually fuck him? Like fuck-*fuck* him? He wasn't sure if he was ready to go there.

Jamie took a big gulp of air, and then exhaled it slowly. He played with the bottom of his tie as if it could fill the silence that followed. “As I said, we seem to have fun together. What do you think?”

“Duh. It's great.” Mike sat down in an armchair by the window, somehow thinking he looked like a Bond villain with the background of the city skyline. He just needed a white cat.

Jamie turned toward him, squinting as he stared into the bright window. “I'm having a lot of fun with you, and you are nothing like I expected, which has me thinking that we could maybe try to get to know each other better. What do you think?” With each word, Jamie's voice became quieter, but Mike still got every word.

Mike swallowed, his blood pumping faster. “You wanna go to Vegas with me?” he uttered. In the bright light, Jamie looked even paler than he usually was. Was he this nervous?

“If you want. I've earned a vacation anyway, so we could pick a destination and go.” Jamie cleared his throat. “I know you're very tight on money, so we could... you know, continue with the current arrangement. We could speak of the details after I'm back...”

Mike licked his lips, dumbstruck. “Current arrangement”? Jamie wanted to keep paying him for company? As much as Mike loved and needed money, it made him feel uncomfortable at best. Was that all Jamie thought of him and their sex and... stuff? So Mike was broke, but the situation had changed since two days ago. He wanted different things now. It wasn't even about feeling like a hooker, he was prepared to take some shit for three days, but he was not a “vacation package”. What was this? Mike all-inclusive?

“Y-yeah...” he uttered in the end.

James gave him a tight smile and rushed across the room to pick up Mike's hand. “I'll be back later. We could have a nice dinner somewhere, without all those people,” he said, looking deep into Mike's eyes.

Mike nodded, even though he'd lost all appetite. Dinner would be on James, 'cause Mike Miller couldn't pay for shit. He didn't like this at all. He kind of thought their arrangement dispersed into pleasant nothingness like a spray of Febreze. “I suppose.”

James bit his lip and opened his mouth to say something, but the silence was broken by his weird ringtone. It sounded like the soundtrack from a 1990s video game. James groaned but picked it up. "Yeah, I know, I'm getting back there right now. Tell him to wait for me," he told the person he was speaking to. He finished the call with a brief "thanks" and smiled at Mike. "I need to go. There's the promised two thousand in the bedside drawer, just so that you know I'm not trying to cheat you."

Mike gave him a tight smile, unable to utter a word. It was his own damn fault that he got himself into a situation like this in the first place. Mike Miller, prime stud meat for the millionaire. The lunch he'd just had rose in his throat and threatened to escape. He needed to be out of here. The air conditioned room didn't seem all that cool and comfortable anymore. The slight kiss James pressed to his cheek felt like a branding. "So... see you in a few hours. Get some rest. They have a great day spa, I've heard," uttered James, slowly moving back toward the door where his briefcase was already waiting for him.

"See you. I'll... have that nap." Mike muttered, feeling completely out of place. He didn't belong here. This wasn't the thread count his life had. Expensive hotels, restaurants, big brand pants. It was all fake and rubbed him the wrong way. Having sex with James only showed Mike what he was missing, what he really wanted. And what he wanted was something real. Getting paid to be a boy-toy just didn't cut it. Mike wasn't the kind of guy Mr. Jaguar would be looking for.

James waved at him one last time and disappeared. The emptiness he left behind was filling the room like vicious smoke, threatening to choke the life out of Mike. The comfortable sofa, the television on the wall, even the grand bed peeking from the bedroom seemed to ready themselves to jump him.

He walked over to the other room and opened the drawer by the bed to find an envelope with the promised money. He could take it and go to Las Vegas, but it felt so dirty in his hand that even a pauper like him wouldn't take it. Where he saw the possibility of something deep and meaningful, James saw a luxurious fling. A way to rub the noses of his frenemies and a good sexual experience. In a way, Mike couldn't blame him. James couldn't know how intense it would all get for such a gay-virgin like Mike.

He took a piece of paper from a notebook with the hotel logo and quickly wrote:

Thanks for the offer, but it turned out to be more intense for me than this. I think we're looking for different things. I'll find my own way to get what I want. It was great though. XXX Mike.

Mike sneered at the note. It looked pathetic and didn't convey even half of what he was feeling. His handwriting was so bad it looked like it was offending the thick, creamy paper. Just like *he* was a stain on James's life. He would have only been a nuisance.

Having made his decision, he started folding the clothes James got him into neat packages. He didn't want dirt or weird smells on them. The ones that didn't fit into the duffel bag he stuffed into one large plastic bag with the department store's logo, and he gave the room one last look. His eyes were instantly drawn to the bed, and he found himself feeling sorry that the maid had made it. If it were still rustled, he'd consider walking over and smelling the pillow James used last night, but now it seemed like a waste of someone's work.

If worse came to worst, and Vega wouldn't give Mike his job back, he could probably sell some of the clothes on eBay. He could hardly believe thoughts like that were his life again.

Chapter 9

Mike felt numb when the crappy, old bus stopped a few hundred meters from Vega's Gas & Motel. The thought of having to face his boss again, explain that he didn't in fact fuck Vanessa, and that he would be a proper employee from now on was making him physically sick. But with barely having enough money for the bus fare, there was no way around it. It was back to the drawing board. Now that he got a taste of a different life, he would be more motivated to save up some money and eventually move to Vegas. In a year or so, if he was lucky.

He walked along the asphalt, with dirt blowing into his face. He could almost smell the gasoline now, and it brought the nauseating memories of long days filled with nothing of importance, of the smelly room that only fit a single bed, and the complete lack of fulfilment. This was going to be his life again. At least it was getting dark so he didn't have to bear the excruciating heat pouring down from the sky. Everything around him had this purplish shade that made even the dry ground beneath his feet seem a bit otherworldly. He wouldn't mind walking along this road with Jamie.

A car exited the station and drove past him with a low hum. There were a few vehicles parked by the motel, but the station seemed pretty much deserted. This was it, his walk of shame, his nightmare. He held the duffel bag over his arm so hard his palms were all sweaty. Even from afar, Mike could already see Vega getting up from his shabby old chair and making his way to the door. This would not be pretty.

Vega pushed the door open so hard it rattled when it hit the wall. He stopped by the entrance with his arms slightly spread, the beer belly peeking from underneath an old tank top that used to be white but was now a sort of unhealthy yellowish color. At least he wasn't holding a gun.

"Hey, Mr. Vega!" Mike forced a smile as he walked up to his former and hopefully future boss.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the *prodigigulolous* son." Vega smirked.

Mike laughed even though there was nothing funny about his position. This had to be the most humiliating day of his life. Even worse than the day his brother found gay porn on his computer. "Yeah, I suppose so. Stuff got a bit out of hand on Friday, didn't it?"

Vega snorted and crossed his arms on top of the drum of his stomach. "I didn't expect you to show up after that performance."

Mike came up to Vega with a frown that he hoped looked apologetic. "Yeah, I kinda... I was on drugs. You know Mr. Jaguar? He gave me coke in the garage, and I kind of went mental. Sorry for that. I never slept with Vanessa. I respect her very much."

Vega frowned. "You should kiss her feet after all this! Though I doubt she would ever speak to you again."

Mike looked down at a bug crawling at his feet. That was how he felt now. Crawling at Vega's feet. And just when he thought that, Vega stepped on the thing, breaking its little back with his dirty shoe. "I will. I'll never do coke again, boss."

"Oh, so it's boss now?" snorted Vega. "I thought I fired you the moment I took out my gun."

"How about I work for free for two weeks to make up for the stress, huh?" Mike clenched his hand over the handles of the plastic bag with expensive clothes. It was time to put all his stuff on eBay.

Vega narrowed his eyes. "I don't know... what guarantee do I have you won't do it again?"

"I promise, man. You know me, I don't usually go off the rails." Mike took a deep breath of hot air and put his hands in his pockets.

"A month. We'll feed you," said Vega, and Mike already knew that meant cheap toast and expiring food from the store. Horrible, but he would take that chance.

"Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Vega," Mike muttered and pulled his hand out for a shake. There was a hum in the background so maybe a lost driver would end Mike's misery?

"And we'll lower your hourly wage by a dollar, until I decide I can trust you again," said Vega. His eyes were slowly narrowing as he zeroed in on something over Mike's shoulder.

Mike inhaled and gritted his teeth, but looked over his shoulder, annoyed with the noise. His mouth fell open when he saw that it wasn't a car that disturbed the conversation. A black helicopter was lowering itself to the empty parking lot by the motel, raising dust into a cloud around it.

“What the f—” Vega uttered, barely audible through the noise.

Dirt and garbage started tumbling all around, pushed by the speeding air as the machine set down by the building.

“Is this even legal?” asked Vega, watching the helicopter door opening to reveal a male figure. The guy got out into the parking lot and rushed for the store, his tie and suit jacket floating in the air.

Mike’s jaw fell even lower when he recognized the man as no one else but James. What the hell was *he* doing here? Mike dropped both his bags and stared. With the helicopter behind him, in that sleek suit, James looked so classy it made Mike’s heart beat faster.

James started jogging, his face open and honest as he approached Mike in front of Vega’s store. He stopped two yards away from him and after a moment’s hesitation, took one more step. He blinked. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Mike uttered.

“What the fuck is Mr. Jaguar doing here? You givin’ my Mike coke, you shithead?” Vega walked past Mike and poked James’s chest.

“Who?” James shook his head, his eyes darting to Mike. He was flushed and out of breath. “What? No, I only had coffee.”

Mike slapped his forehead, wishing he could disappear. “What are you doing here?”

James looked back to the helicopter, to Vega, and then back at Mike. “Could we have some privacy, please?”

Vega opened his mouth to say something, but Mike stopped him with a groan. “I’ll deal with this, yeah?” he said and grabbed James’s arm, pulling him along, away from Vega.

“I’m so happy I found you here,” whispered James, tagging along like a puppet. “I was afraid you went God-knows-where, and I wouldn’t catch up to you.”

Mike frowned at the sight of a bandage on James’s hand. That was a much easier topic. “What happened to you? What are you doing here?”

James blinked and glanced at the white fabric. “Oh, this? I punched Richard, and... yeah, I’d never done that before so I hurt my hand.”

“Why did you punch him? I mean... he probably deserved it, but why?”

James spread his arms. "He told me he saw you leaving, and he made a comment that just... I just snapped."

Mike raised his eyebrows. So James had it in him after all.

The silence was only bearable because of the hum of the helicopter. James bit his lip and inhaled so much air that his chest seemed to have gained a size. He cupped Mike's face, stepping close with a slight frown. "I'm sorry."

Mike tried to look away, but it was impossible, especially with the touch so warm on his skin. "It's fine. I think we're just looking for different things."

James shook his head and found Mike's hand, squeezing it tightly. "Don't leave."

"I can't do it for money, Jamie. I thought I could, but it feels really weird with someone you like." Mike took a deep breath, trying to slow down the pounding in his chest.

James let out a shuddery breath and nodded, his hair floating with the moving air. "But that's what I'm trying to tell you. I like you too. I just thought... you'd feel weird if I expected you to just tag along with me for nothing after two days together."

"It's not like I had much of a plan anyway." Mike dared to smile at James. Could Jamie possibly feel the same way about him? His whole body went aflame at the thought that he wasn't the only one overwhelmed by their time together.

Jamie's Adam's apple bobbed. His face looked soft and fresh in the purplish light of the setting sun, which made his small smile seem all the sweeter. "I know it's weird, but I've never felt this way before. I don't want to bury you with the rest of my past," he said, squeezing Mike's hand harder.

"You don't?" Mike stood a bit closer, unable to stop himself, as if the blue eyes were drawing him in.

James nodded, his eyes darkening. "When I was with you, it felt so... right. Everything; your voice, the way you touched me." He swallowed and started to whisper, "The way you feel inside me... it makes me feel real."

Mike couldn't help the grin widening on his face. He loved to hear that. He'd love to hear that all the time. "Yeah, I couldn't keep the money after that. No matter how much I need it. It's not about pride, I didn't want to make it seem less than what it was."

Jamie's hand fell from Mike's face, and he squeezed both of Mike's hands, standing so close that their chests were almost touching. "So... will you come with me?"

"Why? You gonna take me away in your chopper?" Mike snorted and glanced to the glorious machine that looked just as out of place in front of the ugly motel as a flying carpet would.

Jamie's eyes glinted. His handsome face was otherworldly, like in a movie. This was where the characters kiss at the end. "I thought you'd like to fly in one before you start working for your license."

Mike bit his lip and squeezed Jamie's hands so hard it hurt his fingers. "I'd really like that."

Jamie opened his mouth but then closed it without uttering a sound. He leaned in, his chest bumping into Mike's, and their mouths met. Jamie's was soft, luscious, safe.

Mike smiled into the kiss and slid his hands into Jamie's hair. He didn't have the words to describe what he felt, but he hoped his kiss did all the talking. Jamie's arms slid around his neck in a tight hug as the kiss deepened. For a brief moment, it was as though they were in a different place, but eventually, James pulled away and smiled.

"We can go anywhere we want. Your pick."

Mike looked to the helicopter with a head full of ideas. The world seemed to finally open up to Mike Miller. "Walmart."

The End

Author Bio

K.A. Merikan is a joint project of Kat and Agnes Merikan, who jokingly claim to share one mind. They finish each other's sentences and simultaneously come up with the same ideas. Kat and Agnes enjoy writing various kinds of stories, from light-hearted romance to thrillers. They love creating characters that are not easy to classify as good or evil, and firmly believe that even some villains deserve their happy endings. It is easiest to find them in galleries, restaurants and historical sites, always with a computer or notebook, because for Kat and Agnes, every day is a writing day. Future plans include lots of travel, and a villa on the coast of Italy or a flat in Paris where they could retire after yet another crazy venture, only to write more hot homoerotic stories.

As K.A. Merikan, Kat and Agnes have published a number of books, which cross genres while always staying homoerotic.

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MY AFRICAN PRINCE

By Vona Logan

Photo Description

A handsome African tribesman stares straight at the camera with light-coloured eyes, fierce, smouldering, and intense. Long, thin, braids hang down his back, and his ears and neck are adorned with tribal jewellery. Lush lips form a slight pout and dark stubble shadows his jaw. The second man is tall, broad-shouldered and muscled—he sure looks capable of fulfilling the dark needs in the first man's eyes.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am supposed to be content as a lion. A prince and heir of our pride. We are a fierce, strong, and unique pride of black lions. Humans think it is because of melanism but what they don't know is that we are shifters. All of us.

But Author, that is not my dilemma, HE is my dilemma. That gorgeous, delicious, man over there. I have never seen someone with his skin tone before. And while he doesn't smell like a lion, he also doesn't smell completely... right as a human either. And even more than that he makes me want to give in to my secret, darkest desire, to submit, to be mounted by someone else, to be filled.

I am a prince! The heir of my pride! I am supposed to submit to no man or woman! And yet, with this man? All I want to do is beg him to take me and even more than that... to love me. Even though it may get me killed by my pride.

****Free reign with this except one MC MUST be a black lion shifter and the other must be if a different race (and species-he can be an alien with tentacles for all I care, have fun with it! Just not a lion).*

Thank You, Author.

Sincerely,

Vic

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: cat shifters, interracial, interspecies, 2 alpha males, soul mates/bonded, outdoor sex, rimming

Word Count: 22,190

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MY AFRICAN PRINCE

By Vona Logan

Prologue

The Zulu warrior slowly placed one foot in front of the other as he crept through the long African grass. From the cloudless sky above, the scorching sun beat down on his naked back. His movements made no sound, but his sharp gaze scanned his surroundings, seeing through the browns and yellows to spot his prey.

Making a kill today would feed his family for days and certainly ramp up his esteem with fellow tribe members. Being young and inexperienced went hand in hand with regular frowns, haughty looks, and the shakes of heads from the older leaders on a regular basis. The reality frustrated him to no end.

His vigilant state changed to one of defence in an instant as he dropped his *assegai* and unsheathed an arrow to notch it in the bow with one sweep. Loud snarls, growls, and hisses had him frozen to the spot. When no wild animals came at him through the veld, he cautiously moved forward, stretching his neck to peer around a thorn tree. What he saw chilled him to the bone.

A few feet ahead of him lay the biggest male lion he'd ever seen. Its head and jaws were so huge it should've instilled a terrible fear in him, but the powerful beast was in bad shape. The wounds it bore were usually the result of a fight for domination, the right to rule the pride. Its injuries and weakness explained why five hyenas would've dared attack it head on. Rearing up to swipe at his attackers, the *impi* saw the bloody gashes in the lion's thick coat.

The injustice of the act playing out before him gripped his soul and made him lose all reason. Yelling a war cry, he stormed from his hiding place. Within seconds, he wounded three of the hyenas who backed off in retreat. Poised with another arrow at the ready, he kept his eyes on the ugly, drooling beasts staring back at him in challenge. Bellowing again, he advanced another few steps, pulling back his arm to let the arrow fly. Defeated, they turned their tails and ran off, yapping as they went.

The reality of his precarious situation crashed over him, and he slowly turned around to assess how much longer he had to live. But his fear was unfounded. The lion lay on its side, the massive ribcage rising and falling erratically with each laboured breath.

Falling to his knees, the young warrior carefully edged closer. Golden eyes shot open, and the pupils dilated as they focused on him. A plaintive growl left

the beautiful animal and gave him the courage to reach out a hand. The nose twitched as it took in his scent before the beast closed his eyes once more.

Expecting to lose his hand any moment, he cautiously laid his palm on a warm, quivering flank. The animal's wounds were serious. He reached back to bring forth the hide pouch of water he carried around his waist. With care, he held it suspended above the parted lips and trickled some down, hoping the lion would drink it.

"Kungani angisize?" *Why are you helping me?* The deep voice reverberated in his head, and he almost dropped the precious water as he jerked away in surprise. Looking over his shoulders, he confirmed it was only him and the beast in the field.

Staring into amber eyes he replied, "Isilwane enhle noma mandla, kufanele nifa, ake ukuksiza whena." *No being so beautiful and powerful should die like this. Let me help you.*

A soft purr reached his ears. "Kunguwe okumisewe khona, lami ukuba. Sibe lapha namhlanje, okumiselwe khona lakho ukuphila eside, umoya ukhuluma nami. Ngizohamba nawe kuze kokuphela." *It is my destiny to die here... today. Your destiny is to live long. The spirit in you speaks to mine. Leave me be. Go and I will go with you and your descendants forever more.*

The young man's eyes filled with tears that shamelessly flowed down his dark cheeks as he frantically poured water on the wounds to clean them. Infection killed quickly on the *veld*.

A huge paw hit him on the back, claws piercing the skin and digging into his right shoulder blade. The sensation of liquid running down his back told him he was bleeding quite heavily.

The paw pulled him forward until their noses touched, the lion's cold to the touch. "Ayeke! Angiphinde, ngasho hamba!" *Stop! No more. I said go!*

Digging his fingers into the thick, dark mane surrounding the beautiful animal's neck, he sobbed. "Mana njolo unkosi!" *No! Long live the king!*

"Cha! Mana inkosi lesi *Ibhubezi*." *No! Long live the king of the lions!*

The magnificent animal stared into his eyes as it breathed out, forcing its life force into his lungs. Warmth flowed through his veins, penetrating muscle and bones as the lion's gift of life permeated and reinforced every fibre of his being. Golden eyes held him captive until the beast's eyelids lowered for the

last time, almost pulling him off his feet as its head fell back onto the dry grass, unmoving. Bereft of life.

The warrior sat back on his heels, roughly scraping the tears from his cheeks. Knowing the fate of the animal lying at his feet if he chose to leave it there, spurred him into action. Ignoring the change the lion had caused in him, he fashioned tools from the land around him and started digging. When the sun started to set, he carefully lit a small fire to keep the wild animals at bay. Throughout the chilly night he worked, tediously digging a worthy burial site for his friend.

Hours later, he stood over the site where the lion would now rest forever. His spirit stirred as if to remind him he was different. No longer alone. With a decisive nod, he bowed his head in honour, collected his weapons, and started the journey back to his tribe. He had much to tell them.

A few feet away, unknown to the African tribesman, a young male cub had silently watched the meeting between human and lion. When the younger lion in their pride challenged his sire to a fight for supremacy, the cub had readied himself to leave too, instinctively knowing what his fate would be as the firstborn son of the defeated leader. Following his sire's scent through the veld, he had stumbled across the scene as the man tried to save the beast.

The moment his father's last breath left him, the cub's coat changed to pitch black.

Chapter 1

His head wanted to kill him! Zee groaned, rubbing his temples to help diffuse the agony. Note to self: a drink to avoid at all cost—vodka. That crap went down your throat like silk, then beat you into submission with a jackhammer against your skull the next day. Evil stuff.

The door to his office flew open, Ben, his best friend, and assistant of sorts, barged in. “Hey, Zee! Howzit going this morning?” Just the man’s chipper mood made Zee feel like throwing the hole punch at his head for adding to his misery.

“Shhhhhhhhhhh,” he whispered.

Comprehension dawned on Ben’s face, teeth flashing bright white against his black skin. “Oh, man! You look like shit. Where the hell did you go last night?”

“Is that for me?” Zee moved only his eyes to indicate the steaming cup of coffee in Ben’s hand, but even that small movement shot shards of pain through his head like a ricocheting cannonball. He barely withheld a whimper of agony.

As if he’d forgotten he carried it, Ben looked at the mug he carried in surprise. “Yeah, of course.” The coffee’s aroma drifted to his nose as Ben placed it in front of Zee, before dropping his bulk into a chair on the other side of the desk.

“Come on, talk to me. I worried when you took off.”

“It’s the usual, Ben. My uncle is concerned I haven’t shown any interest in settling down and reproducing to continue the royal lineage. I’m a king in the making, remember? How the fuck to do I do this, Ben? I’m bloody gay! There’s no way I’m gonna have sex with a woman for the sake of carrying on the Kekana bloodline. But can you imagine me telling the elders this little thing they didn’t know about their prince?” Lifting the cup to his lips he took a few deep swallows of the heavenly brew.

“Zee, you’ve allowed them to pressure you all your life, man. It’s about time you stood up for yourself and said no—for once. This is your future they’re messing with.” Ben’s unwavering support meant so much to him. Sometimes it was all he had.

“According to them, marrying and having young is the life destined for those of royal blood, Ben. Apparently, I have no choice in the matter.”

“You and I both know you do have a choice. You’re not their puppet, Zee.”

“What about the pride? How do you think our people are gonna feel about having a homosexual king one day, Ben? Society has become more tolerant, but our tribal cultures have not. They still stone gay men to death in some African countries.” Why people chose to hate and discriminate against those who lived in a different way, confounded him.

“The pride may very well object and try to excommunicate you. Maybe even try to kill you,” Ben added. “But don’t you think you have loyal friends and followers here who would stand by your side if that happened? By my count, there would probably be enough to start up a pride of your own.”

“I didn’t even think of that. How people will react will only be revealed in the moment.”

The idea of coming out to the elders and his people made him physically sick to his stomach. The vodka wasn’t helping much either.

Ben rose from the chair, straightening to his considerable height. Locking gazes with Zee, Ben’s eyes flashed green-gold for a split second. He bowed his head in acknowledgement of his leader before he cracked another broad smile and turned towards the door.

“I for one will stand by you, seeing as I have the same problem you do. Even if it is only the two of us, we can start over, Zee. Think about that.” Ben’s words hung in the air as he pulled the door closed behind him.

Zee barely restrained his flinch when it suddenly popped open again, and Ben stuck his head around the corner. “By the way, the new groundskeeper starts tomorrow.” The door shut with a click.

“Groundskeeper? Ben! What groundskeeper?” Ben’s deep chuckles reached his ears through the thin walls, and Zee knew he had left the small building already.

“I know you can hear me Ben! Why the hell am I the leader when no one ever tells me *anything*!!” He emphasized the last word as loudly as he could.

Ben cracked up again.

“Fucker!” Zee yelled back. “Shit, my head.” Time for the big guns. Painkillers hardly affected them, so Zee popped six into his mouth, chasing them down with the now almost-cold coffee. There, that should do the trick.

“Groundskeeper. What the hell?” he grumbled as he turned on the PC to get down to work.

Ben gave a full belly laugh as his acute hearing picked up Zee's soft-spoken curses. Ben would do anything to be present when his friend came face to face with their new employee. Ever since Zee's father, their king, stepped back, handing most daily responsibilities of the tribe over to Zee, his friend had so much on his plate. Under the circumstances, it came as no surprise that Zee had forgotten about asking Ben to hire someone to take care of the upkeep of the wildlife park where they all worked. Not only did Zee run the business now, but he also managed the affairs of the small pride who lived in or not far from the reserve grounds.

Ben didn't have a specific job description. He did anything and everything, pitching in wherever work needed to be done. Earlier this morning, he'd been washing the windows of the curio shop at the entrance of the park when a stranger surprised him. As Zee's second in command, Ben's abilities were highly developed and always on alert. Ben thought back to the encounter, trying to figure out how someone could catch him unawares. Why didn't he hear the footsteps approaching him until the man spoke behind him?

“Excuse me?” The deep, guttural voice and faint accent had Ben spinning around in shock. Surprisingly, Ben didn't have to look down, but straight ahead into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

“Hello. How can I help you?” Ben offered while checking the guy out. He was packing. As in muscles. Broad shoulders filled out a light blue T-shirt and a pair of well-worn jeans hugged slim hips and thick tree-trunk thighs. Not to mention the package at the apex of said thighs.

The man looked behind Ben, probably at the shop, into the car park, and over his shoulder at the surroundings before making eye contact again. The slight flare of his nostrils didn't escape Ben's attention. *Mmmm. Interesting.*

“Do you know if there are any job vacancies here?” The big man scanned his surroundings again, and if Ben wasn't mistaken, the bulge in those jeans appeared larger than moments before.

“Why, are you looking for a job?” Ben wondered what had the man so... *interested.*

“Yes.” He gave a brief nod.

“Okay. Would you like to come into my office so we can talk?” Ben indicated the building behind him.

“Thank you.”

Ben turned to lead the way, not liking for one second the feeling of vulnerability at his back. The nape of his neck itched. This man was fucking dangerous, that was for sure, but with no immediate threat, Ben kept walking until they reached his office.

Thirty minutes later he showed their new employee, Luka Vetrov, to his small, but private thatch-roofed *rondavel*, where he would stay for the duration of his employment.

Ben had a gut feeling about this one.

Chapter 2

Luka stood inside the door of his new living room, and took in the tidy interior. He never would've thought a round building could be so spacious inside, especially with the peaked thatch roof. A beautiful golden varnish covered the wooden beams holding up the roof, the earthy colours giving the whole house a warm and comfortable vibe. A settee faced a flat-screen TV to his left, and an open plan kitchenette with a bench top sat on the right. The awnings above the windows would definitely keep the inside cooler during the hot summer months. A door ahead of him would be where the bedroom and ensuite bathroom were, as Ben had informed him. Luka opened it and walked in, dropping his sports bag on the polished floor boards.

The headboard and side tables of the double bed consisted of a dark wood on which a very talented carpenter had skilfully carved a beautiful African sunset, complete with baobab tree and gazelle. A mocha, cream, and black motif decorated the quilt which covered the bed and matching pillows.

To his left, the concrete wall had been fashioned into a fern-like swirl to house the bathroom. It didn't take him long to unpack his few personal belongings before he stepped into the shower to wash off the dust from his trip.

Feeling refreshed, he opted to wear a pair of knee-length cargo shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, although he hoped his pale skin wouldn't blind the tourists on vacation. Despite his reduced levels of melanin, he had never been sunburnt. The fact had nothing to do with sunblock. Slipping his feet into flip-flops, he stopped to grab his wallet and keys on his way to the door. Tomorrow would be his first work day, so exploring his surroundings seemed like a good idea.

The staff accommodations stood separate and a good distance away from the main entrance and visitors' lodges, sheltered by plenty of trees and shrubs for privacy. In addition, it offered an umbrella against the wild thunderstorms during the tropical summer months.

At the main entrance, he discovered a complex of buildings rather than simply a few shops as he'd initially thought. A stunning restaurant offered an amazing view onto a drinking hole where currently a herd of elephants had gathered to cool down. Exploring further, he found a decent-sized gym with sauna, a small shop selling everything from groceries to swimsuits, a beauty salon and spa offering massages and other pampering treatments such as a

hairdresser. The wildlife park proved equipped for every need a customer could possibly have for the duration of their stay.

On the far side of the complex, he found the swimming pools sized to accommodate all ages. The aromas from the restaurant reminded him of how long it had been since he'd eaten a decent meal, and he turned around to rectify the problem. Afterwards, he would take advantage of the sparkling clear water of the pool to cool down.

Zee wearily rubbed his hands over his face, massaging his temples. The bloody headache threatened to return with full force and it wasn't even four o'clock yet. Maybe he should shut the computer down and call it a day. After answering what felt like close to a hundred emails and phone calls, but which could be considerably less, Zee saw the merits of having a secretary to handle all the small stuff. He made a note of his brilliant idea so Ben could hire someone to lighten his workload, seeing as the man found the new groundskeeper situation so damn funny.

He rose from his chair and stretched his arms over his head, grateful for the tension relief when a few joints popped at the movement. Happy children's voices drew him to his office window, which looked out over the pools. A small walkway framed by neatly pruned hedges on either side separated the office building from the swimming area. A family with two younger kids disappeared around the corner, all wrapped in towels after their swim, laughter accompanying them as they left. Zee loved kids and got a kick out of visitors enjoying their stay at the park.

Suddenly, the water directly ahead of him exploded with the force of a body propelling itself out of the depths. The man landed on the non-slip border around the pool—crouched on the balls of his feet. No hands. Water rolled off his muscled body as he shook his blond head, sending water droplets flying, some hitting the glass in front of Zee.

Zee's gaze stayed locked on the body squatting on the ground. When he looked up, their eyes connecting across the small distance and electricity rippled down Zee's spine. Goose bumps arose all over his body. Shards of ice. Blue summer skies. Zee felt torn between which he saw the most in those arresting eyes. Maybe a bit of both.

Lazily, the man straightened to his full height and Zee almost whimpered. He appeared to be maybe three inches taller than Zee's own six foot two. As a

tall, big man, Zee rarely saw men larger than himself except for his own tribe members. When Zee had sex, he always topped. Always. And yet, deep down he always questioned what being mastered by a strong, confident top would be like. What would it be like to trust someone enough to kneel before, to bend over for, to submit, and be filled—stretched wide—for the first time by another man? In fact, Zee craved the experience, but he wouldn't give himself to just anyone. Zee knew for this man he'd do anything, and the knowledge left him breathless, and his hard cock aching in the confines of his jeans.

They stood staring at each other in complete stillness, a moment frozen in time. Never in his life had Zee seen someone with the stranger's skin tone—light, very much so, but yet full of colour. Zee searched for the right words in his mind... creamy vanilla? Yeah, and oh boy, did Zee crave to lick that smoothness, tasting his flavour.

The way the man scrutinized him in return had his inner cat purring in delight. A small grin tugged at Zee's mouth when his eyes dropped down and saw the huge tent in the man's swim shorts. Good! They were equally affected and afflicted.

The window latch tempted Zee with the possibility of catching a scent, but he knew opening it might shatter the moment, and he wanted to look his fill. When their eyes met, Zee licked his lips in a brazen display of desire. The action got him a full-ass grin. Zee's heart raced, and sweat coated his skin. The man was absolutely stunning. How could shards of ice look so scorching hot all at once? Zee's knees weakened at the passion he saw reflected back at him, forcing him to lean against the window slightly. Inside, his lion tossed his mane, and Zee fought the sudden impulse to allow his eyes to shift.

Voices reached his ears and the man glanced in that direction. More people arrived to take advantage of the pools in the heat. When he turned to face Zee again, he smiled and winked before walking away, grabbing his towel off a nearby lounging chair as he strolled past. Zee sighed in disappointment as the stranger exited the gated area. He had to find out who the hell that was. Normally, Zee's common sense would've kicked in, reminding him how fragile humans were. Shifters tended to be a bit... well, exuberant—a bit on the rough side and insatiable when it came to sex. Humans usually got hurt, or simply couldn't keep up. But Zee would give his left nut to have a go at the tall stranger who made him yearn for the unknown.

Giving in to the earlier urge, he opened the window, his cock pulsed as he abruptly came in his underwear. The other man's pheromones hung in the air outside, and Zee's lion went ballistic inside, roaring to get out—to pursue.

“This is fucking bad!” Why did this have to happen now?

Jabbing a finger at the intercom on his desk, he yelled, “Ben! Get in here. Now!”

Chapter 3

Luka made a beeline for his hut, his towel thankfully hiding his raging erection from the public roaming about. He barely kicked the door shut before the frustrated growly hiss of his cat forced past his straining throat muscles. Leaning his palms against the cool wood of the door, he tried breathing in and out deeply, attempting to soothe his animal side, to calm the fuck down.

While driving past this place on his motorbike yesterday, on the current leg of his road trip, something had beckoned him over. He'd tried to ignore the sensation, but the draw overrode his intent to keep going, especially his inner cat wailing in displeasure. So, he'd turned around.

As soon as his helmet came off, he smelled the delicious scent. Any animal would've, because it surrounded the whole area. The surroundings had been marked as the territory of someone very strong and powerful, that much Luka could tell. The inconvenience of his cock randomly standing at attention had happened quite frequently since his arrival.

Now he knew why. The alluring scent belonged to the incredibly beautiful African man in the office across from the pools. Man? Luka snorted. He recognized another predator when he saw one—a shifter, like him. Maybe another cat, but Luka hadn't gotten close enough to confirm his suspicion.

Calling the guy beautiful did him no justice. Dark ebony skin, light green eyes tinged with yellow, strong cheekbones, white teeth flashing against the contrast of his dark colouring. From where Luka had stood, broad shoulders had tapered down to narrow hips where a belt threaded through the loops of a pair of damn lucky jeans.

The other man's scent faintly infused everywhere Luka had been in the park. A leader of some sorts, but exactly who, and what, he couldn't place yet. Luka also knew from his bodily reaction, as man and beast that he'd experienced nothing like today ever before—with anyone. The stare-off between them had been the single hottest moment of his life. Without one physical touch. Would life be as cruel as to show him his mate, only to find their differences could keep them apart forever?

His erection ached, and his skin stretched tight as his cat fought for dominance to break free. Shifting in the hut could be disastrous. He'd break everything, and probably the door on his way out. Not to mention the humans

he'd send into hysterics. Losing control would be bad for business, and would win him no brownie points with the object of his affection.

Cursing under his breath, he stalked into the shower and turned it on cold. Standing under the cooling spray, he pushed his trunks over his hips and off. Sighing in relief, he stared in annoyance at the disobedient piece of flesh between his legs. Luka prided himself on his ability to control himself at all times, but today he almost lost the strong hold he had on his animal. It hadn't been the time or place to deal with the situation.

He washed his hair and body before getting down to business. With the help of a squirt of conditioner, he took himself in hand, and stroked his leaking dick. He hissed as he touched over-sensitized skin, but kept going as the discomfort, and pleasure, sped him into the fastest orgasm of his life.

Watching his seed disappear down the drain, Luka knew without checking that his eyes had shifted. The tips of his claws peeked through his skin, for shit's sake. His cock was still hard. Not good at all. The quicker he found out more about the other man, the quicker he'd find a release that would, hopefully, last longer than ten seconds. His cat wouldn't settle for anything less.

By the time Ben arrived at Zee's office after being summoned, Zee had no more control over his body than when he'd been staring at the giant walking wet dream outside his window. To be honest, Zee's control teetered on a razor edge, because his damn lion wouldn't stop whining, threatening to break free at any moment. His fucking canines shot through his gums when he tried to close the window to lock out the scent calling to his soul.

"Yes, my liege?" Ben lowered himself into a chair in front of Zee's desk, a frown pulling his brows together when he noticed the sweat running down Zee's face.

"Are you okay, Zee?" He leaned forward in concern.

"No, I'm not. Who the hell was that?" Zee gritted out through the tight clench of his jaws.

"Who?" Ben's confused expression would've been comical at any other time, but not now.

Throwing an arm out in the general direction of the pools, Zee explained. "He was out there earlier, in the pool. A big guy. No scrap that, he's fucking huge. Blond hair, blue eyes, and creamy white skin. Who the hell is he, Ben?" Zee almost pleaded.

Ben's expressive face showed relief. "I have no idea who you're talking about." Something about his friend's innocent reply infuriated Zee.

"Are you lying to me? Your prince? Your future king?" Blackmail might help.

Ben grinned. "What's going on, Zee? What has you tied up in knots so bad I can feel you're fighting not to shift?"

"It's not funny!" Zee stood up from his chair. "This is not fucking funny at all, asshole!" Ben's sharp eyes zoomed in on the huge wet patch on Zee's jeans. Then he folded double with laughter, his hilarity almost shaking him off his chair. Zee fumed as he watched Ben enjoy the moment.

Chortling and wiping tears from his eyes, Ben pointed. "You came in your jeans?" And then, he was off again, overcome with laughter.

Zee couldn't help himself as he grabbed the closest projectile and launched it at Ben's head. The stapler whipped across the distance superfast, but came to a quick stop as Ben put out a hand to halt its advance mid-air. Zee sat down, hoping the act would distract Ben long enough to forget Zee came in his pants like a horny teenager.

Zee waited until Ben eventually calmed down. "Feel better now?"

"Man! I haven't laughed like that in a long time." Ben smiled, shaking his head. "You gonna tell me what happened"—he gestured in the direction of Zee's lower body under the desk—"other than the obvious."

"Nothing happened. I stood looking out the window and he came out of the water like a bullet from a gun. He saw me and stared back. He's magnificent, Ben. I want him." Zee confessed.

"I can see that." Ben grinned again.

"If you laugh at me again I'm gonna kick your ass." Ben pulled his top lip down between his teeth in an attempt to stop smiling.

"Ummmm... did he like you just as much?" Ben's eyes went round as saucers when Zee swore. "What? It's a fair question."

Grinding his molars together, Zee gave a painful smile. "Yes, Ben. He looked equally troubled going by the tepee in his trunks." When the last word left Zee's lips, Ben did fall off his chair.

"Bwahahaha. Trunks!" He hooted uncontrollably as Zee watched in bemusement.

“You are such a kid, Ben! You know what? Get out! Before I throw you out.” Zee threatened.

“Yep, got that!” Making quick work of shutting the door behind him, Ben lost it again on the other side of the wall.

Zee dropped his head on the cool wood of his desk and repeated the movement a few times. Remnants of his hangover headache taunted him, and the powerful, yet disappointing orgasm and battle for supremacy over his beast, had left him completely exhausted. Time to go home.

He would figure the rest out tomorrow.

Chapter 4

The next morning Luka rose early and stood in front of the window as he drank his coffee and took in the breathtaking African sunrise.

Thankfully, his cat gave up on getting his way sometime during the night, retreating into a corner to sulk. Luka almost enjoyed the silent treatment a bit after the temper tantrum of the day before.

In the kitchen he rinsed his cup and took a water bottle out of the fridge. At the door he placed his Springbok Rugby cap on his head, and grabbed the bunch of keys Ben issued him after his interview. The morning air filled his lungs as he walked towards the storage sheds containing the four-wheeled utility vehicle, along with other tools and equipment he would need to do his work. Although his official job description stated he was the groundskeeper, Ben pretty much explained Luka may be asked to help wherever he could, the same way all employees pitched in when required. Luka liked the possible variance a lot, because mixing things up meant both man and animal never got bored.

Ben had given him a short to-do list complete with an in-depth map of the park, until Luka became more familiar with his surroundings and able to identify jobs for himself. According to Ben, a few fences required mending, and their appearance refreshed with a new coat of paint. In addition, flower beds needed weeding and replanting and large areas of the bricked or cobblestoned walking areas posed a slip hazard due to the moss growing on them.

In the equipment shed, he placed the required items for the day on the back of the UTV and drove to where his map showed the broken fences in big red crosses. With the local radio station as company, he got to work replacing worn broken planks before sanding and staining the new wood.

Engrossed with his task, a now familiar, but torturous aroma reached his nostrils before he heard their voices. If the gorgeous creature from the office came anywhere near Luka, things could turn to shit in seconds. Containing his animal would be near impossible if the other man proved to be his mate. Nothing stood between two mates, and anyone doing so, took a chance on their life, but in this case, the obstacle was him.

Sitting on his knees, he kept his hands moving rhythmically as he painted the planks in front of him. Recognizing Ben's voice, Luka held his breath, fervently hoping they'd walk past. The footsteps slowed as they approached his spot, and every muscle in Luka's body went on high alert, with his cock happily taking the lead.

"Oh, here he is. Hey, Luka!" Ben's jovial voice hinted at mischief. Luka hoped the man could move fast enough to get out of the way if the situation turned to hell on him.

Rising slowly, Luka turned around, pulling his cap down further to hide his eyes. And there he stood—the one man in the world who could bring Luka to his knees with a crook of his little finger.

"Howzit, big man!" Ben smiled in welcome. "Zee, this is our new groundskeeper, Luka Vetrov. Luka, meet Zithembe Kekana, our boss. Just call him Zee for short."

Until that very moment, Luka had avoided eye contact, but he finally gave in and looked into smouldering caramel eyes. Zee's hands hung fisted at his sides, his nostrils flaring. A ticking muscle in his square jaw clearly expressed his own inner battle for control.

"Hi, Ben. Nice to meet you, Zee." The taste buds on his tongue exploded as he inhaled Zee's pheromones hanging in the air. Big mistake. His cat hissed, growling in rebellion and frustration, yearning to break free from the constraints which held him back.

Zee swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Hello, Luka. Same here. Ben, I forgot about an important call I have to make." Zee spun around and almost ran in the direction they came from, but not before Luka saw his eyes turn completely golden. Unsuccessfully, he tried to keep his own eyes from changing. His cat wanted to chase down Zee and prove to Zee who owned him. Not able to hide that his eyes had shifted, he turned to Ben who stared in bewilderment at the path Zee had fled down to get away.

"What the hell?" Shaking his head, Ben turned back to Luka... and did a double take.

"Shit! What the fuck is going on, Luka? Who are you?"

"I'm like you, Ben. You knew that the moment you met me. And in a spectacular surprise to you and me... and Zee apparently, I appear to be his mate."

“Like me? Us? You’re not one of us. I would’ve recognized your scent.” Ben squared his shoulders in a defensive manner.

“No, but I am a shifter. I live my life on a need-to-know basis, and I have special gifts to mask my identity from those I want to keep in the dark.” For a split second, Luka withdrew his masks and freed his true scent into the air. With the way his cat’s nature threatened to dominate him, the smell was overpowering.

Ben groaned and stumbled back a few steps, his hand going to his crotch where he exerted pressure in an effort to tame his obvious erection. Luka slammed his masks back in place.

“Fuck! Sorry, man. That’s not for you, just a reaction to the pheromones,” Ben offered apologetically.

“I know. I’ve been walking around in the same condition since I stopped here and caught a whiff of Zee. What or who is he? He’s marked the whole damn place.”

Ben breathed a bit easier. “As it should be. He’s our future king and the leader of our pride.”

“A prince? From the way he ran, I assume he’s either straight or gay, but not out to your people?”

Ben chuckled. “Not straight at all, but in the closet. For the moment anyway. I’ve been trying to convince him to spill the truth to them, and let the cards fall where they may, but he’s still thinking on it. Let’s just say the Zulu culture is not forgiving and any form of weakness is quickly eradicated.”

“Whatever rules our world: fate, nature, or God, always has the last say. Nothing ever comes easy, does it? I have a mate—and he’s fucking gorgeous, but we can’t have each other, because he has another destiny to fulfil. As your king. Maybe being gay is the least of their worries. Wait until they hear I’m a different species altogether.” Turning away in disgust, Luka grabbed his cap and threw it down on the ground in frustration.

“What are you?” Ben asked softly. “I know you’re a predator like us. A damn big one.”

Luka faced Ben as he allowed another part of him to show.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ben whispered in awe when black stripes appeared on Luka’s skin from his face to his feet, his eyes burning like chips of ice.

Ben snorted. "Zee has met his match with you, bro'. His cat is huge, but I'm sure you can give him a run for his money. So, what are you gonna do about it?" Ben asked in all seriousness.

"I am not claiming an unwilling mate, Ben. I don't do rape either. So, it's up to Zee to decide the lengths of the risks he's willing to take and what's more important to him. Being here, smelling him and knowing he's close, it's very difficult for us, and if Zee won't choose us, I'll leave. Soon."

Leaving would kill him, but Luka had to do what was best for both of them. Maybe distance would lessen the pull between them.

"Luka, no authority trumps that of a true mating. None. Zee is scared out of his mind. I've never seen him become worked up over anyone else, and I've never seen him run from anything in his life. He's my best friend, and I want to see him happy. He needs you."

"I need him too. Everything in me wants to go after him and take what belongs to me, but not against his will. I'm not living the rest of my life with a mate who'll despise me for claiming him and ruining his life." Luka wouldn't budge.

Ben appeared sad. "I'll see if I can talk some sense into him. He's stubborn and even worse, he's scared, but hopefully he'll listen to me. I'll talk to you later, man." Ben gave a determined nod.

"Thanks, Ben." Luka picked up his paint brush and carried on painting.

Wow, a prince for a mate? Luka burned to call his parents and tell them the good news, but he held back. It would be cruel to get them excited only to shatter their joy if things didn't work out.

Zee had a decision to make, and if he chose Luka, he vowed to make it worth every bit of agony his mate was going through until the day he died.

Chapter 5

Ben found Zee's office empty and headed to Zee's house. As a pride member, Ben had to follow the lead of his prince, but as a friend, Ben couldn't let Zee give up his personal happiness for the sake of their people.

He didn't bother knocking when he reached the front door of Zee's cottage, but walked straight in. Zee lay stretched out on the couch, his arm flung over his eyes, his breathing almost erratic.

"You know you're fighting a losing battle, don't you? There's no way you can deny yourself your mate, Zee. That's crazy shit," Ben started.

Zee didn't move, but growled at him. Ben stood his ground.

"Leave me alone." Zee's voice no longer sounded human, and Ben reminded himself to tread carefully.

"No, I can't. Zee, man. I love you like a brother. I'm not gonna stand back and watch you give Luka up. So many of us never find our mates or wait so long before it happens. We all yearn for that bonding of lovers and friends. He's the other half of your soul, Zee. Don't give him up."

The longer Zee remained unresponsive, the more pissed off Ben became. "So, that's it? The mighty prince of the *Ibhubezi* tribe is a coward? Too shit-scared to choose the destiny laid out before him on a silver platter?"

Zee's attack happened fast. The next moment Ben found himself slammed into the concrete wall of the room, his body suspended a good foot above the ground. Zee's unsheathed claws held him immobilised with a death grip around his throat. Trusting that his friend wouldn't kill him, Ben stared into Zee's striking golden-yellow eyes. The tips of Zee's fangs showed between his parted lips, and his nostrils flared wide in anger.

"I am no coward."

"No, you're not," Ben soothed. "Don't do this, Zee. You need Luka, and God knows, he needs you, too. You can't live this life without your mate."

Zee growled at him, his eyes bleeding back to brown. Slowly, he released Ben's throat before turning away to sit back down.

"Two destinies stretch out before me: one chosen for me by the blood running through my veins, the other offered to me by God! If I choose the first I

lose my mate forever, destroying two souls in one go. If I choose Luka, I disappoint my father, my mother, the elders, and my whole fucking pride! So, either way I'm fucked, Ben!" The anguish on Zee's face cut Ben deeply, and his heart bled for his friend.

"No! God wouldn't be so cruel as to reveal your destiny and then withhold it from you! I don't believe that and deep down, neither do you! There is a damn good reason this is happening after taking over from your dad. This is meant to happen. This is your future and Luka is part of it. Don't be an idiot! Whatever journey lies ahead of you, whether it's with this pride or a new one, you need Luka by your side to accomplish it. I'm done talking to you. If you don't want to believe, then there's nothing else I can do." Ben walked out, slamming the door behind him.

He found Luka in the same place, packing up his equipment to move on to the next job. The white ice of the man's eyes slammed into Ben's gut, the agony in them stealing his breath.

"I've spoken to him, but I'm not sure if that would make any difference to what he does. He's mad and in pain. On Friday night, the elders of our tribe will be here for a meeting with Zee. Afterward, there will be a barbecue and dinner for all staff at the big thatch roof *lapa* behind the staff living area. He'll be there. Don't give up on him too quickly, Luka."

"Thank you. By staff, I gather you mean they're all part of the pride?"

"Yes. A bunch of lions and you." Ben grinned before turning away, heading in the direction of the front gate.

Luka had two days to prepare for his meeting with his mate and Ben hoped he made it count.

No amount of cold showers could get Zee's body to calm down. Neither did jerking off. Only one man could still the raging hunger rushing through his veins and Zee couldn't let that happen.

Luka made him want so many things he could never have. Being a prince and future king of his people meant Zee always had to exude a dominant, powerful persona. He had to lead. Make decisions. Be strong. Show no fear. No weakness.

Seeing the bigger than life Luka had been his undoing. Zee had been seconds away from getting on his hands and knees to beg his mate to claim

him. Zee wanted... no, he needed Luka to take him, fill him, stretch his body to the point of hurting, then fucking him into oblivion.

Zee didn't want to lead, or be strong, and take care of others, for once. He wanted to be taken care of, by someone solid with whom he trusted his life. Zee craved letting go of all his responsibilities, allowing himself to be mastered. Luka looked like that master and Zee would beg for him.

In shorts, sleeveless T-shirt, and hiking boots, Luka's appearance resembled everyone else's, but one glance into those baby blues, and all notion of ordinary fled out the window. Dangerous predator radiated from every inch of Luka's body. Zee wanted to climb the big man like a tree and rip his clothes off, take what belonged to him alone. The idea someone else may touch Luka, if they parted ways, drove Zee crazy with jealousy.

And yet, Zee would have to let Luka go. By no means would the elders or the pride accept a gay king with a mate from another species. Zee couldn't see that happening any day soon.

Frustration roiled inside of him and his pushy cat convinced him to go for a run, but he had to wait for darkness to fall. Up until now, their existence remained a secret and took priority in protecting his people. Many years ago a few reports surfaced on sightings of completely black lions in the wild, but thankfully the rumours died down and went unconfirmed. His ancestors' decision to move their whole tribe to a habitat where they could become more inconspicuous had saved their pride. A large black predator didn't blend very well into the browns and golds of the savannah, so the more tropical vegetation of Kwazulu Natal suited them well.

By the time the last shades of red and orange succumbed to the night, Zee left his cottage and took the shortest route to the wild expanse of land at his doorstep. His bare feet made no sound as he stuck to the shadows, careful to remain undetected by people moving about. On the other side of the high fence, he took off at a slow jog on two feet, but soon fell forward onto all fours. Before his palms slammed into the ground, they had shifted into massive black paws, the change effortlessly rolling through Zee's body. Unable to contain his heartache and irritation any longer, his lion roared its discontent loudly, the sound echoing in the night around him.

Usually, he revelled in letting his animal go, and in the powerful freedom the action granted him, but not tonight. The lion with whom he shared his body and head, had a one track mind, and running in the opposite direction of where his mate waited, proved to be the most draining exercise of his life.

To his utter relief, he found the further he ran, the lesser the pull to turn back became. Approaching a small creek running through the western border of the property, Zee slowed down and walked up to the water. The surrounding Drakensberg Mountains fed the creek with fresh spring water, the coolness soothing his tight, dry throat. Drinking his fill, he retreated to lie down and rest on a soft bed of moss nearby.

When a bushbuck made a hesitant appearance a few minutes later, Zee couldn't muster up any excitement for a hunt. Normally, he enjoyed the chase, but nothing could take his mind off of Luka or the way his body ached to answer the call to be with him. His constant state of arousal since first seeing Luka drove him crazy. No matter how many times he got off by his own hand, complete satisfaction eluded him. Each time his need became greater. A need only his mate could satisfy.

Every inch of Luka oozed self-confidence—and sexual knowledge. Zee had no doubt he would be satiated by his mate. Everything about Luka warned people off; intense blue eyes, his intimidating physique, the square set of his broad shoulders, his slow, measured movements. Such control promised an inferno in the bedroom or danger for anyone else if Luka let go of his self-restraint. A fleeting image flashed across his mind: Zee on his knees in the dirt, one of Luka's hands entangled in Zee's braids as Luka pulled Zee's head back for a brutal kiss while pounding into him from behind. The vision left him weak and painfully horny, a condition very familiar to him by now.

Gradually, the night sounds comforted and calmed him, the crickets chirping, the trees swaying in the wind. Laying his head on his front paws, he drifted off to sleep, completely exhausted from the inner battle of the last few days. Who knew things could change so significantly in the span of one day. With one meeting. Over one man.

Zee woke up with a start, looked around, but saw nothing out of place. He had another drink before turning back, but he took his time by walking. Along the way he rubbed against tree trunks, allowing the leaves of shrubs and grasses to stroke his coat like a lover's kiss as he glided past.

Approaching the place where he had slipped through the fence, Zee allowed his human half to re-emerge. Defeat weighed heavy on his shoulders. He wished he could go to sleep and wake up in an entirely different world—one where he wasn't a prince and had no royal obligations. He wanted to simply be

an ordinary person who didn't have to exist in fear, but could live openly with his friends and his family. A life where he could freely walk side by side with his man, and all knew Luka owned his heart.

Chapter 6

Two days resembled a fucking eternity, and telling himself to be calm or more reasonable made no difference to Luka. Since he last saw Zee, Luka had been fighting a losing battle with his animal counterpart.

Randomly during his work day he'd catch a whiff of Zee, and would become unable to rein the beast in. His eyes would change, his skin and scalp would prickle as the stripes he masked appeared. Facing Zee tonight would tell him exactly where he stood with his beloved mate, and the time couldn't come quick enough. Exhaustion rode him like the devil, and Luka wanted the whole mess over and behind him. From both his encounters with Zee, Luka almost believed he'd never stood a chance, but until Zee refused him to his face, he'd fight for them.

If Zee denied him once more, he'd pack his shit and get out of there. For good. Fuck! Maybe he should go all the way back to bloody Siberia. The cold and distance should deflate his dick for longer than a few minutes, and soothe the hole in his chest threatening to bleed him out.

In an attempt to impress the visiting elders, Luka dressed in his best pair of jeans, a smart black button-down short-sleeved shirt, and his black and blue Patrick Ewing sneakers. Mentally making a note to take them off before getting into a fight tonight, he locked his door at quarter to nine, and walked in the direction of the party he could hear going on. Jovial conversation, laughter and the aroma of delicious chargrilled meat lead the way.

Under the covering of the trees, he slowed to a halt, taking in the scene before him. On the back wall of the braai area, Ben and a few other large men cooked the meat on an open fire made in a brick fireplace.

About thirty odd people, men and women, all dark-skinned, stood around enjoying glasses of wine, beer, or other beverages. Some sat around the rustic wooden tables as they enjoyed their meals.

Luka's eyes honed in on where his mate stood talking to three older, but intimidating-looking men. The elders. Across the distance Luka identified the strain of the last few days on Zee's face. Through the smile Zee gave the men, Luka could see the corners of those luscious lips pull down in sadness. Dark marks marred the skin under his expressive eyes, and his colour appeared pale compared to the first day Luka had seen him. His mate needed him.

Squaring his shoulders, Luka took a deep breath and prayed for his heart to stay intact no matter what happened. At least until he found some privacy to let the pain out. Keeping his eyes pinned on his mate he walked out from the shadows and climbed the few steps before weaving his way through those standing around to where Ben barbecued some steaks and chops.

No wind blew tonight, so Luka took his time watching Zee while the man stayed unaware of his presence. Coming up to Ben he smiled in greeting. "Hey, Ben."

Ben's eyes cut to where Zee stood with his back to them. "Hello, Luka. I'm glad you decided to come. Please help yourself to something to eat and drink."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Luka extracted a chilled beer out of the zinc tub filled with ice. He twisted off the cap and took a swig, the cool bitterness tasted so good. With his lips wrapped around the bottle tip and his head arched slightly back, Luka made eye contact with one of the elders standing across from Zee. He knew his masks were firmly in place, but he should've known his size alone would draw attention very quickly.

Ignoring the probing stare, he wandered back to where Ben and his cooking buddies made light conversation. He took a dinner plate and lifted a few lids and selected a T-bone steak, side salad and grilled bread which he started eating while listening to their conversation. Ben introduced him to a quiet, but friendly man called Jacob, and a shorter stockier guy, Marcus, who had a mischievous look about him.

Looking up in-between bites he froze when he saw Ben's gaze riveted somewhere over Luka's shoulder. Placing his knife and fork down on the plate and wiped his mouth with the serviette. Crunch time.

He slowly turned around, every muscle in his body ready for action. Someone must've picked up on his presence and not liked it at all. But when he turned around to face the threat, Zee's golden cat eyes held him captive—was his mate unable to fight the pull between them any longer?

"Fuck!" Ben spat beside him.

"I'm fucked you mean? I'm on my own, yeah?" Luka snorted.

Not waiting for an answer, Luka took two steps forward, closing the distance between him and Zee. And then things turned to shit very quickly. The three elders moved into position in front of their prince and pushed Zee behind them. Logically, he knew the action to be for protection, but they had a death wish to come between two mates who hadn't consummated said mating.

For once Luka's cat pushed him aside and rose to the forefront. A loud growl escaped his throat and the gasps erupting around him confirmed his stripes were visible. The elders froze, their eyes shifting, their stances ready for attack.

"Zee, who is this man? And what is he doing on our land?" The tallest and broadest of the three elders spoke.

A hiss and chuff rumbled through his chest, but he waited to hear Zee's reply. The man deserved a chance. The party-goers all stood back against the surrounding *lapa* walls, the danger in the air tangible. Confusion, apprehension, and excitement rippled through the crowd. All these people would attack at a moment's notice to defend their leader, and sadly, Luka would fight to the death if they kept him from his mate. Only Zee could refuse him and send him away. If Zee bid him to stay, nothing but death would keep him away. He would wait as long as Zee took to make his decision.

"Luka. Back down my man. I know what you're thinking, but don't. You won't survive." Ben spoke firmly, but gently behind his left shoulder. That Ben and his two friends still stood on his side of the face-off brought him great comfort. He could almost believe Ben and his friends would fight with him instead of against him.

"Zithembe?" The elder growled.

Zee shouldered his way past the wall of muscle standing squarely in front of him. Sweat droplets ran down the side of his face and he stared everywhere but at Luka. At the sky, the flames dancing in the fireplace and even his own feet.

"Zee, you have thirty seconds to explain this or we will remove this intruder from our midst." Luka didn't like the older guy, who obviously thought he ran the show. However, no one had the right to undermine a true mating, not to mention a royal one.

"Uncle..." Zee's hoarse voice broke his heart. "I never knew..." He broke off.

"Knew what?" Uncle Dick spat out, the disrespect for Zee hard to miss.

Luka heard Zee breathe deep. "This man's name is Luka Vetrov and he's a new employee." Zee lifted his head and stared straight at Luka. "And he's also my mate." Whispers and loud exclamations burst from the onlookers.

"Your mate? Are you insane!" Dickhead exploded, swinging around to stare at Zee. "Men don't mate with men, Zithembe Kekana!" Using Zee's full name,

the elder attempted to try and intimidate his man, but Luka stood back, allowing Zee to take the lead. Zee needed to do this for himself in front of his people.

“This one does, Uncle. I would’ve liked to discuss this with my parents first, but I’m obviously out of time.” Luka could feel Zee’s heartache and fear over his parents’ reaction to his sexuality.

Clearing his throat, Zee started at one side of the gathering and let his eyes go from one person to the next, looking them squarely in the eye. Everyone listened as their prince spoke. “This is as good a time as any to tell you I am gay. No, I’m not confused. Yes, I have deceived you all with my silence and I regret doing so. The reasons why are hopefully obvious—a king is expected to carry on the royal lineage of the *Ibhubezi* pride and I’m gay.”

“I never expected to have a mate, believed it to be impossible. I was wrong, because a few days ago, this man walked into my life and changed every preconceived idea I had. Some of us wait years for our mates, while others pass on without ever meeting the other half of their soul. If I remember one thing my father, your king, has taught me, it is if you have a mate, you’re blessed beyond measure.” Zee’s voice wavered, and he swallowed.

Zee took three steps forward, his gaze clashing with Luka’s. “I am blessed beyond measure, although I know many of you may disagree. I’ve fought the inevitable, to deny this man would be suicide, to my heart, and to my soul, and would leave me an empty shell for the rest of my life. I can no more do that than take a knife and end my own life. I won’t do it.”

Luka closed the distance between them and came to a stop in front of Zee. Raising his hand, he laid his palm against Zee’s warm cheek and watched the man’s eyes close in pleasure as he rested his face in Luka’s hand. Within seconds Zee’s pheromones released into the air, and no one could miss the effect they had on each other.

“Zithembe! You can’t do this! Imagine your father’s reaction to this. You’re a disgrace to this tribe and to all your people,” Dick yelled, his face puffed up and his eyes wild.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Frank, but I can and I will. If following my destiny means disgracing my tribe, so be it.” With those final words Zee spun away and headed for the steps leading away from the gathering.

Chapter 7

“Go, Luka. We’ll see you guys tomorrow, and hopefully I can do some damage control here.” Ben nudged his shoulder.

“Thank you. I won’t forget your support, Ben,” Luka declared before going after Zee.

By the time Luka entered the shadows of the tree cover, Zee had disappeared from sight, but his scent led Luka to a *rondavel* similar to his own. The open door invited him in, and Luka started shedding his clothes once the door shut behind him, and the lock clicked in place. Frustration warred within him when he had to stop to toe off his sneakers and pull off his socks. The smell of Zee’s arousal drew him down the dark passage, where a light beckoned from a room to his right.

His breath left in a whoosh when he came to a standstill in the doorway. A completely naked Zee lay stretched out on a red sheet covering a massive bed, a hand firmly wrapped around an impressive erection. Luka had waited long enough. The last few days might only be hours for some, but to him the time-span had resembled an eternity during which he’d been unable to touch his man. No more.

Zee languorously stroked his cock as he watched his larger-than-life mate take him in where he sprawled out on his back on the sheets. The comforter and pillows lay discarded on the floor where he flung them earlier in his haste.

Taking in the raw beauty of Luka as he faced Zee, proudly erect, Zee moaned deep inside his throat at the thought of what was to come. Luka’s nostrils flared and the corner of his mouth hitched up.

“Oh, babe. I can smell your need for submission a mile away and know this: I will satisfy your every desire any time you need me to.” And with that, Zee couldn’t drag his gaze from Luka as he strode forward, placed a knee on the bed and climbed over Zee’s body, straddling his hips. Bending over, Luka met Zee’s mouth, their lips sealing together in a hard kiss. His body spun into realms of unknown pleasure as Luka’s tongue slipped inside to taste. Luka’s flavour assaulted all his senses, Zee’s body screaming satisfaction as it acknowledged and received its mate.

Their tongues met in a dominant display of duels, taking and giving, sucking and licking as the fires of their needs swept them higher. Luka withdrew, pulling on Zee's bottom lip before kissing a line up his jaw. Another nip to his earlobe shot electricity up his spine, but then a rough tongue licked a long stroke up the tender skin of his neck—and Luka purred, the sound resounding through Zee's chest. So unbelievably hot.

"Fuck! I'm gonna come." Zee tried to grab his dick to stem the threatening eruption of seed, but a strong grip clamped around his wrist stopped him.

"No, you're not!" Luka growled, sitting up. He inched up until he straddled Zee's chest, effectively using his legs to immobilize Zee's arms. Zee couldn't care less, because he only had eyes for the gorgeous cock right in front of him. When the object of his affection came no closer, he looked up. Luka's gaze promised to melt him into a puddle on the bed.

"Can you deliver on the promise you made through the window the other day?" Luka grinned.

Zee remembered the lust slamming through him when Luka came out of the swimming pool like an ancient Viking, strong and hard. How he'd licked his lips in a blatant invitation to suck Luka down.

"Hell, yes!" Zee's mouth watered as he parted his lips, his eyes begging Luka to fill his mouth as he craved to be filled somewhere else.

Taking himself in hand, Luka sat forward, dangling his dick above Zee's parted lips just as a bead of precum dripped off. Bucking against his restraints, Zee craned his neck to catch the precious drop on the tip of his tongue, sighing in bliss as he succeeded.

Luka lost the semblance of cool restraint, because the next moment his flesh pushed past Zee's moist lips to lodge in the back of his throat. Trusting his mate to take care of him, Zee swallowed, breathing through his nose to hold his gag reflex in check. Approval shone down from Luka's stunning baby blues and Zee desired to please him all the more.

When Luka started pumping in and out of his mouth, Zee let go and allowed himself to be used. So content to be what Luka needed. Saliva wet his lips and crept down his neck, but Zee lost himself in the pleasure reflected on his mate's face.

Minutes later, Luka hissed and withdrew completely, and Zee moaned in disappointment, moving restlessly under Luka's weight. He needed so bad.

“I know,” Luka answered and Zee realised he’d spoken out loud. The bedside drawers opened, first the one, then the other until Luka found the lube Zee kept there. Sniffing the tube briefly, Luka smiled in satisfaction, obviously approving of no one else’s smell on it but Zee’s.

Climbing off Zee’s chest, Luka moved down and spread Zee’s thighs before taking his place between them, propping them up for easier reach. Luka first applied a generous amount of slick to his own cock, before squeezing more onto his fingers.

His hand disappeared between Zee’s legs, a finger brushed over his taint to slowly swirl around and around his pucker before pushing in slightly. Luka took Zee’s hard-on in his other hand and stroked him while preparing his body for penetration. He teased, rubbed and pulled before a second finger joined the play and Zee’s hips lifted off the bed, seeking something much deeper and thicker.

A third thick finger slid in alongside the others and Zee whimpered—the pleasure and pain mingling to form a wicked euphoria he found himself suspended in, waiting, waiting to fly. The next instant Luka’s digits disappeared and two hard hands pushed his thighs up and out.

“Hold them,” Luka ordered him.

Hopelessly caught up in the maelstrom of emotions and sensations far above and beyond any he had ever experienced, Zee grabbed onto his own legs and pulled them back, baring his body and soul to his mate.

Luka used a hand to direct his cock and joined his other with one of Zee’s, linking their fingers together as he slowly applied pressure.

“Breathe, Zee. Bear down,” Luka whispered, his eyes glued to where Zee’s body battled, but steadily overcame the struggle to accept Luka’s erection. Zee squirmed around, lying still almost impossible as the wicked burn threatened to hurtle him over the edge.

“Shit! You’re getting off on the pain?” Luka incredulous eyes locked in on Zee’s hard, pointed nipples and the little pool of precum now gathered on his sweaty abs. “Your skin is like liquid chocolate, I just want to lick you all over.”

The head of Luka’s cock popped through the tightest ring of muscle, and they both groaned loudly as the hardness slid all the way in until Luka’s hips touched the back of Zee’s thighs. Zee’s muscles bunched and quivered with tension, his dick throbbed painfully and his heart threatened to pound out of his

chest. He needed Luka to... move and take and pound into him until he passed out.

"My pleasure, mate." And with those words, Luka did exactly that. He pulled most of the way out and slammed back in with raw power and strength. As the claiming commenced, Zee's cat came to the fore, his claws shot through, his fangs descended and his vision cleared to that of the animal inside of him.

As if answering the call of Zee's lion, Luka's cat seemed to emerge. His eyes bled out to almost completely silver-blue and the stripes appeared all over his body, from the hair on his head down to his feet.

The sight before him—his soulmate in his full naked glory, vulnerable and yet so mighty in the power of his beast—undid Zee. His orgasm shot up his legs, through his spine and he cried out, letting go of his legs and wrapping them around Luka's hips. Rearing up he pulled Luka down and kissed him as his body convulsed, gripping Luka's cock tight as semen pulsed from the stinging tip of his own.

The sexy smile on Luka's lips made his stomach flip over. "We're not done."

He continued to fuck into Zee, crouching over with his elbows next to Zee's shoulders while staring into Zee's eyes. In between their bodies, Zee stayed hard, his skin sensitive, but so ready for more. When the next orgasm rolled through his every cell, Luka smiled again, with fucking huge fangs showing this time. Pushing in deep, Luka stopped moving, the look on his face serious.

"If we do this, there's no turning back. You still want this. Want me?" The flicker of fear in the bottomless blue pools gripped Zee's heartstrings. He would tolerate no doubt between them.

"Fuck, yes!" Tightening his grip behind Luka's neck, Zee pulled Luka down into the crook of his neck. "Do it, please!" Zee begged.

Luka resumed his pumping, the rhythm hard and fast... animalistic in its passion and Zee had no more time to make sense of anything. The same moment his second, more powerful orgasm rocked his body, his cat roared in triumph as Luka's canines sank into his flesh while he did the same on the other side of Luka's neck.

Luka's cat celebrated its conquest when the small hollows at the back of his fangs acted like tiny straws to draw his mate's blood into his body. Zee claimed

him the same way, the pain overshadowed by the bliss exploding inside of them. And he came, over and over, filling Zee with his cum while their blood and tissues mingled and became one.

Chapter 8

Reality slowly snuck up on them and Luka retracted his teeth, soothing the wounds with gentle licks and kisses, knowing the saliva would speed up the healing. Goose bumps riddled his skin as Zee returned the favour before pulling far enough away for them to see each other.

“That’s the fucking hottest thing I’ve seen in a long time,” Luka said incredulously. “And I’ve just had the most amazing moment of my life, so that’s saying a lot.”

“What is?” Zee still panted, sweat running down his temples into his braids.

“My own eyes looking back at me. Don’t get me wrong, you’re gorgeous with your golden eyes, but man, this is something.” Zee’s eyes had turned icy blue, taking on a characteristic of his mate and Luka felt his chest puff up at the evidence of their joining.

“Really?” Zee pushed at Luka’s shoulders, trying to dislodge him.

“Wait, wait,” Luka laughed as he pulled away, his softened dick sliding from Zee’s warm body. Zee rolled off the bed and strode into the bathroom.

“That is so bloody cool.” He heard Zee’s voice from behind the dividing wall and walked over.

Zee burst out laughing, then cut it short. “Oops!”

Luke chuckled. “What?”

“Laughing is not a good idea after what we just did, but man! Look at you!” Zee pointed as he reached for a cloth and warmed it under the tap to clean himself off.

In front of the mirror Luka discovered an amazing new dark golden tan covering him from head to toe. Those who knew him would immediately notice the undeniable difference. The darker skin colour illuminated his eyes and light hair.

“It is true then,” he mumbled in amazement.

Zee came up behind him in the mirror, pushing up against his naked back as they stared at their shared reflection. “I never doubted, but we all wonder what those exchanges would be.” As Luka watched Zee’s eyes gradually returned to

its hazel shade and so did the colour of his skin. "Damn!" he sighed in disappointment.

Zee chuckled. "Maybe you'll just have to keep me in bed often and you'll stay that way."

"Good idea."

When Luka turned around to grab the man, Zee sprinted away. "Let's go for a run!"

Coming out of the bedroom Luka saw the front door stood open and Zee nowhere to be seen. Zee hadn't shifted yet, but he moved damned fast and had slipped past the fence and into the forest already. As if daring Luka to catch him.

Following Zee's scent he jogged through the foliage, letting his animal senses free. A good few minutes later, the branches and long grass gave way to grass clearing where Zee stood waiting for him.

While Luka watched Zee fell onto all fours and changed forms—into the biggest fucking lion Luka had ever seen. A black lion with golden eyes. Luka shuddered in appreciation of his mate's cat. There had been rumours about sightings and the existence of completely black lions, but never confirmed since the first witness came forth almost seventy-five years ago.

Zee lay down with his big head on his front paws, as if telling Luka to hurry up and shift already. Which he did standing up, balancing on his hind legs before slowly lowering his front paws to the soft grass underneath. He heard Zee purr loudly in approval.

Zee's breath stuttered in his chest at the sight of the enormous white tiger standing a few feet away. The emotion in the silver blue irises framed by dark, long lashes cut through his every thought, cell, and emotion, baring his soul. Luka's tail switched from side to side behind him and Zee longed to feel the softness wrap around him.

Luka came forward and walked all the way around Zee, his tail stroking lovingly across Zee's flanks before Luka rubbed up against his neck from the side, lifting up his head. Purr's reverberated through the air, the expression of utter bliss and contentment to be free to love each other. A warm, long tongue licked up his neck to his ear before nipping at the tip. Zee did his own

familiarising as he bathed Luka's luxurious coat with his tongue. The pale colour of the tiger matched the man's pale hair and skin tone. Thick black stripes ran all along the big body and over his mate's face. A short mane thickened Luka's neck and Zee longed to sink his fingers into the softness. He slid down the side of Luka's long, muscled body and came up the other side, using his nose to rub under Luka's chin this time.

In amazement, Zee thought of the last few days and how drastically his life had changed. How completely blessed and fortunate he was. He had been given a strong, honourable, loyal and gorgeous mate. A future. A destiny.

The sight of Luka's massive tiger reignited his passion for his lover, his body humming with need. In front of Luka, Zee lay down on his haunches, lifting his tail in invitation and surrender. The warmth of Luka's cat covered him from above, strong paws framing his body, growly purrs making his hair stand on end.

As their skin touched they both shifted back, Luka's chest hot against Zee's naked back. Luka licked across the tender spots where he bit Zee earlier. The bite stung, but also sent exciting shocks straight to his cock nestled on the soft mat of grass underneath his stomach. "I need you, Luka." The moan made him sound almost weak, but he had never been more empowered in his life than this moment. He had a mate and a future he couldn't wait to explore.

"You got me, Zithembe." In one fluid movement Luka reared back, pulled Zee onto his knees and slid inside of him, his entry eased by the remaining cum left in Zee's ass. Zee sunk desperate fingers into tufts of long grass, digging his fingernails into the soil underneath to hold on.

"I love the tattoo. So freakin' hot!" Luka groaned as he slowly withdrew and rocked back in.

Confused, Zee had to think. "Oh, my shoulder?" The cock filling his ass made it hard to form coherent speech. "It's not a tat. That's the mark we all carry from birth. A lion gave it to us, long ago. Can't talk now. Fuck me Luka!"

Zee cried out as Luka slammed into him, this time without restraint. It was fast, hard and rough, and Zee lost and found himself at the same time. Lost because all the demands and expectations of his parents, the elders, and his pride fell away. And he found himself strengthened by his weakness and need to yield and give it all to Luka, who could handle it, otherwise God wouldn't have given them to each other. They fit.

Luka hammered into him from behind, their flesh slapping together each time the man bottomed out in Zee's body, raking across his prostate in the process. Luka came over him, his hot breath fanning Zee's neck before those huge fangs sank into his flesh, his balls pulling up tight and shooting their load up his dick as he came. The burn. The friction. The discomfort from being claimed twice in one night. The pain from the bite. They combined to launch him into oblivion, his body shaking and clamping down on Luka's cock where he ejaculated deep inside Zee's ass. Luka groaned above him, the sound a mix between a growl and a moan, their skin drenched with sweat where they glided together.

Zee's knees slid out from underneath his body, the cool grass soothing his hot skin. One word came to mind—perfection. Luka kissed his bite marks as he withdrew from Zee's body. Shifting to the side he half-covered Zee as he lay down next to him, wrapping a heavy arm around Zee, tracing the scar indentations of the lion's paw on Zee's shoulder with light touches.

"You drive me crazy." Luka gave an exhausted sigh.

"Ditto," Zee mumbled, smiling tiredly when Luka's laughter shook them both.

Minutes or possibly hours later, Zee stirred when Luka picked him up and started walking back. "Put me down."

Luka ignored his objection and Zee nodded off again, too tired to argue. Once back in Zee's house, Luka pushed Zee under the warm spray of the shower before joining him. Luka washed and dried them both before taking Zee's hand to lead him to bed. Under the covers, Zee cuddled up close, putting his ear on Luka's chest before closing his eyes. He belonged here. In Luka's arms. Forever.

The tantalising aroma of frying bacon drew Zee awake better than any alarm ever could. Memories from the night before came rushing back and Zee experimentally stretched under the covers, wincing when not only his shoulder but also his ass complained.

In the early hours of dawn Luka slid into him from behind where they lay spooned together. Long, steady strokes of his cock from Luka's rough palm mimicked the actions in Zee's tender hole as Luka made love to him. The slower and gentle motions pulled him over into another powerful climax before he succumbed to sleep once more.

Flipping the comforter off he rolled over and inspected the sheets which thankfully had no white spots on them. Luka had cleaned them off.

“Rise and shine, babe.” Luka walked into the room with a large tray of smoky bacon and scrambled eggs on wholegrain toast and two cups of steaming coffee.

“Hey, good morning. I’m so damn hungry I can eat a horse.” Zee smiled as he sat up.

Ravenous, they dug in and shared the meal, finishing it in minutes. While Zee sipped from his mug, he watched Luka pull on his clothes from the night before. He sat down on the side of the bed to tie his shoes before looking over his shoulder at Zee, his blond hair brushing his shoulders with the movement.

“I would love to lie in bed with you all day, but I know you’re sore and my boss is a slave driver. Wouldn’t want to piss him off.” Leaning across he kissed Zee softly, swiping a tongue over Zee’s slightly swollen lips.

“I may have to chat with your boss then. Can’t have him pushing you too hard,” Zee murmured against Luka’s mouth.

Seeing the happiness in his mate’s eyes made Zee become serious all of a sudden. “You know my uncle’s not going to let this rest?”

“I hoped, but from what I saw—no, he won’t.” A rough thumb rubbed against his cheek. “But whatever happens, we have each other, right?”

Zee nodded, Luka’s touch on his skin almost hypnotising. “Yes, and Ben and his cohorts. If we have to leave we can start over somewhere on our own. Somehow.”

Approval shone from Luka’s light eyes and he gave Zee a quick kiss before rising from the bed. “That’s all we need. I’m off to earn my bread and I’ll see you later.” He winked before leaving the room and Zee heard the front door open and close. He had half an hour to show up for work, but first things first. A shower.

Chapter 9

A bow string had nothing on Zee about two hours later. Imagine his surprise when no one barged into his office to rake him over the coals. No emails from his parents, or the elders, or even a phone call from a concerned pride member. None. The literal calm before the storm, he reminded himself, and almost jumped out of his seat when his door swung open. Only to have Ben walk through it with two cups of heavenly brew while he kicked the door shut behind him.

“Jumpy much?” Ben smirked.

“Wouldn’t you be?” Zee flung back, reaching out for his cup of nectar. “Thanks.”

Ben put his cup down on the coaster before walking around the desk. Without reservation his friend pulled his collar away, exposing Zee’s neck.

Ben whistled. “Fuck me! The man’s got some serious jaws, cuz.”

“I think it looks worse than it is.” Zee offered.

“You smell funny.” Ben grinned as he took a seat across from him. “Both of you sort of mixed up. Separate, but together.”

Zee smiled, feeling all fuzzy inside, and trying hard not to act like a sap. “I got him good too.”

Ben’s gaze turned sincere. “I’m honestly so happy for you, Z-man. And so damn relieved you didn’t give in under the pressure from the elders. You can’t live your life for others all the time. Sometimes we have to live it for us.”

Zee nodded his agreement. “But I hope you know the shitstorm is coming from this. Good old Frank will not rest until I’m exposed, ridiculed, and banned from my own pride. Are you still so sure I made the right decision when your support of me may mean the same for you, Jacob, and Marcus?”

“You are my future king and your father threatened to unman me with a blunt axe if I let him down in backing you up. Even without the threat over my head, or balls in this case, you’re my friend. I’m a bit insulted that you are questioning my loyalty.” Ben finished his drink and headed for the door.

“I don’t think I can ever tell you how much that means to me.” Zee spoke softly, the rollercoaster of emotions from the last few days starting to take its physical toll on his body.

“You don’t need to. I know. Go home Zee, you look like shit. Luka kept you up too late.” The door clicked shut behind Ben’s bulk. Zee reached for the phone and dialled his father’s mobile number only to slam it down when the voicemail came on. His mom and dad were officially on vacation after his father’s retirement from managing the pride full time. At their departure, his folks had the Seychelles, Namibia, and Egypt in their sights. Where they could be found stayed a mystery. Not being able to get in touch with them just ramped up his stress levels even more.

Trying to stay busy didn’t work and when he found himself staring out the window at the pool area in a daze several times, he locked up and went home. Once he swapped his jeans for a pair of sleeping shorts, he stretched out on the couch with a pillow under his head and fell asleep.

Throughout the morning Luka ticked off one job after another on his to-do list. Leaving Zee in the bed this morning, looking all sleepy and fuckable had been hard. Not to mention the worry Zee carried over his parents and the whole threat from the elders circle.

After lunch he sensed Zee’s fatigue and his increased uneasiness. With his mate in distress, work became an obstacle standing between him and going home to see to Zee’s needs. So he worked harder and faster, managing to pack away his tools an hour earlier than planned.

At his place, he took a quick shower to wash of the dust and sweat before packing a bag and heading over to Zee’s house. A high, trimmed hedge lined the path up to Zee’s front door and before the latter came into view, Luka smelled the intruding scent. Not welcome at all.

The man’s presence on Zee’s front steps irritated Luka, but the act he was committing made Luka furious.

“Are you just fucking stupid or do you have a death wish?” The man whipped around so fast, his dick still in hand and the urine cut off mid-stream where he stood spraying the flowers beds and concrete in front of the house. Seeing Luka, the idiot shoved his prick back into his pants and stumbled back, creating a distance between them with terror in his eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m only doing what I’ve been told.” He stammered, still retreating. Looking closer, Luka noticed he couldn’t be much older than twenty, tops. A kid.

Luka stilled. "Who sent you?" Using kids to hide behind didn't fly by Luka.

"The elders," the youngster whispered. Reaching underneath his arm, he removed a white envelope which he held out to Luka. When Luka stepped closer, the kid dropped the letter and ran off.

The door opened to reveal a sleep-mussed Zee, clad only in sleep shorts and nothing else. The sight of him and the smell of another cat under his nose, drove Luka's hormones into overdrive, stat.

"What is that smell?" Zee screwed up his nose, still trying to wake up.

Luka growled in answer, beyond forming words at present. With a few steps he had the letter in hand and burst through the door. The envelope dropped to the floor as he kicked the door shut and hoisted a gasping Zee up in his arms.

The bedroom was out of the question. Too far. They ended up in the kitchen where Luka spied a bottle of olive oil on the counter and dropped Zee down right next to the lifeline. Zee's shorts hit the ground seconds later.

"Lie back." He ordered.

Zee's now blue eyes singed him on the spot as he obeyed, bringing his feet up and propping them on the edge of the counter. The action splayed him open for Luka's attentions.

"Hold it right there." The olive oil's lid flew off with his rough fumbling and he messed some on the floor, but he managed to get some where he wanted it. Dribbling down Zee ball sac to his ass. Spreading it downwards with his fingers he speared first one then two fingers into Zee's warm body. At Zee's hiss he glanced his way.

"You're sore."

"A bit, but it's good. So good. I want you." Zee's hips lifted to meet the slow thrust of his fingers.

Out of patience, he slathered some of the messed oil on his cock and lined up. Exerting slow, steady pressure he breached the ring of muscle easily, before sliding into heaven. Taking Zee's ass cheeks in his hands, he pulled them apart, his eyes glued to where he penetrated his lover's body.

"That's the hottest thing ever—my white cock moving in and out of your dark, pink hole. It's so damn sexy." Zee moaned and squirmed harder at his words, the man's thickly veined cock hard against his abs where moisture leaked from the slit.

“Imagine me fucking you the same way,” Zee gritted out. The image played in his head and he clenched his jaw to stem off his approaching orgasm.

“Would you let me?” Zee asked.

“There’s nothing I would ever deny you, Zithembe. You’re mine and I’m yours.”

Zee clamped his eyes shut, his knuckles turning pale where he clutched the sides of the cabinet under him. Luka slowed his thrusts, not wanting to hurt Zee any more than necessary. He made sure to angle in just right to graze over Zee’s prostate with every pump, pushing the man closer to the edge with every brush.

From this position he watched his lover—saw every frown, lips parting, the flick of a tongue, panting chest, sweat rolling from mocha skin, the beautiful pulsing erection all for him, and the scrotum underneath as it drew up tight, ready to shoot.

As Zee gave himself over to his release, he opened his eyes. Knowing Zee’s eyes turned blue and seeing them pin him to the floor were two totally different things. Luka groaned, but persevered in pumping through the tightness gripping his dick. When Zee’s body turned limp, Luka pulled out and jerked himself off fast, spraying his semen all over Zee’s stomach and groin until it dripped down over his taint.

Leaning over, he plastered himself to Zee and kissed the living shit out of him. Would this ever change—the burn, the need, the affection? He sucked Zee’s tongue into his mouth, rolling his own around and around it before letting it slide through his lips to pop out.

Zee smiled softly. “You’re so hot, Luka. The stripes, your eyes. You’re more than I could have ever asked for. Darker skin and all.”

Looking at his arms he chuckled. “At least I’ll have a tan some of the time.” He reached under Zee’s shoulder and lifted him off the table, taking them both into the shower where they washed off the remains of their passion.

After pulling on shorts, Luka lay back on the couch to watch as Zee started dinner.

“What is that?” Zee indicated with a wave and Luka saw the discarded white envelope next to his overnight bag by the door.

“Oh, yes! The little shit responsible for my caveman display earlier. He pissed all over your garden beds and front step while dropping this off for you.”

He retrieved the letter from the floor and handed it to Zee who tore it open and pulled out a note.

Zee's nostrils flared and Luka sensed the immediate tension in his mate's muscles. "What is it?"

"A fight-off," Zee said with resignation.

"What? Who?" Luka's heart beat faster.

"The elders are summoning me to a fight-off tomorrow night in the pride meeting area. They have chosen a suitable opponent to challenge my position of up-and-coming king. My uncle and his cronies seem to believe a faggot cannot be a true king and are therefore asking me to battle it out to prove my supremacy as the leader of this tribe." Zee slammed the letter down on the table and grabbed the whisk, rapidly beating the eggs intended for their omelettes as he fumed.

"I won't let you do this. I can't Zithembe. Don't ask me to." His throat tightened with his words. A match for supremacy usually didn't stop until one fighter died. Luka could not stand by and watch his mate be killed.

"Somewhere deep inside you must have known I am going to ask you to do exactly that. You would not fall for a coward and neither would I. My parents have prepared me all these years for ruling the pride, taught me about who I am, and I have to believe in their words or I will not come out of this alive. As my mate, it means you have to believe with me. I can't not show up for this. Any respect I have with my people will vanish if I don't fight. My strength and ability comes from who I am, and who I was born to be. And from you." Zee spoke calmly as he assembled the omelettes with cheese, mushrooms, spinach and ham. He served it with a small side salad and Luka sat on a bar stool at the kitchen counter while Zee ate his standing up on the other side.

Luka could've been eating cardboard for all he cared, but he finished the food and helped Zee clean the kitchen. The sombre atmosphere hung around all night, but Zee tried hard to lighten things up by giving Luka a successfully distracting blowjob after which he managed to doze off.

Chapter 10

His phone vibrating on the bedside table roused Zee from a restless sleep. The clock display showed 00:37 and on his other side Luka slept undisturbed. At least one of them was getting some much needed rest.

He picked up his phone and swiped across the screen. A tap on the little letter icon opened up the text messages. His dad. At bloody last.

"Son? U ok? Saw missed calls from u. In Egypt now."

He thought long and hard what to say in response.

"All sorted. Don't worry. Luv u."

Almost immediately another came back.

"Zithembe, ur a bad liar. Will sort u out when we're back."

That made him smile. His father's idea of sorting things out usually turned into a tipsy party. Serious men, serious talk. A bit of wine or vodka. And *walla!* Headache the next morning.

"Lol. Sure. G'night."

"Ur Mother says <3."

"<3 u too."

Zee never much got into the mushy shit with his parents, but this may be the last chance he had to tell them, so he did.

Sleep eventually came for him, as did daylight while he did the same down Luka's welcoming throat. Turned on his side afterward, Luka spooned him and got off rubbing up and down between Zee's butt cheeks.

Snuggled or rather glued together they listened as the day began. "You going to work today?" Luka's breath wafted against the back of his neck.

"No. I've got some mental preparing to do and being around people won't help."

"Fair enough. I've got heaps to do, so I'll get out of your way." Luka kissed his nape before rolling away.

"I didn't mean you have to go." Zee apologised.

"I know, but you need your space. I'll come home when you need me to." He sounded so reassuring, but in his eyes a storm raged.

“Thanks.” Zee threw aside the covers and followed him to the shower. They washed each other and shared slow, long kisses.

What night would bring he didn't know. Fear and intimidation wouldn't make him give up everything belonging to him. Giving in without a fight meant Ben, Marcus, and Jacob, wouldn't have a home here. Neither would Luka.

Somehow, he had to believe everything would work out. Or die believing it.

When Luka stormed into the house slightly after four, Ben sat on the couch to welcome him with a wide smile. Not Zee. And Luka much preferred Zee's version of welcome.

“Hey, Luka. Howzit going?” Ben's jovial tone couldn't disguise the seriousness in his gaze.

“Where's Zithembe?”

“In true Zithembe style, he's gone off to be by himself. Away from the noise around here. He'll be fine.”

“I know he will, because I won't let anything happen to him,” Luka growled.

“Coolit, man. I'm not your enemy in this.” Ben strolled to the kitchen and switched on the coffee machine. The rich aroma reminded him of a skipped lunch in an attempt to get home earlier.

Luka sat down and accepted a cup from Ben with a nod of thanks. “Luka, we need to talk.”

“Then talk.”

“No matter what goes down tonight, you can't interfere with the fight. Any help from any of us and Zee will forfeit the challenge. I know you're mates, but this he has to do on his own,” Ben urged.

“Do you know how hard that's going to be? Standing back and not coming to his aid?” Luka swore.

“I know, because I'll be standing next to you fighting not to defend him. Let this be a consolation to you—Zee is far stronger and more skilled than you know. It's the very reason he is the chosen future king of this tribe. I grew up with him and he's fast, damn tough and never gives up. He can take me down in a heartbeat. Trust me on that. The only one here tough enough to beat him is his father and you. Maybe.”

Lying his head back on the sofa, Luka breathed deeply, his very being longing to search out his mate and protect him. Giving in to the urge would be wrong, because it would mean betraying his lover's trust in him to do what he'd asked. Talk about setting out on the wrong foot.

"Ben, you're gonna have to hold me back and I'm gonna fight you. And if he dies, all bets are off. I'll kill as many of your tribe before they take me down, starting with Uncle Dick." Just the thought of the smug, condescending asshole sent his temper into overdrive.

"We'll hold each other back and if the worst happens, I'll help you take them out. Zee is like a brother to me and I will avenge him." The wild look on Ben's features made Luka relieved to call the man friend. He would hate to stand opposite Ben in a fight.

Ben rolled his head on his neck, a few bones cracking as he did. "Well, come on then. Get ready to head out by seven. We're due to meet at the clearing by seven thirty. I'll wait for you outside." Luka didn't answer as Ben left.

His cell phoned went off in his pocket and he pulled it out. "Hello."

"Luka, what's going on? I can sense something's wrong." His father never beat around the bush and his mother even less. He heard her mumbles in the background.

"Hey, Dad. The shit has proverbially hit the fan in my life."

"Tell me... wait... what? Just wait. Your mother wants you on speaker phone. Okay, carry on," his dad barked.

"Mikhail, *shush!* Luka, honey? Are you okay?" As a physically small woman, his mother's personality made up for it in spades.

"Hi, Mom. Yes, I'm okay, for now anyway. Before you go off, I'll tell you this, because I know you'll be happy. At least I hope you will. I've met my mate." There, he said it.

His mother gasped. "Oh, that's great news!"

"Dad?"

"Luka, you know I've always supported you and always will. I'm really thrilled for you, but what has this got to do with the danger I feel heading your way?"

In the shortest way possible he explained the situation to them, watching the clock on the wall.

“Well, that’s just stupid. He’ll be a better king to his people with you by his side,” his mother huffed.

“I wish everyone felt that way. The challenge is tonight, so I’ll have to go soon.”

“Luka, wait!” His father sounded panicked. “Don’t get yourself killed, son.”

Luka loved them all the more for their concern. “Dad, this is my mate. If they kill him tonight, I’m going in. I wouldn’t be your son if I stand by and do nothing.”

Silence met his declaration and then his dad sighed. “We’re getting on the first flight out of here tonight. Stay alive until I get there. God knows, you’re as stubborn as your mother so hang in there.”

“Hey!” He heard the slap his mother delivered probably to the back of his father’s head.

“Gotta go, Dad. I’ll see you when you get here. I’ll send the address through shortly so you can Google it.”

“Honey! I love you.”

“Love you too Mom, Dad. Bye.”

Into the stillness of the room he addressed his mate. “Let’s do this, Zithembe.”

From his vantage point where he crouched amongst the dense vegetation, his scent masked, Zee watched the show. He purposefully waited ten minutes past the required time to show himself to the people assembled at the designated clearing for the challenge. One thing stood out to him though. His mate was missing.

Praying to God to keep him safe, he squared his shoulders, withdrew his masks and walked proudly into the clearing. A hush fell over the group—his closest friends stood on one side, battle ready and they smiled when they spotted him. The rest of his pride formed a circle around the group of elders who stood deep in discussion in the middle. Wild gestures accompanied their hushed words, the contention amongst them clearly evident. His uncle’s head whipped around as the crowd parted to allow Zee through. The whispers ramped up in volume and surprise, outrage and excitement skittered all around when his mate appeared from his right side, coming up behind Ben, Jacob, and

Marcus. Luka's pale skin identified him as an outsider in the sea of black surrounding him. Zee's heart swelled with pride over the ease with which his closest friends accepted Luka into their midst.

Zee walked to where they stood, placing himself a few steps in front of them and turned to face the elders in the middle.

His uncle dramatically cleared his throat, and the crowd quieted down. "Thank you all for being here for this crucial event tonight. Two nights ago the true nature of our future king was revealed. In the history of this pride there has never been a homosexual in our midst. Let alone allowing one to rule our people. This atrocity will not be tolerated and I am confident my brother, your present king, will be appalled at the turn of events upon his return." The man turned and pinned Zee with his gaze before looking over Zee's shoulder to do the same to Luka.

Outrageously, Ben snorted. Loudly. "My ass." Zee almost gave in to the grin tucking at the corners of his mouth.

"After careful deliberation the council of elders have decided unanimously to call forward Zithembe Kekana to defend his position as leader of the *Ibhubezi* tribe. A suitable challenger has been found, and if victorious, this man would make a true, powerful ruler who will be able to carry on our lineage. If Zithembe is truly destined to be our next king, he will have no trouble proving his supremacy in this battle. A battle to the death."

In the crowd some roared their outrage while others appeared shocked and a few even smug. These were his people, and he hated the confusion displayed on their faces.

"I call forward the two contenders." Frank's voice boomed in the stillness.

Before Zee could move the crowd, the far side of the circle parted and out walked a large, golden lion, tail switching from side to side. The size of the head alone should've frightened Zee just a little bit. Frank chose well, because Zee had his job cut out to defeat this mother of a beast.

Zee pulled his shirt over his head and released the button on his fly before lowering the zipper. Without taking his eyes off the animal in the ring, he removed the rest of his clothes until he stood naked and unashamed. Someone fondled his ass from behind, and he knew it to be his lover, because someone else would've lost a hand by now.

"You go, Zee. We'll be here when it's all over." Ben spoke gravely.

Zee stepped into the ring, shifting between one step and the next. He shook his head, and his skin rippled as he became comfortable with his cat. Murmurs and gasps of appreciation could be heard amongst the people as he circled his opponent. He may not be quite as bulky as the other fighter, but you didn't have to be big to win.

“Let the best fighter win!” Frank yelled, and all hell broke loose.

Chapter 11

Goldie launched himself at Zee and despite stepping aside, he managed to hit Zee in the back left flank and they both went down. With Zee pinned at the bottom, he struggled to keep deadly fangs from piercing his throat. With his right paw he lashed out and dislodged his attacker, the other cat hitting the ground a few feet away.

Coming to his feet Zee focused his senses, drawing on the strengths of his beast. Across the distance he saw his mate pacing furiously, his three friends forming a barrier between the fighting arena and Luka.

Goldie stormed towards Zee again, and this time he was ready. Using his weight and strength from his back legs, he attacked the cat head-on, going straight for the neck. His teeth sank in, and the lion roared his pain. Kicks to Zee's stomach and sides pushed him away, giving the fighter time to get up, and then Zee hit again, this time with his claws.

Both on their hind legs, raking lashes fell wildly, and Zee felt his flesh peel open as the other animal did his own damage. Their roars and growls deafened out any noise from the pride. Dust and grass flew up as they clashed, clawed and rolled on the ground. Blood dripped down his opponents face, a few gashes visible above his eyes and the bridge of his nose. Warmth flowed down Zee's front legs from the burning muscles of his shoulders.

Falling down onto all fours, they circled each other. Goldie charged, and Zee swung away, the movement almost causing the beast to stumble into the crowd. Instead he managed to catch himself, and Zee noticed he came to a stop in front of Ben, Jacob, and Marcus who joined forces in holding back a furious Luka whose stripes and darker skin spoke volumes.

If Zee didn't know any better, he would've thought the golden lion had a death wish. Or belonged in an asylum, because what he did next meant game over.

The crazy animal stormed up to Luka's face and roared at him, teeth dripping with Zee's blood. A red flag in front of the proverbial bull. His mate lost it. The next moment the white Siberian tiger stood in front of the lion, pieces of Luka's clothing scattered around at the speed of his shift. With immense satisfaction Zee noticed Luka trumped the guy in size. Luka let rip a brutal roar, and Goldie stepped back. Fast.

“Fuck Luka! Stop! Remember what I told you!” Ben yelled, the three men frantically trying to hold back the enormous cat foaming at the mouth to kill the beast responsible for injuring his mate.

With Luka successfully contained, Goldie must've thought the danger over, but he visibly took a step back when he faced Zee again. The surprised yells from the bystanders meant his blue eyes had showed up. If the people ever doubted the truth of their mating, they now had their confirmation. Only true mates traded characteristics.

From far away he heard Frank scream in anger at the proof before their eyes. His opponent came at him, and Zee watched him swing a paw. With precision Zee hit, his claws sinking into a thick shoulder joint and then he ripped downwards—slicing through fur, muscle and sinew to scrape against bone. When his claws came free, Zee shouldered the lion off his feet, the loose flesh on his wrecked leg flopping obscenely as he slammed to the ground.

Zee stood over him, eyes honing in on where the jugular visibly pumped in his neck. Killing this guy would go against everything his father ever taught him. Seeing Frank's true colours the last few days had Zee believing the man in front of him might have innocently been pulled into this whole mess by Frank's greed. Lowering his head he touched noses with the other animal, staring into liquid yellow eyes very similar to his own.

Zee stepped aside and paced, walking off the adrenaline pumping through his system ultra-fast. The flash to his left caught his eye, and he had enough. Unwilling to accept defeat, the lion came at him once more. Rearing up, Zee tackled the other beast to the ground, this time his fangs hitting true and hard. Sinking deep. Buried in warm flesh, blood flowing into his mouth, Zee felt the vibrations caused by the pumping of the jugular millimetres away. Cutting off every thought of his father's teaching and how he would deal with the guilt after, he closed his jaws.

“Zithembe! Don't!” Ben yelled. The sound human enough to break through the utter stillness in his head and froze him on the spot. “I know you don't want to do this. So, don't.”

Indecision mind fucked him for split seconds before the human side of him forced the wild animal to retreat. Agonisingly slow he withdrew his fangs, blood dripping from his mouth as he lifted his head and surveyed the crowd.

“Kill him!” Frank demanded.

Zee watched his crazy relative. "Finish him off!" Spit flew as Frank yelled maniacally.

When Zee made no move to comply the man went ballistic. "If you're too weak to do it, you don't deserve to live. I should've done this myself." In seconds Frank undressed and shifted, his lion black, huge and threatening. Saliva dripped from his fangs as Zee looked on, and an odd, rancid scent filled the air.

Zee could've fought his uncle at any other time, but twice in one night without having time to heal, meant certain death for him. The massive black beast charged at Zee, but a chorus of furious roars stopped him in his tracks. Ben, Jacob, Marcus and Luka stood united in shifted form, at the ready to join the battle to save their prince. Everyone else around the circle looked on in horror as the drama unfolded.

However, nothing seemed to penetrate Frank's fanatical mind as he chuffed at the group in defiance and advanced on Zee.

For as long as he lived Zee would never forget the sound that rippled through the atmosphere the very next moment. The words escaped him to describe the wrath of the deafening roar penetrating the night. Zee recognized the sound and every bit of tension flowed from his sore body as his father burst through the crowd, getting right up in Frank's face.

No one with a sane mind would even attempt to compare the two brothers. There was no contest. King of the beasts clearly screamed from every hair and oozed out of every pore on David's body. He stood head and shoulders above his now timid sibling, the size of his head and mane clearly reminding each and every person of his status as king.

Without preamble David lashed out, and Frank's body flew through the air like a limp soft toy and came to a hard crash against a tree trunk several metres away. David shifted back, stalking to where his brother cowered on the ground.

"The only disgrace in this tribe is you, Frank! Your greed has made you an abomination and no amount of power and money is ever enough for you. The moment I turned my back you tried to kill my son! You call him weak and an abomination, you hypocrite! I am convinced you have betrayed the *Ibhubezi* tribe, and disregarded the values which form the very foundations of what we stand for. You are banished from this pride and are never to return. Get out of my sight!" Never had Zee seen his loving, affectionate father this enraged.

Dismissing his brother, David entered the clearing again, the man as proportionally big as the beast. Seeing his father naked weirded Zee out, but he couldn't lie. David's wide shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist, a deep chest flowed into rippled washboard abs, thick tree-trunk arms hung at his sides and thighs bulged as he walked. No wonder his mother smiled a lot—David was one hell of a catch.

“Son. Your mother and I have raised you to be strong, confident and honourable. You have never disappointed us. I don't know why you never told us you are gay, because it makes no difference to us as we already knew. Your name, Zithembe, means ‘trust in yourself’. We hoped the name will give you courage to do what is right, even when other options appear much easier. The last few days, you trusted in yourself and stood firm against Frank. We are so proud of you.” David's words dissolved any doubt he had about their love and acceptance and brought tears to his tired eyes.

Just when Zee thought he could go home and let his mate nurse him, the earth quaked. Literally. And thunder rolled in without the sign of one cloud in the dark sky above. Under him, the ground trembled with the vibrations of hundreds of pounding paws and the air throbbed with a deafening rumble. Panic gripped the tribe members, and they ran to one side, grouping together to form a wall of protection, the men out front and the women behind.

As the sounds came closer, the volume escalated. Branches and twigs snapped. Leaves shook loose and fell to the ground. Zee pulled on his reserves and turned to face the unknown threat, sensing his mate and his friends at his back. The king followed suit, placing himself right in front of his people. Not that the formation would offer a sufficient defence, because they were completely surrounded.

The pounding slowed as the group neared and growls and chuffs filled the air. As a unit they revealed themselves, closing in on those gathered in the clearing. Of those visible to Zee, he estimated close to a hundred assembled before them, but he sensed more watching from the darkness beyond.

Black lions.

Not shifters. Fucking huge, untamed, genuine lions and lionesses. True predators of the African plains.

One enormous, majestic male stood taller than the rest—the leader. Solemn orange eyes studied them closely, then walked to where Frank sat propped up against the tree trunk. One chilling roar from Simba had the coward scrambling

to his feet and running off into the night. Each and every person on the elder panel who betrayed Zee this day, received the same treatment. They quickly learned in no uncertain terms to get out or they would die there.

The massive cat's head swung around and honed in on Zee. He walked up to Zee, stared into his eyes, and Zee understood the command to shift. So he did and lowered to his knees, his body giving in.

A scuffle sounded to his side, and a stunning lioness nudged Luka forward to stand beside Zee. Luka gave up his animal, returning to human form next to Zee. Strong arms came around his shoulder and pulled him close. He almost pulled away, not wanting Luka to be touched by the blood, spit and other dirt covering him from head to toe. The iron-laced scent hung heavy in the air, but he returned the gesture anyway.

"Are you okay?" The possessiveness in his lover's voice comforted him and attempted to stir up other things below the waist, but Zee kept a handle on it. Barely.

"I'll survive," he whispered before facing their judge and jury.

One by one the dominant lioness went around to face the tribe members, scaring off the traitors and bigots before she rejoined her pride.

Simba walked up to David and licked his cheek. What the hell? More bizarre behaviour followed when man and beast stood looking at each other, not twitching a muscle. Zee jumped when his father's voice bellowed into the quiet.

"We all know the story how we came into existence. This here in front of me is the first born son of the golden lion who joined spirits with our tribal ancestor many years ago. Only the first born of every litter inherits the black gene, and assembled here tonight is the totality of the true black lions in the wild. They have come here tonight because they sensed the pending evil, and Zithembe's distress called to them."

Within seconds Zee's people, every last one of them, went down on one knee in a show of respect for the majestic beasts standing before them. From somewhere behind his dad, the lions parted and his mother appeared to stand proudly beside her husband. His father took her hand in his and together they bowed to show honour.

Simba turned away from his parents and approached him and Luka as his father spoke. "Everyone here needs to understand that this couple carry their

blessing and the mating is true. The time has come for our prides to join forces with other beasts of nature and discontinue keeping ourselves apart. The mating of Zithembe Kekana and Luka Vetrov is vital for the destiny of our people and divinely predetermined. Anyone unable to deal with that needs to leave. Right now, or forfeit your life.” No one moved and Zee assumed the bigots had all been rooted out.

“Zithembe, they want you and your mate to know they’re always near. Listening and watching over you and this pride. They always will. You won’t see or hear them, but they are there. We are their people and together we are one.”

The splendid black creature then reciprocated their gesture by bowing his enormous head before Zee and Luka. Call him crazy, but Zee couldn’t resist. He carefully reached out and locked his fingers in the coal-black mane, the texture amazingly soft against his palms and his face when he leaned against the warmth. As the lion breathed out, Zee made out a soft purr-like sound. The enormity of the gift of acceptance and respect from these wild animals combined with the overload of adrenaline of the last few days and turned him into a sap. Before he knew what happened, tears ran down his cheeks into the thick fur he held close.

Around him, in true African spirit the people wept, rejoiced, and clapped in elation. The big cat lay down by Zee and Luka’s knees.

“Okay, people. This show is over. The meeting is dismissed.” The group reluctantly broke up and started wandering off in the direction of their dwellings. And still the black cats remained until only the royal couple, Zee and Luka, and Ben, Marcus and Jacob remained.

“Thank you for coming here this evening. No one who witnessed the events tonight would ever doubt my son and his mate again.”

Simba rose and made his way to where he had first appeared from the trees. “Ngiyabonga. Hambani kahle.” *Thank you. Go well.* The king spoke for the tribe as all the lions left quietly, almost in silence as if they’d never even been there.

The single big roar echoed in the darkness moments later. Zee smiled. They would be back.

One day.

Chapter 12

Unable to sleep, Zee left their bed, moving quietly to not disturb Luka, who slept soundly next to him after their eventful night. For some reason the adrenaline still burned in his veins and only afforded him a couple of hours sleep before waking him up.

He padded barefoot into the bathroom and grabbed a towel and his swimming shorts from where he'd hung them out to dry. In the lounge he pulled them on, the fabric slightly damp against his heated skin. The humid night air clung to him, so he hoped a dip in the pool would cool him off, or drain him enough to get some decent sleep.

On his way to the gated pool area, he found the place completely deserted. He let himself in and dropped his towel on a lounge in the darkest shadows. Entering the pool by the shallow end, he slowly immersed himself by walking down the gradually declining bottom. The light from the moon turned the surface into liquid silver and ripples formed as his body waded through. Eventually he couldn't stand anymore and ducked underneath, enjoying the rush of coolness over his scalp.

Using the capacity of his strong lungs, he spent some time underwater to swim laps, only surfacing to breathe, turn around and head in the opposite direction. Lost in the sensation of the stillness below the surface and the gliding pressure against his skin, he only became aware someone else had joined him when big hands gripped his hips. A touch he recognized.

They surfaced together, Luka with a smile, which disappeared as Zee attacked his lips the moment they cleared water—kissing the grin off them. Luka ought to know Zee teetered on the edge of harshness. In one day, one man had almost succeeded in taking everything he valued from him—made Zee doubt his ability to stop him. He would've lost his parents, his friends, his people, his lover and his life. His respect and honour. His lion wouldn't settle down—the anger at letting his enemy get away, too overwhelming to process.

Luka met him head-on while their hands frantically pushed down the confining swim shorts. Luka wrapped his thick arms around Zee's back, drawing Zee's legs to wrap around his Luka's waist. His fingers probed Zee's anus as he walked them towards the shallow end, where he lowered them to the ground, with Zee on his lap.

Zee ground his raging hard-on against Luka's ridged abs, but wanted more. His desire to take, conquer and own made him frantic. He pulled Luka's tongue into his mouth and sucked on the thickness, nipping and licking at his lips. Gripping Luka's head between his hands, he painted wet kisses along the strong cords in his neck, marking his man.

Pushing Luka up into shallower water, he encouraged him to lie back against the bottom. Luka's nipples beckoned him. Using his teeth to torment them, Zee heard Luka gasp and felt his bodily shudder, but Zee hungered for more. Sitting up, he grabbed Luka by the shoulder and pushed him over. He parted Luka's thighs before climbing between them.

"Up!" he growled, pulling on Luka's hips until his lover's ass lifted into the air where he wanted it. Pulling Luka's muscled cheeks apart, Zee dove in. Luka moaned where he leaned on his forearms, the rumble echoing in the quiet, but the only other sounds Zee heard were those of crickets and frogs. Dragging his tongue over Luka's hole, he wet the entrance thoroughly, humming his pleasure. When the taut muscle gave way, Zee pushed through—pointed his tongue and fucked Luka with short, deep stabs.

"I can't take much of this, Zee. Too good." Luka gasped his pleasure.

"Don't you dare come," Zee almost snarled.

He rubbed his thumbs around the perimeter, slowly exerting pressure until gradually, they both slid in beside his tongue. He pulled outwards with his fingers, stretching Luka's opening further, lightly nipping on the surrounding skin with his teeth.

"Fuck! Zee!" The desperation in Luka's grunt drove him wild.

Sitting up, he gripped his cock and lined up and started to push into the ready warmth, the cool water lapping at his ankles. For a moment he caught himself, comprehending his intentions. He stopped.

"Shit! I'm sorry, Luka. Can't take you like this out here in the open. No lube either," he mumbled almost drunkenly.

"Forget sorry, Zee. I fucked you out in the bush too, there's no one here. I knew you needed this tonight and I came to you. I'm wet and more ready than I'll ever be. Do it!"

Zee didn't wait to be asked twice. He lodged the head of his cock in place and applied the necessary pressure to breach Luka's ass. Once past the tightest part, he slid home, bottoming out when his hips touched Luka's cool skin. The

heat he buried himself in contrasted deliciously with the cool liquid they crouched in.

Luka sighed in bliss. "So bloody good." He pushed back against Zee, asking for movement.

Zee indulged him—pulled back before slamming back in, their flesh connecting at the impact. Luka cursed and braced himself.

"Like that?" Zee asked.

"Yeah. Give it to me," Luka moaned.

The words ended, and the mating took over. Zee made love to Luka as he'd never done before in his life. He used his blunt nails and dragged them down Luka's pale back while he rammed into him from behind. Reaching below their bodies, he fondled and squeezed Luka's balls in his hand, rolling the globes in his palm. Remembering their conversation from a few days back, he parted Luka's ass cheeks, his superior eyesight affording him the best view even by moonlight.

His thick black erection glistened where he shuttled back and forth into Luka's pale-pink flesh—the sexiest thing ever and a serious kink. The contrast drove him insane with lust. Only one thing could make the image better—his cum dribbling from the opening. So, he set about making it happen.

Hearing Luka express his pleasure at the rough handling, Zee knew he could never hurt him, so he let go and went with instinct. Angling his hips on the next thrust, he grinned when Luka swore under his breath. *Hello prostate!* Keeping the position, he kept up his movements, enjoying the tight grip Luka's channel had on his dick.

Feeling the tingles coming up his legs and hearing Luka's moans, Zee knew he couldn't last much longer. He pulled Luka up with two arms under his shoulders so they kneeled back to front, ramming Luka the whole time. Reaching around, he took Luka's cock in his right hand and stroked its hardness in time with his pumps. He knotted the fingers of his other hand in the long hair at Luka's nape and bared the right side of his neck.

His orgasm burst over him as he bit into the strong muscle at the back of Luka's neck. Further below, he buried his cock deep as his balls emptied their load deep into Luka's contracting channel. In front of their bodies, warmth flowed over his fingers as Luka came, his soul-deep groan resonating in the courtyard around them.

As he came down from the pheromone high, Zee retracted his fangs and soothed the wounds with his tongue. Luka shuddered in his arms, his breathing uneven as he grinded his ass back against Zee's hips, wringing every last drop from Zee's dick.

Luka pulled off.

"Wait!" Zee held Luka still, watching his seed dribble out of Luka's ass to run down his thighs. "Damn! That's so hot!"

Luka turned around, wrapping his arms around Zee. Sighing, he laid his head on Luka's shoulder. "Thank you for being what I needed tonight."

"You did exactly what I wanted you to, but anytime you need to vent, I'm here. Whatever you desire. Anytime. Anywhere. I can handle it." Luka kissed him hard and deep, their sighs of satisfaction mingling as their hearts followed.

With their knees a bit stiff, they awkwardly helped each other up, chuckling at the discomfort. "You're shameless," Luka teased. "In the public swimming pool. Tsk, tsk."

"Haha! Pot meet kettle." Zee snorted. Luka swam into the pool like a fish, retrieving their shorts where they drifted on top of the water. After wringing them out, they wrapped towels around their waists and slowly wandered home.

Their future together overflowed with promises, but Zee knew they couldn't forget the battle of the day before. Hate and greed were powerful motivations for people like Frank and his buddies. Would he try again? Who knew, but whatever tomorrow brought they would fight.

Together.

In the shadows cast by the trees, Ben watched Zee make rough love to his mate. He obviously hadn't been the only one unable to sleep after their exciting day. Taking a walk in the cool evening air had seemed like a great idea to burn off some steam, until he came around the corner and walked in on his friends' wild bout of sex.

He should leave, but found himself rooted to the spot—unable to look aside from the hot display a few feet away. Watching Luka take the pounding Zee dished out turned Ben inside out. As a gay man, he had always harboured the hope he would be gifted with a mate of his own one day.

Leaning back against the tree trunk behind him, his presence masked, Ben pushed down his the elastic waist of his pants and exposed his cock. Watching

Zee slam into Luka's body, Ben imagined himself to be on the receiving end of said pounding—a nameless, faceless stranger giving it to him from behind. The vision flashing before his mind's eye almost pulled him out of his orgasm, the weirdness and timing couldn't have been more wrong. A thick slice of white bread, slathered in butter while golden syrup drizzled onto it from above. Completely disappointed in his interrupted orgasm, he tucked his sticky dick back in, grimacing in confusion.

“What the fuck?”

The End

Author Bio

Vona Logan grew up in South Africa and has always been a romantic at heart. Then one day a whole new world opened up to her when she sneaked off with one of her mother's Mills & Boons. Her love for reading was born and continued to grow until about two years ago when she discovered the world of m/m writing for the first time. Always on the backburner, her desire to write her own love stories ignited and wouldn't be silenced. So, she wrote her first short story in 2012 and her dream became a reality.

Vona lives in stunning New Zealand with the man of her dreams, a bunch of busy kids, four cats, a dog, and too many guinea pigs to even start counting.

Contact & Media Info

You can visit Vona's blog or find her on Facebook.

[Blog](#) | [Facebook](#)

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NEVER CRY WOLF

By Phoebe Sean

Photo Description

A man is naked, on his stomach on the floor, bound by thick rope in intricate knots, with his legs and arms stretched back, tied with the rope wrapped many times to keep him still. He is also gagged.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Never thought I'd be here at this phase of my life, chasing mice or bats or whatever the hell it is making that noise behind these industrial building walls. But there's nothing wrong with pest control, so my grandmother tells me.

The creatures making all the racket tonight are elusive. If I don't take care of this tonight they'll find another company so this is it. Turned around in the dark room I trip over something on the floor and hit a wall hard and flail as it crumbles and I fall face first inside. I scramble to find my flashlight and when I do I find this. A nude man bound hand and foot face down on the floor. I don't know who he is but I have to help. I know he doesn't deserve to be imprisoned in this room and tied this way.

Or does he?

No dub-con, rape, torture, etc. No bed hopping Looking for something paranormal or with a little paranormal flair. The tied man can be an MC or not. And would like the guys to be older, at least thirty-five. Heat level, your choice.

Sincerely,

Issa

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: werewolf, Montreal, soulmates/bonded, blue collar, homophobia, pack politics

Word Count: 32,353

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Dedication

To Dominic and Frédérique, as promised.

To Philippe.

And to Issa, thanks for the prompt. Hope you like it.

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NEVER CRY WOLF

By Phoebe Sean

Chapter 1

“Shit, it’s cold,” I mumbled as I parked my truck behind the construction site. March in Montreal is never warm, but this year was particularly cold and it was getting us behind schedule.

Four o’clock in the morning was brutal, but in this weather it was insane. I had to take my glove off to turn the key in the padlock, and my fingers froze numb in two seconds.

I had to check those traps before the other guys came into work at six. I could’ve asked one of the younger guys but, as foreman, I thought it’d be pretty lame to get them to do the shitty job of exterminating our little friends—if there were any—before we closed the walls, so here I was, freezing my balls off. There was no one to warm my bed or wait for me anyway.

Closing the door behind me as quickly as possible, I stopped for a second to get my bearings and turn my flashlight on. I couldn’t see a thing, but I could hear something. Grunting? Mice didn’t grunt, did they? Rats or raccoons, on the other hand, who knew...? Sweeping the beam of light around, my boot caught on a wire or something, and I stumbled right into a piece of drywall that had been put there temporarily. I just remembered its presence as I fell with it and landed in what would be the next room. My flashlight flew out of my hand and switched off. The racket it created echoed in the skeleton construction. Dust and crud flew up my nose and made me sneeze.

“Fucking fuck!” Yeah, I know, my vocabulary is remarkable.

As I lay there catching my breath, the grunting seemed much closer. Since meeting grunting rodents was not on my bucket list, I fumbled until I found my flashlight and clicked it back on.

The grunting got louder as I turned around to the most unexpected vision on a construction site at four in the morning.

I heard a gasp and knew it was mine, because the guy tied up on the ground had a gag in his mouth and was wearing a blindfold.

“Guess I found the source for the grunting noises.” All thoughts of killing rodents vanished. I bent down and removed his blindfold.

The most beautiful pale brown, almost golden eyes I had ever seen were throwing daggers at me. If looks could kill...

I admit I was completely frozen in place. It's not just that the guy was tied up. It was the intricate rope work holding him immobile that was worth a closer look. Thick rope was keeping him on his stomach, wrapped four times over, starting from his neck then tied in complicated knots, reaching both his arms, maintaining them tightly behind his back, going under him at the hips and coming up to wrap around his legs, bent at the knees, all the way to his ankles stretched over his back and ass. The rope was coiled around his limbs many times before continuing on its journey all over his body, which was just muscle and more muscle.

Oh yeah, did I mention he was stark-naked? What the hell was I interrupting?

His grunting and angry stare got me to refocus on the situation. I removed the gag.

The man spat out, "Get me the fuck outta here!" Then, like an afterthought, he added, "Who sent you?"

"No one sent me! What about you? Are you hurt? Should I call the cops?" I asked, as I took my gloves off and reached for my knife. There weren't any visible injuries.

"No cops. Absolutely no cops. Just untie me," he grumbled. He stopped moving suddenly. It almost looked like he was sniffing my hand... I was suddenly overly conscious of the strawberry-scented soap I used. Not very manly, but too late for a second first impression. His eyes closed slowly, in pleasure or in pain, it was hard to tell.

"What the hell are you doing here? Who did this to you? Should I call someone?" I was working on cutting the rope but it was really thick, the kind used for mooring small boats. His body should've been cold, but his skin was hot, like the blood coursing underneath was boiling. His skin was burning me. He couldn't have been there long.

"Never mind, just get me free so I can get the hell outta here. You never saw me, you understand?" he said, his voice rasping and his eyes hard.

"What are you doing here?" I asked one more time. The rope across his back was finally cut enough that he could free his arms. He immediately put his hands on the floor near his shoulders and yanked himself up and twisted so he was sitting. He grabbed my knife from my hands—"Hey!"—and cut his feet free.

“You never saw me, got it? I was already gone when you got here,” he said through gritted teeth.

In a second he was standing up, throwing the knife down, his package right in my face—fuck me—before he spun around and ran for the door. “I wish I could stay, but...” he called over this shoulder.

“Wait! You’ll freeze!” I yelled as I got up and started after him. The door slammed behind him before I reached the entrance. When I opened the door, he was gone. Vanished. I stepped out and looked around. The street was empty. It was dark but the streetlamps were still on at this hour. I walked behind the building to the alley, but all I saw was a big dog running at the other end. The guy was really gone.

I stood there, wondering what the hell had just happened.

The bitter cold got me back into the building. I went to the small room and wondered what to do with the rope. Should I get rid of it? Show it to my boss when he came in?

Should I call the police? And tell them what? This gorgeous guy was tied up on the floor and when I cut him free, he ran outside naked at minus twenty-two degrees and vanished into thin air? Yeah, right.

There was no way the guy could survive in this weather more than a few minutes without suffering at least major frostbite. My gut churned as I went back out to my truck. I drove around the neighborhood for fifteen minutes, slowing down at cramped spaces in alleyways in case hypothermia had set in and he had taken refuge somewhere against the wind. Nothing.

Maybe he lived somewhere nearby. Maybe this was a stupid prank. But the guy wasn’t college-age. He was close to my age, early thirties at least. You don’t play stupid pranks on your friends at that age, not if you’re smart or experienced enough to know he could have seriously suffered in this cold. The heating appliances we kept in the building were turned off during the night. And why was I even worried about a perfect stranger?

I went back to work; there wasn’t anything I could do for the guy now. Although getting his number would have been nice. The man was simply beautiful and there was a chance his eyes were even more breathtaking when they weren’t spewing pure rage. I would’ve liked the opportunity to see for myself.

At least I got fodder for the next few whacking off sessions.

Once back in the building, I went in search of the rodent traps I had set the night before. A couple of mice had bit the dust, pun intended. We'd be able to close the walls later today.

I was in the back of the building when I heard someone come in. It wasn't even five yet. Who was here this early?

I stopped in my tracks when I heard what sounded like my boss George whisper, "Where the fuck is he?"

Someone answered, "He's gone, the rope's cut."

"Ssshhh, Tom's truck's outside, moron," George whispered. Then much louder, "Tom? You in here?"

Well, I couldn't very well hide, now could I?

"George? Is that you?" I yelled as I walked toward them. I heard the front door close. When I got to the entrance, George was alone.

"Starting pretty early this morning?" he asked with a tight smile.

I held up the two traps. "Thought I'd clear these away before the other guys came in. What are you doing here?"

"I was gonna do the same thing," he answered flatly.

We both knew that was a lie. No way the contractor was gonna get up at four-thirty in the morning to come clean up vermin. That was my job. Plus, as far as I knew, George hadn't even known I'd set traps the night before. He could have guessed, it had had to be done, but I doubted it.

"Say, do you know what happened to this wall here?" he asked, pointing to the fallen drywall.

"No, it was like that when I came in." The lie just flowed from my lips. The image of those amber eyes telling me I'd never seen them was still at the forefront of my mind. I walked over to the broken drywall when George took a step toward it, blocking me.

"Don't worry about it, I'll take care of it. In fact, I'll get whoever's responsible for leaving it there to clean it up. Why don't you go get us some coffees while I turn on the heat?"

"Sure, let me just get rid of these," I said, holding up the traps with the dead mice splattered on them. I threw the traps in the container in the alley.

I got in my truck feeling odd, scared even. George obviously had something to do with the tied-up guy and his accomplice had taken off before I had gotten to the entrance. I drove to the Second Cup a couple of blocks over.

As I washed my hands in the coffee shop washroom, I went through the events.

Someone had tied up a guy, taking great care in the knots so it would have been impossible for him to get free or even to move around. The guy had disappeared in minus twenty-degree weather without clothes or shoes. And he specifically told me not to tell anyone I had seen him or to call the cops. Hence my lie to George after he and someone whose voice I didn't hear enough to recognize came in looking for him. Maybe George was part of some weird BDSM sex club that dealt with ropes and stuff. Not my thing, but who am I to judge? Then again, why bring a member to the construction site? Didn't they have private, secure places for that? And there was that question—who sent you; not who are you.

I could just bet the rope cuttings would be gone by the time I returned to the site with the coffees.

I was right. When I handed George his double espresso latte, the room next to the entrance had been cleaned of any evidence that there ever was a man tied up like a pretzel in there.

The guys started trickling in around six and we were very busy the whole day. I didn't think of Mr. Mystery again until I left around four that afternoon. I was exhausted, but I had promised my grandmother I'd visit her after work that day.

Chapter 2

Grandma was in her room watching television. Her smile when she saw me always made my day a whole lot better, and today was no exception. She always made me feel like a star. Her star.

“Hey there sweetie, come in,” she said, holding her hand out.

I took her small, wrinkled, and cold fingers in mine and bent to kiss her weathered cheek. The television was put on mute.

“Hi, Grandma. How’s it going today?”

“I’m fine, can’t complain. Well, I could but it would cost too much,” she said. It’s something she said all the time, and I had never heard anyone say it except her in all my life; I wasn’t even sure what it meant. She smiled, her front tooth long since broken from biting into an ill-intentioned baguette.

“So what brings you out here in this bad weather? You look tired,” she said, frowning.

I took a seat on her bed, the only other flat surface in her small room.

“I wanted to say hi, and yeah, I’m tired. I went in at four this morning.”

“Four!? What’s that boss of yours thinking making you go in that early? Aren’t you unionized? You should file a complaint!” Of course, Grandma would presume that my boss forced me to go in at four a.m.

“I went in on my own, Grandma.” Sadly, that didn’t seem to make her happier. In fact, she looked downright disappointed.

“Oh. Well. If you’re crazy enough to get up in the middle of the night to go to work... you need a life.”

“I had to set traps for rats, we’re putting up the walls.”

“Oh... well, in that case, there’s nothing wrong with pest control,” she said, smiling.

“Strange thing happened—I found a naked man tied up on the floor.”

That got her attention. Thought she’d get a kick out of it.

Her head swiveled towards me, eyes wide, muted television forgotten.

“What? What do you mean a naked man tied up?”

“Just what I said. I untied him and he took off running. Told me not to call the cops or say anything to anyone.”

“Tommy! That’s terrible! You called the police?”

“No. Look, the guy was okay, he ran away and I even tried to find him and he was nowhere. I’m sure he’s fine. Probably a joke someone played on him. Maybe I even busted the joke; maybe the pranksters meant for him to be found by a bunch of construction guys at six. Who knows? Don’t worry. He was probably just embarrassed at being found naked.”

“Hmmm...” She pondered this for a few seconds. “Still, maybe the cops should know. Just file a report? He could’ve died of cold!”

“Well, he was hot as hell when I cut the rope so he mustn’t have been there long. Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s fine.”

Then she turned to me with a twinkle in her eye. “So he was hot? Did you get a good look at his hiney?”

I laughed. “Grandma, seriously.”

“What? You’re not gettin’ any younger, Tommy. Neither am I for that matter. So tell an old woman about the naked guy you found this morning and give her some excitement,” she said, slapping me on the knee.

You had to give it to her. She was ninety-four, her only son, my dad, had passed away two years before, and she was stuck in this old folks’ home till her death. She hadn’t been able to walk on her own since she was ninety, she was confined to a wheelchair; although sometimes she liked to make the chair go forward with her feet as if she were walking. She couldn’t cook anymore either. I think she missed cooking more than walking. I sure did.

Her room was the standard in this privately owned and operated nursing home. All the furniture was hers, but she had a private bathroom equipped for her wheelchair. When I moved her from the house where I grew up and my dad lived until his death, she’d been eating cake all day and couldn’t go out anymore. Her health had failed slowly but surely, and there weren’t any renovations done throughout the years to accommodate her changing needs. I knew she was well taken care of in this place, but I would have preferred to keep her with me. Unfortunately, I couldn’t be with her all day and I lived on the top floor of a duplex I had renovated myself.

She had been my rock through the years. I could do no wrong as far as she was concerned so when I came out as gay, she was my champion. My father... not so much.

“He had the palest amber eyes I’ve ever seen, Grandma. He was beautiful. And yes, his hiney was fantastic,” I told her.

She was smiling with her mouth open, hanging on my every word.

“Do you think you’ll see him again?” She sounded almost wistful.

“Probably not. After his ordeal this morning, he won’t be hanging around the site anytime soon.”

We kept chatting until she got tired. I left her to her evening activities: dinner in the dining room, a bath, more television until bedtime, a prayer thrown in there for good conscience.

I couldn’t wait to get home when I left Grandma’s. The temperature had warmed up a bit during the day, but it was back to disappearing-dick weather by nightfall. I had to scrape the windows on the truck before I could leave, everything was frosted. With the heat set to defrost on high and my hat down to my lashes, I drove home.

I lived in the Mile-End borough of Montreal. I had bought the second floor of a duplex and renovated it myself. I was proud of my work. The original moldings and tiles could be saved so it kept some of its charm. I had tried to design a kitchen that would blend in with the rest of the apartment, but the bathroom was all new. I had had to gut it out and was pretty happy with the large bathtub I had fit in. It was large enough for two people. Maybe someday I’d meet the man who’d share it with me.

I parked my truck and got out. The bitter wind whipped my face and made my nose hair feel crisp when I breathed. I started up the steps to my apartment when I heard a grunt. What the fuck? I was having auditory hallucinations. Then I heard a soft “Excuse me.”

Through the stairs, between the staircase and the house, peering up at me, were the most beautiful amber eyes I’d ever seen. The same exact amber eyes I’d seen that morning. I was face to face with Mystery Man, crouched behind the staircase among the snow and sparse bush branches, as naked as the day he was born but dirty with bits of crap in his hair. Steam was coming off his skin.

“I need your help,” he grumbled.

“What the fuck are you doing there? Where are your clothes? Who are you? Do you need a doctor?” Once they started, the questions just kept on coming.

“Look, I just need some clothes. I can’t get back to my apartment like this. Can you help me?”

I was contemplating how reasonable it would be to just throw him some clothes off my balcony. His testicles and cock were just hanging there, apparently impervious to the temperature. However, the size of my testicles told me we should get out of this cold and in the house.

Instead I said, "I'm calling the police." I was taking my glove off when he reached for my arm between the stairs, and I swear I felt the heat from his hand through my coat.

"No, no, no. No need for the police, everything's fine. I know you don't know me, but I'm not a bad guy. I just moved to Montreal and I don't know anyone. If you could spare some clothes and some water, I'd really appreciate it. Then I promise I'll leave."

"How did you find me?"

"I followed you from work."

"How? I think I would've noticed a naked guy running next to my truck."

"Look, I ran into some trouble that I wish I could explain, but right now I can't. It's freezing, you must be cold. Can we go up? I'll wait outside on the porch if you could just bring me some water and maybe some clothes."

It was dark but I could still see his features and his eyes didn't look like they were spewing hatred. In fact, they looked sincere and imploring.

It was minus twenty with the wind chill factor. This guy was naked standing in snow. I didn't know him and, as dangerous as letting a stranger in my house could be, I couldn't leave him out like that. For some reason, I felt I needed to help him. It's not like he could walk into a diner and ask to use the phone.

"Sure. Come on up. But I'm warning you, anything funny or out of the ordinary, I'm calling the cops." I started up my steps and heard him follow.

When we got to my porch, I opened the door, got in and said, "Come in."

"That's alright. I'll wait here." He put his hands on his hips, like it was a summer day and he was waiting for the bus.

"Don't be silly. Come on in so I can close the door." I turned on the exterior light. It startled him and he almost jumped in the entrance, as if to avoid the light. I knew he could see me ogling him but it couldn't be helped. He must've known what kind of impression he was making, showing up naked in this weather.

The entrance was suddenly very small. He took up a lot of room. This was a big man. Bigger than me and I'm six one.

I took off my winter gear and went to the kitchen. He followed. I turned on the cold water and, as I was reaching for a glass, he bent down and drank right from the tap with big slurping sounds.

His skin was covered with a sheen of sweat. He was tall and muscular and, in that position, I got a really good view of his ass. I felt a stirring in my boxers and was happy to have a long wool sweater hiding it. I had enough time to notice he had small scratches here and there, and his feet and hands were very dirty. Again, this weird need to take care of him crept up, and I held back from stroking his skin to soothe it.

When he was finished drinking, he stood and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand—yuck—and looked sheepish.

“Sorry. I was really thirsty.” He washed his hands, used the towel hanging from a hook on the cabinet door and kept it to hide his package.

“No shit. Where have you been since this morning? How come you didn't just go home?”

His eyes looked pained and he frowned.

“I was walking around and trying to keep warm until I could find some clothes but people don't hang their laundry out to dry in this weather. I hid in an alley, under a heating vent. I can't very well stroll in like this without getting arrested or shocking my neighbors. My stuff's still in my apartment. Once I get some clothes on I can ask my landlord to open my door for me.”

“Wait—you've been walking around Montreal naked since this morning? You should be dead, dude! At least some frostbite. But look at you. Apart from the dirt and scratches, you're fine! Not even white patches of skin!”

“I have a strong metabolism. Don't worry about it. Do you have any spare clothes? Maybe some shoes?”

He had to be lying, right? He couldn't be saying the truth, but for what it was worth, I believed him.

“How about a shower?” He could've really used one. He smelled of wet dog.

“I don't want to trouble you, and I really have to get back. It's okay, just some clothes and I'll be out of your way. When I get the chance, I'll bring 'em back clean.”

"I'm not worried about the clothes." I started for my bedroom so I yelled over my shoulder: "But you're really freaking me out, man. Fuck, does that mean you haven't eaten or drunk since this morning?" I had reached my bedroom but I turned back towards the kitchen. The guy had to be starving.

"I'll make some dinner. In the meantime, you want a snack?" I opened my fridge and looked through it.

"This is fine. Can I have some of this?" He asked, holding the Sugar Crisps box I had left on the counter this morning.

"Sure," I said looking around the kitchen. I grabbed a bowl and a spoon for him.

His eyes followed me around the room. He was almost smiling. It made me self-conscious. Did I put deodorant on this morning? Did I have stale breath?

He said, "It's okay, thanks. By the way, I'm Dylan. What's your name?"

I realized I hadn't introduced myself yet and here I was running around my kitchen trying to feed this guy. I turned towards him and stuck out my hand. "I'm Tom. Nice to meet you, Dylan." He shook my hand. Electricity shot through my arm all the way to my heart, which started pounding.

"Not that I don't appreciate the food, Tom, but I'm starting to be a little embarrassed standing in your kitchen without any clothes on," he said, staring into my eyes with a small smile.

He didn't look embarrassed one iota about his nudity. He was still holding my hand, like he didn't want to let go. I didn't either. His other hand was still protecting his modesty.

I thought he was running a fever his hand was so hot. I felt it all the way up my arm. His stare, however, was creating another kind of warmth in a lower region of my body. Thank goodness for extra layers.

"Yes, right. Well," I said, extracting my hand, "you probably know how to pour milk so I'll let you take care of that and I'll go get those clothes." I cleared my throat. I pulled milk out from the fridge and went to my bedroom. I felt his eyes on me until I walked through the door.

I stood in my bedroom for a few seconds trying to compose myself. A naked, attractive stranger was eating cereal in my kitchen. A naked stranger who should be dead or at least in hospital suffering from exposure and dehydration if his story was true. And what was wrong with me that my stomach had butterflies from a simple handshake?

I came back to the kitchen with a bunch of clothes in my arms and found him leaning on my counter, eating his cereal like it was the best meal he'd ever had. I stopped and stared. His muscles were so defined he must've worked out every day. His black hair was long, down to his shoulders, and wavy, streaked with gray—no, not gray, shiny silver strands. Straight nose, high cheekbones and full lips. The towel was gone, back on its hook. I made a mental note to put it in the laundry.

He turned toward me and stopped chewing. He was back to being completely nude. "Tom?" he asked, eyebrows raised. I was staring. The guy had no shame.

"Yeah, sorry. Here, these might be tight but at least they'll keep you warm," I said, dumping the clothes on a chair.

"I'm sure they're fine. Thanks a lot. I owe you," he said, finishing his meager meal.

He came around the counter and picked through the clothes. He started with the socks—funny, I would've started with the boxers—then the underwear, the jogging pants, the Henley and finally the sweater which I could've sworn he sniffed before putting on. He sat to put on my old size thirteen running shoes and winced.

"Too small?" I asked.

"A bit, but it's okay. I won't be wearing them for long." He put on both shoes and stood. I had also found an old jacket, a hat and gloves.

He shrugged into the jacket but left the rest. "I won't be needing the hat or gloves, but thanks."

"It's minus twenty something out there, Dylan. I won't miss them. You can take them," I said, trying to sound reassuring.

"Strong constitution. I don't get cold easily," he said, smiling. And what a beautiful smile it was. Now that he was dressed, Dylan's tension had eased noticeably.

"No shit. I'm still wondering how you're not frozen solid in an alley," I said. "Are you okay to get back to your place?"

"Yeah, I'll walk. Thanks."

I fished in my pocket and came up with three dollars. "Here, at least take the bus and metro. It'll go faster and you won't be in the cold too long. I

know,” I said quickly as I saw he was starting to protest, “you don’t get cold easily. But still, no human in their right mind would walk when they could take a bus.” I got a smile for that.

“Okay, thanks. I’ll pay you back when I return the clothes,” he said, taking the money I was offering. I didn’t know what it was, but I was starting to like this guy. When he smiled, his eyes crinkled at the corners and it made him seem more approachable, not like when I had untied him and all that was coming off him was anger and fear. Speaking of which...

“Hey, can I ask how you ended up at the site tied up?”

Wrong question. His smile fell, then he caught himself and chuckled drily, “Oh, you know, just guys pulling a fast one on me. Don’t worry about it. Anyway, it would be better if no one knew I was here or that you saw me this morning. You don’t want to get involved.”

“You have to admit it looked weird,” I said as offhandedly as I could.

“Yeah, I know. Listen, I’m grateful for all you’ve done for me,” he said as he turned and strode to the front door. “Thanks again.”

And he was out of the apartment. Son of a bitch.

I rushed to the door and opened it to a gust of wind. “Hey! Wait! I’ll drive you to the metro,” I yelled, but he was already down the stairs and walking briskly.

“Thanks, Tom,” he yelled over his shoulder. He never stopped. I watched him disappear down the dark street, the steam from his breath vanishing quickly.

Chapter 3

The next morning when I got to work, George had a surprise for me.

“Tom, can you come see me in the office please?”

I had just gotten through the front door when I heard him call me. The site office was the room opposite to the one where Dylan had been tied up. We had put the walls up the day before.

I entered the office and Dylan was standing there with George. He was facing the door and his eyes went wide but his mouth was closed in a hard line. He looked worried and shot me what could hardly be interpreted as anything other than a warning. George was bent over the plans laid out on a long table. When he heard me, he looked up.

“Tom Colucci, this is Dylan Scott. He’ll be joining us from now on and I’d like you to show him around the site.”

“Welcome, Dylan. I’m Tom,” I said as I extended my hand toward him.

Tension seeped from his shoulders. Relief replaced the fear in his eyes.

“Good to meet you,” he mumbled as he shook my hand. That hotness again with accompanying tummy butterflies.

“I was thinking he could work with you today,” George said. Turning to Dylan, he added, “Would you mind giving us a minute?”

“Sure,” he said, and left.

George feigned looking at the plans but I could tell he wasn’t really paying attention to them.

“Tom, I want you to keep a close eye on Dylan. He’s new to town and I’m doing a friend a favor by hiring him, but we need to keep him on a tight leash. He’s going through some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Nothing illegal, and it’s got nothing to do with work, just some personal crap. Anyway, just let me know how he works out. He’s not in the union yet.”

So I was to babysit Dylan Scott, who only the morning before was trussed up in the next room. What the hell was he doing here?

I joined my team and we worked hard until the break at ten, at which time Dylan came to stand next to me, drinking from a huge coffee.

“Hey, thanks for not giving me away.” He was looking at his cup, not at me, being very discreet. He was standing maybe a foot from me, but I felt his energy like a vibration. He cut his eyes my way for a second and there was warmth there.

“Yeah, sure.” I was having my breakfast sandwich. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on? What you’re doing back here?”

“Nope.” And he walked away, smirking into his coffee, playfulness in his eyes. “As long as we don’t know each other, everything’ll be fine.”

I finished my sandwich and went back to work. During the lunch break, Dylan came to sit next to me. I did my best not to let on that we’d met before. I wanted to keep Dylan’s secret, whatever it was. Then his thigh rubbed against mine under the table and I almost jumped out of my seat. When I looked his way, he was just chewing his food, and the beginning of a smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. The bastard knew.

When we finished at four, I caught up to Dylan on his way out. “So how was your first day?”

“Okay.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. “I appreciate you showing me around, Tom,” he said.

“You want a lift?” I offered.

Dylan was walking towards George’s truck, head tucked down. He slowly turned around but kept walking backwards. “No, thanks, I have to leave with George.” He turned back towards George’s truck, but not before I caught a look of... longing maybe, in his eyes.

“See you tomorrow.”

I got in my truck. For the first time in a long time, it felt lonely.

I stopped by my grandmother’s place on my way home. She looked like she was napping in her chair, but when I came in, she opened one eye and, when she saw me, she perked up.

“Hello, my darling boy! What are you doing here?” I bent to kiss her cheek. “You’re so cold! Why don’t you go to the kitchen and get some coffee? I have biscuits here somewhere...” she said as she started to get up from her wheelchair, holding the blanket draped on her knees.

"I'm fine, Grandma, stop." Her piercing gaze scrutinized me to make sure I was truthful, and, satisfied, she sat down again.

"How's work?"

"Fine. We're close to lock-up, probably done by the end of the week. How are you?"

"I'm as good as can be. Although Mr. Tremblay from next door came in again today, thinking I was his wife. He started yelling at me that I wasn't ready to go to church and that I had to get a move on. Pfff. This place is going to hell in a handbasket. And the mashed potatoes at lunch were runny." She frowned and rubbed her forehead, then suddenly turned toward me, potatoes forgotten. "How was your day? Still cold out?"

"Yeah, it's cold, but getting milder. I think it's gonna snow. And remember that guy I was telling you about? Well, he was at my place last night when I got home, naked, said he followed me home"—here my grandmother's eyes went wide—"and asked to borrow clothes then took off. Now today, he's at the job site and George is putting him on my team, says I have to watch out for him. Nuts, right?"

"He was naked outside for a whole day? He must've been frozen! Why didn't you take him to the hospital?"

Under normal circumstances, that's what I would have done.

"That's the funny part. He was hot as hell"—Grandma smiled wide at this—"when I shook his hand," I said, putting emphasis on those last words, "and apart from being really thirsty and hungry, he seemed alright! And this morning, we acted like we didn't know each other and he worked with us all day and left with George. There's something fishy going on," I told her. "George is involved, but there doesn't seem to be any animosity between them."

"Now don't start any trouble. If the man is alright, then there's no reason for you to get involved more than you did. You gave him clothes, you did the right thing. It is strange, though, isn't it? Him just showing up at your place? How come he didn't have anywhere else to go?"

"He said he just moved here. And this morning, George said the guy was having some problems. My impression was that George was keeping an eye on him for some reason," I said. "And, Grandma, I am involved whether I want to or not. He came to my place, asked me not to tell anyone I'd seen him, and now he shows up at my work and I have to watch him all day."

Grandma thought about this a bit and then said, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No, why?"

She looked me in the eye and said, "There's something about this man, isn't there?"

I couldn't hold her stare. "I don't know. Yeah, there's something about him, but I don't know what it is. I just feel..." Words wouldn't come to finish that sentence. I was suddenly embarrassed. Why was I making such a big deal about it anyway?

"What's going on, Tommy?"

I fidgeted like a schoolboy and tried to make it look like I was getting more comfortable on her bed, which was impossible. I stared at the floor.

"I don't know what it is, but I feel like I have to watch over this guy. I know it sounds weird. I don't know why I even care," I said with a dry chuckle, "but I can't escape feeling like I should help him." I sighed. "Plus, he's really good-looking."

I finally looked at her again. My grandmother's eyebrows were raised and she was holding her chin in her hand.

"I see," was all she said.

I rolled my eyes. "And what is it you see?" I asked, smirking.

She smiled. "You like this man. Or at least he's affecting you," she added when I snapped my tongue at the word "like".

"I don't know him," I said, hoping she'd let it go, but without high expectations.

"How long has it been since Jeff?" she asked.

Jean-François, or Jeff as everyone called him, was my last steady boyfriend. We had met in a bar some years ago and stayed together six years. We lived together for five of those years before I left him. Not only was he not sad about my leaving, but he replaced me within three months. As far as I knew, he was still with that guy. Our breakup was no big deal to him. I was the one who was completely devastated to realize our relationship was unhealthy and had to end it, and I was heartbroken that he could find someone else so easily, so quickly, to take my place. Not that I thought I was so special, but it just made it more

obvious that he had never cared for me as I had cared for him. Not by a long shot.

“Four years,” I said, sighing deep and long. “But Jeff has nothing to do with this, Grandma.”

“Not Jeff personally, but it’s been four years and you haven’t let anyone in. I know you go out sometimes, but you haven’t talked about a man in a long time. You even have a gleam in your eye, Tommy. You didn’t even have that for Jeff,” she said with a warm smile. “This one’s special.”

I knew she cared about me and she was worried I’d be alone forever. So was I for that matter.

“What’s his name?” she asked abruptly.

“Dylan. Dylan Scott. Why?”

“Now I know what to call him, that’s all,” she said, still holding her chin in her hand, smiling. “I get the feeling I’ll hear more about him,” she said, giggling.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if he’s gay,” I said, but I had wondered if I affected him the way he affected me, if he felt our energies colliding like I did. He hadn’t talked to the other guys today, just kept mostly to himself except when he was talking to me or rubbing his thigh against mine under the table.

“Only one way to find out. Ask him out,” Grandma suggested.

“Are you nuts? That would just be weird. Hey, I saw you naked, would you like to go dancing? Yeah, right.” We laughed.

She said, “Tom, if you like this man, don’t let him slip through your fingers. Life is too short for regrets. The worst-case scenario is he’ll say no. Big deal. Then you move on. But at least you’ll know you gave it a shot.” She patted my arm with her frail, spotted hand. Her hands had cared for me, cooked for me, wiped my face, patted my cheeks and ruffled my hair my whole life. Her touch was kind, soothing. “Did you talk to Paul about him yet?” she asked.

“No, I haven’t heard from Paul this week.” Paul was my best friend and Grandma’s adopted grandchild.

“Talk to Paul, Tom.” She winked.

“Okay. I’ll think about it,” I answered. “I’m gonna go now. I’m hungry,” I said, regretting it right away. Her face fell.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Come, we’ll go to the kitchen and see if there’s something edible. I have biscuits somewhere here too. I might have some leftover chocolate from Christmas...” she rambled on, getting up stiffly and heading over to her bureau, putting her blanket aside.

“No, no, it’s okay. I’m fine. I just have to go make dinner.”

She turned toward me, sadness etching her face. I knew one of her biggest joys in life had been feeding me and she was in no shape to do it anymore, and I had just reminded her of that. I felt like an ass.

“Have a biscuit before you go, to tide you over,” she said, turning back to her bureau. I let her find the biscuits and ate three, to make her happy. As I dusted the crumbs off her bed, she smiled. “Better?” she asked.

“Oh yeah. I’m good now.” And so was she.

Chapter 4

I was exhausted when I got home around five. I hate March. It's the last official winter month, but the cold weather doesn't let up until at least mid-April, and every year I get fed up with the cold and the snow. Before Christmas, fine. After Christmas, they can take it all away. At least the days were getting longer.

That night, big fat snowflakes were falling, giving Montreal a white, new coat. The fresh snow covered the dirty, uneven snow mounds left over from the previous snowfall, like a clean canvas. The light reflecting on the flakes made them look like they were peppered with diamond dust. It was pretty, but I was still sick of it. My boots made a crunching sound on the stairs, the only noise on the quiet street at this hour. Snow meant milder temperatures, followed by a cold front the next day or two.

I banged the snow off my boots on the door frame and entered my apartment. It seemed lonely tonight. I was usually pretty happy with my routine of work, grandmother and home, but tonight the apartment felt unusually empty. There had been a large presence warming it last night, and I caught myself longing for it.

I thought maybe I could ask him out, like Grandma had suggested. There would be three possible scenarios. If he were straight, I'd know right away. If he were homophobic, I'd get the shit kicked out of me. If he were gay, maybe he'd consider going for a beer. I know we could've gone for a beer whether he was straight or gay, but I wanted to take him to the Village and if he were straight, he'd probably be uncomfortable.

The Gay Village in Montreal was a great place to go out, but not to live as far as I was concerned. It had become very trendy for gays, but was still a trashy neighborhood in an old part of downtown Montreal. The more southeast you went, the trashier it became. It was the perfect place to make out with your boyfriend on the street though. No one would look twice, apart from a few tourists perhaps.

While in the shower, I was thinking about the last time I'd gone out in the Village, and those thoughts led to Dylan. Was he gay? If so, was he available? Would I be his type? My soapy hands strayed from my chest to my growing cock. He was certainly my type. Quiet, discreet, gorgeous. I closed my eyes and

imagined they were his hands on me. His big, hot, calloused hands. The left one would stroke my abs, go up to my nipples and pinch them, the other would pump my cock slowly, sensuously, expertly. His lips would graze my neck from behind. His breath would tickle my ear. His dick heavy with desire would rub between my butt cheeks...

Semen shot out in ribbons on the tiles in front of me, like I was sixteen again. A fantastic orgasm ripped me apart like wildfire. I had to hold on to the wall not to fall, my legs had turned to mush.

After my shower, I watched the news with a plate of steak and grilled vegetables on my lap. I heard crunching noises on my steps and went to see who was coming up. When I reached the entrance, something banged on the door and the crunching noises receded. I opened the door to see Dylan going down the steps. He turned when he heard me.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't want to disturb you." He motioned with his hand. "I left your clothes and three bucks in the bag."

I turned and saw a full plastic bag hanging from the doorknob.

"You didn't have to do that. It could've waited until tomorrow at work," I said.

Dylan stood on the stairs. "I won't be working there anymore."

I was cold, holding the door open, but I didn't want him to leave. "Do you want to come in? You came all this way," I said, trying not to sound too desperate.

"I'm sure you're busy. I don't want to intrude," he said. He had reached the sidewalk. He was going to run from me again. For the third time.

"I'm not busy, in fact, I'd like the company," I said, epically failing at not sounding desperate.

He smiled. He thought about it a couple of seconds, which seemed like a year to me. "Okay, just for a minute," he said, coming back up.

I welcomed him in my home, this time dressed.

I got him settled on the couch with a beer in no time. I sat across from him in my favorite chair. From this viewpoint, I could observe him all I wanted. I found he fit nicely in my place. A flannel shirt covered a T-shirt that molded his pecs superbly. His strong thighs were encased in worn jeans. He sat comfortably, legs stretched out, arm on top of the couch.

Dylan commented on my apartment, I told him about the renovations I'd done and he complimented me on my work. He drank his beer slowly.

"You live alone?" he asked me.

"Yes. You?"

"Yeah." He took a sip of beer.

"You said you hadn't been in Montreal for long."

"I moved from Colorado a couple of weeks ago. Found a small apartment near the Beaudry metro station. When I get a decent job, I'll move."

Interesting. Beaudry station was right in the Gay Village. Did he want to move because he'd realized he was living in a gay community or because his apartment was too small?

"How come you're not working with us anymore?" I asked.

Dylan starting ripping the label off the beer bottle, a habit I usually thought was juvenile and messy but funny enough, was fine with me when it was Dylan doing it.

"George didn't need me after all," he said, his head down, looking at me through the hair falling in his eyes. "Have you been working with him for long?"

"Three years."

"Is he a good boss?"

I thought about it for a couple of seconds. George could be abrupt and demanding but if you did your job well, he was satisfied. "Yeah, I guess. How do you know him?"

"A... mutual friend from back home recommended me to George and he's been watching over me since I got here, making sure I settle in alright."

What was that hesitation? Was the person a friend or not? Then it struck me—this person was perhaps part of the peculiar sex club Dylan and George were members of.

"So have you?" I asked. Dylan seemed lost in thought. He focused back to our conversation and lifted his eyebrows, like he hadn't heard my question. "Have you settled in alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have a place to live, even if it's pretty small. I was hoping to work with George but that didn't pan out."

“What are you going to do now? Do you have something else lined up?”

He readjusted himself on the couch, scratching his throat loudly. Was I being intrusive? I took a pull from my beer and waited.

Finally, he said, “I’ll find something. I’m good with my hands.”

That look through the hair again. Was there subtext to go with those words? Wishful thinking on my part most likely.

“What did you do back in Colorado?”

“I worked in construction mostly. I’m gonna have to go through the steps to get recognized by the SCQ which should take a few months. I was a bartender for a while when I was younger, maybe I could find something like that for now.” The SCQ was the Syndicat de Construction du Québec, the provincial construction union. There were many criteria to meet in order to work in construction in Quebec.

“Do you speak any French? You’d need at least the basics to work in a bar in Montreal, unless you find something in an English neighborhood like Montreal West or NDG.”

“NDG?”

“Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. It’s on the other side of the mountain.”

“Oh yeah! I remember reading about that when I was looking for a place in Montreal when I was still in Denver. It’s mostly English-speaking, right?”

“Right. But if you researched Montreal before coming, how did you end up near Beaudry?”

Dylan leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “Because I’m gay and I read that’s where the gay community lives in Montreal.” He let that sink in for a moment then asked, “I’m guessing this doesn’t surprise you?”

My stomach had lifted in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I managed to articulate, “Pfff... Takes one to know one.”

His lips lifted at the corners in a crooked smile. “I know,” he said, smirking.

“Are you saying I look gay?”

“You look fine.” When my eyebrows went up, he added, “I just sensed it.”

My heart was having a boxing match with my ribs. He was gay, that was a good thing, right? Only now, I couldn’t ignore my attraction anymore.

He finished his beer and put the bottle down on the coffee table. "I should go. Thanks for the beer," he said, standing.

"You don't have to go," I said.

"Yeah, I do," he said with regret in his voice. His back was to me so maybe I was imagining it.

I followed him to the door. As he was putting his coat on, his scent wafted my way, a mix of outdoors, snow and what probably was his own musky, clean smell. There was an underlying fresh-cut grass and sun-baked dog fur odor too, not at all unpleasant.

Dylan held his hand out. "Thanks," he almost whispered. As we shook hands, our eyes met and the current between us was there again. His strong, warm fingers were holding my hand tightly, like they didn't want to let go.

He pulled me to him, his eyes on mine still, and our bodies lined up, almost touching. There was heat emanating from his body. Time stood still. I heard a growl that appeared to come from deep in his chest.

"Dylan, did you just... growl?" I whispered, our faces only a couple of inches apart. His eyes went wide, and a blush crept up his cheeks as he suddenly let go of my hand and took a step back. My body missed his heat right away.

He coughed and thumped his chest with a fist, looking away from me, unexpectedly shy after that display. "Sorry. Must be catching something," he grumbled. He turned, opened the door and was out in a second. "See you around," he said over his shoulder. I thought I heard "I hope" after that, but maybe it was just my imagination.

I went to stand in the doorway and watched him leave. "Yeah, take care."

He was gone. As I got back in my apartment and closed the door, I realized I didn't have his phone number or any way of contacting him. I knew his full name at least and I could probably track him down, but we hadn't voluntarily exchanged numbers.

I suddenly felt very alone.

Time to call Paul.

Chapter 5

It was Friday night and we were standing near the bar at Club 80, drinks in hand—Heineken for me and a Cosmo for Paul—far enough away from the dance floor to still hear each other if we spoke near the other's ear. The music blaring from the wall-to-wall speakers in the back of the bar kept anyone around us from hearing our conversation.

Paul had been my best friend since sixth grade, when we realized we both had a crush on Martin Thibeault. This was not obvious until we almost got into a fist fight to be the one to protect Martin from getting a beating from another bigger kid. We forgot about Martin when he decided to rat everyone out and were friends ever since.

"So find him, it can't be that hard," Paul was saying.

"How? I don't know exactly where he lives and he probably doesn't have a landline. You can't find cell numbers."

"Ask George, he probably knows where to reach him," suggested Paul.

"Nope, not going there. There's something weird going on between those two and I'm not sure I want to get involved."

"Anything noteworthy happen when you guys worked together?"

"You mean besides my awkwardness? No, not really."

"Well, finish that beer and let's dance. We'll think of something later," Paul said, putting his empty glass on the bar on his way to the dance floor.

Paul loved to dance. Too bad he wasn't very good at it, but you had to give him points for going out there and shaking everything he had with such gusto and energy. Even when we were in high school, he never got laughed at because he was the one laughing the hardest and having the most fun.

The bass thumps made me confuse the music and my heartbeats. I didn't know if I was having palpitations or if Beyonce's "Single Ladies" was using my body as extra percussions. It was easy to get lost in the heat, the smell of sweat, the anticipation and the loud music.

Paul was twisting around, shaking his shoulders, slapping his hips, lifting a foot here, a knee there, and the more I laughed the worse it got. Guys around us either observed him as if he was another species or laughed with him. He was

engaging me in a raunchy two-step when his smile faltered as he saw something over my shoulder. His eyes had gotten wide when I yelled, "Dude! What's wrong?"

Paul stood on tiptoe to speak directly in my ear, "I don't know, but there's a big guy behind you that's staring at us and he looks like he wants to kill me." As he finished his sentence, I sensed him. I knew who was behind me. I turned my head, still in Paul's arms. I heard Paul mumble something that sounded like "Lemme guess..."

Dylan was standing on the dance floor, a forgotten beer dangling from his hand, arms away from his body, legs apart, chin forward, appearing ready to pounce. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought the emotion vibrating from him was jealousy, or even possession.

Paul let me go like I was suddenly covered in poison ivy. Facing Dylan, I waited, not moving. The music was still making the fillings in my back teeth vibrate, but all I could see and hear was Dylan. I sensed more than heard his growl. His nostrils had flared, and his jaw was clenched so tight I was worried we'd have to bring him to a mechanic to have it pried open.

He walked toward me, his eyes staring into mine, cutting through people dancing without an apology or an afterthought. At that moment, there was no confusion between my heart and the bass from the speakers—my heart was winning in the overbearing sound competition. I couldn't hear anything but my pulse. My mouth went dry.

Dylan stopped when his chest thumped mine and a tingling feeling started in my pecs and travelled all over to the tips of my hands, my toes, my nose. I had to look up to meet his stare. Even in the club's darkness, the golden shade of his irises was sharp and clear. I remember wondering at that moment if he wore contacts. "Who's that?" he said, his voice sounding like the purring of a Harley, still looking right at me. That, I heard.

"Uh... Hey, Dylan," I managed to say. I admit I was a little flustered at this display of alpha behavior—hovering between flattered and annoyed. Who was he to question who I was with, but then did that mean he cared?

"Who is that?" he asked again with that voice. "I thought you said you weren't dating anyone."

"I'm not. This is my friend Paul." I turned to Paul, who was just staring at Dylan, unmoving. I yelled, "Paul, this is Dylan."

"I guessed," Paul yelled over the music, still staring at Dylan. He bent to speak in my ear. "You weren't kidding. He is huge."

I turned to Dylan again, who was smirking slightly. There was no way he could've heard that comment. Still, he held out his hand to shake the one Paul was offering. "Nice to meet you, Paul. Tom and I are gonna leave now. Bye," he said. He didn't need to yell, his voice carried over the music. I looked over at Paul who mouthed "call me" with his index and pinky to his ear and mouth.

Dylan grabbed my hand, pivoted and pulled me toward the exit. After a few steps, I realized I was being dragged out by a guy who was possibly a member of a weird BDSM sex club and I was letting him. What the fuck was I doing?

"Hey! Hey! Dylan, wait!" I yelled, practically running behind him, trying but not succeeding in getting my hand back. He just kept walking, dodging people, making a path for me. We reached the coat check. Dylan finally let go of my hand to pull his ticket from his pocket.

"How come you're so sure I wanna leave with you?" I asked. His eyes went from his ticket to my face, the only part of his body in movement. The coat check attendant took his ticket from his hand without him reacting. My pulse had gone down to a more healthy rhythm and I felt more confident.

"Well, do you wanna leave with me?"

"Yes," I answered immediately, no forethought necessary. Of course I wanted to go with him. I had been thinking about him since he had left my apartment with my heart that other night. My body flushed as I realized this, standing at the coat check in a club next to the most interesting man I had met in a long time, probably my life.

He smiled that shy half-smile I was starting to love. "Good," he said.

When we were out of the club, Dylan started walking west. "This way," was all he said.

"Where are we going?"

"My place. It's close."

Nervous butterflies flew to my stomach. He was taking me home. How smart was it for me to go to a stranger's house in the middle of the night? Maybe he just wanted a one-night stand. Maybe he wanted to tie me up to his bed and torture me until morning. Was I ready for that?

I had had my share of meaningless sex since Jeff. Guys I hooked up with in bars or in the club, mostly quick blow jobs in the john or hand jobs in the alley in summer. I never went to someone's home and I never invited them to mine. Sometimes, if the guy seemed nice, I'd take him to a rooming house nearby and rent a cheap room for the night, but I never stayed till morning. Good, safe sex was all I needed. A cuddle was nice, but not necessary. At thirty-three, I was still active, but the need to come five times a day had gone, along with a bit of hair and the feeling of invincibility. I had been reckless in my late teens but was grateful I wasn't suffering from a deadly sexually transmitted disease and intended to keep it that way.

Our boots crunched the snow beneath our feet as we silently made our way to his apartment.

"Don't overthink it," Dylan said, cutting the silence.

"What do you mean?"

"I can feel you thinking if this is a bad move, if you're safe. Don't worry, I'd never hurt you."

We had been walking side by side, hunched down in our coats, looking straight ahead. When he said this, I looked at him. I believed him. He was watching me, warmth and care in his eyes. It was hard to swallow.

"It's just that I should tell you I'm not into any kinky stuff. If that's what you have in mind, I think we should call it a night." That wasn't so hard.

He looked confused. "Kinky stuff?"

I stopped in my tracks. He stopped too, turned to face me.

"You know, bondage, ropes, stuff like that. I don't judge people and whatever you do with George or anyone else is none of my business—"

Dylan cut me off. "What?" He started laughing. "Is that what you think?"

"Well, what would you think if you found someone tied up with complicated knots and shit?" I was miffed at being laughed at. My assumption was legitimate.

Dylan laughed some more. "And with George? Hell no!" He giggled a little then said, "Why bring George into this?"

"After you left he came to look for you with another guy. They were expecting you to be there, I guess." That stopped the hilarity.

“What other guy?” Dylan asked, suddenly very serious.

“I don’t know, I didn’t recognize his voice.”

“They saw you?” Now he looked worried.

“Yeah, I was in the building to collect traps when I found you. You took off in the cold, butt naked. I drove around to find you, make sure you were alright”—at this Dylan’s eyes got all warm and his expression softened—“and when I couldn’t find you, I went back in the building and took care of the pest control. I heard George and this guy come in, whispering that you weren’t there anymore, that the ropes were cut, then George told the guy to shut up, that my truck was outside and that’s when the guy left in a hurry. By the time I reached George, he was alone. I lied, told him I didn’t know why the piece of drywall had fallen. He got rid of me, sent me off for some coffee and by the time I came back, he had cleaned up the ropes. Now you know the whole story.”

Dylan had been listening to me attentively. When I finished my story, his gaze fell to the ground.

“And you didn’t recognize this guy with George?”

“Nope, although I could hardly hear him. Is everything alright, Dylan?”

He quickly looked up again, straight into my eyes. “Yes, everything’s fine now. Come on,” he said as he started walking again.

“Wait, what about the kink?” I asked, unmoving.

“No kink. Come on,” he said again, over his shoulder.

I caught up to him and we walked in silence the rest of the way.

He was right; his apartment was really close to Club 80. It was a small one-bedroom apartment over a diner on a side street crossing Sainte-Catherine Street. It was quiet at this time of night. We walked into the living room where boxes were still lined up against the walls. Next to it was a small kitchen with the tiniest counter space I’d ever seen, a small stove and a mini-fridge. A small table with two chairs and a couch were the only furniture in the room which was maybe twelve by fifteen feet. Still, a wide window would let in lots of light during the day, making it more cheerful. It was covered with a dark sheet.

I liked the fact that Dylan made no excuses for the appearance of his place. He had just moved in but most guys I knew would have made up reasons for the dreary look, the lack of decor, and the unopened boxes. As it was, Dylan took off his boots and hung up his coat, holding out his hand for mine. I mimicked him, getting rid of my boots and giving him my coat.

“Sit down. You wanna beer?” he asked as he rummaged in his tiny fridge. It looked like it could only hold a few beers and not much else.

“Sure, thanks.” I sat on the couch, which was a small two-seater. A love seat, my mom called those. Appropriate.

The *psshhht* of bottle caps being opened was the only sound in the apartment. I could still hear my pulse though, drumming loudly.

“Relax,” Dylan said, sitting next to me, handing me a beer. “I can hear you think,” he said, smiling, as he raised his beer bottle in a silent toast. We both faced the wall, shoulder to shoulder, too close to turn our heads to look at each other without it being awkward.

“Thanks. Nice place.” That got a laugh.

“It was the only apartment I found around here that had garage space available nearby.”

“You have a car?”

“No, a Harley.”

“Oh! George rides a Harley too.”

“Yeah, that’s how I got to meet him. We’re all part of the same motorcycle club.”

“Cool.” That explained the George thing. It made me feel immensely better.

The love seat was very small for two big guys, or one normal size and one very big one. Our entire bodies were touching from shoulder to knee; mine was tingling too. When I lifted the bottle to my lips, my arm rubbed against his. He felt like he suffered from a high fever permanently. It had gotten hot in the cramped space.

“I’ll take you for a ride when the snow melts,” he said. That low, chest-deep rumble was contributing to my heart arrhythmia.

“Sure, that’d be fun,” I mumbled, realizing he was making plans for us in the next few months. My head was swimming, my skin felt prickly. Was it the beer? I hadn’t had enough for this reaction, surely.

“So... do you often grab guys in bars by the hand and drag them back here?” I took a sip of beer to keep my composure.

When he didn’t answer, I turned to face him. His eyes were on me, warm and glowing, crinkled at the corners. “No.” His lips lifted in a small smile.

My stomach was in my throat in a second. With my swimming head and beating heart, I felt like I'd explode from sensory meltdown.

"I like you, Tom. From the second you entered the site that night." Dylan lifted his arm and had to back away to put it behind me, on the couch. "You're special," he added. He bent his head and smelled my hair.

I closed my eyes, giving in. He could have sniffed me all over if he had wanted to. I knew then that what I was feeling was exceptional. This had never happened to me, not even with Jeff, this sense of connection. I turned and found his lips, like they were just waiting for mine.

His mouth and face were so hot, I stopped to ask, "Are you alright? Do you have a fever?" I opened my eyes but his were still closed, our noses were against one another, our faces touching and our lips moving on each other's. From the movement in his chest, I knew he was laughing inside.

"I'm fine. I'm always hot," he said, taking my mouth again.

I leaned into him and we kissed. A lot. It was divine. All the kisses I had had before were just preliminaries to the real thing. Head-spinning, heart-thumping, cock-exciting kisses that soon became a tango of tongues, stroking against each other, demanding control and giving it. Dylan tasted of promise, hope, and expensive beer. My life at that point had been travelling to get to this, like I had been on the road forever and Dylan was my destination. Other men had been pit stops, learning stations, life preparation.

Our legs had become entangled on the small couch, beer bottles had been put down, and we were embracing, our bodies pressing together to make one pulsating heap of want.

Dylan growled, inhaling deeply. "You smell so good," he mumbled against my lips before ravaging my mouth again. His hand was holding my head, fingers curled in my hair in a possessive gesture. I opened my eyes to see him watching me like a predator, raw hunger ingrained in amber.

He pulled back and stood, his hand running from my head down my shoulder and my arm to take my hand. I accepted the invitation and stood. He walked backward holding my hand, a small smile curving his lips, and led me to his bedroom.

The room was small and made even smaller by the king-size bed taking up most of the space. A bedside lamp was lit. Dylan drew me to him and his mouth was on mine again. I pulled his T-shirt from his jeans. He made a desperate,

grunting sound from deep within his chest. He let go of my lips and kissed his way down my jaw and bit my neck. "I want you so bad," he said.

I sucked in a breath and ran my hands up his granite-hard abs and pecs and tweaked a nipple. We ground our dicks together. His erection was as hard as mine. He grabbed my ass and was rubbing up against me. "Oh baby," he muttered, nipping at my neck. His hands reached for my fly, and he was pulling my zipper down when he bit me hard on the shoulder, leaving a mark.

I heard myself moan loudly. My heart was still beating in my ears. I was beyond aroused. I was about to detonate. My fly undone, he pulled my jeans and boxers down to my thighs in one quick, rough movement, letting my dick free to wave hello; it has good manners. When I managed to get Dylan liberated of his jeans and underwear, his dick waved back and kissed mine, a slobbering, wet kiss that was most welcome.

Our dicks getting acquainted, we got rid of our shirts. Seeing my chest, Dylan growled loudly—it almost freaked me out—and bent to lick my stomach up to between my pecs, sniffing deeply along the way.

I put my hands on his head and threaded my fingers in his long, thick, gorgeous hair. With just the light from the small lamp, his silver streaks glistened as if painted with real silver. He smelled like fresh-cut grass and snow, an unusual mixture you usually wouldn't associate with each other. It was driving me crazy and making me think of camping with him or being outdoors and running together.

Strange thought when you're about to fuck, no?

Dylan spun us around and threw me on my back on the bed. He got on his knees and pulled my pants all the way down and off, tugging my socks along. "Is this okay?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," was my only answer. He got rid of the rest of his clothes and stood before me. What a sight. "You're gorgeous," I heard myself say. I don't think I'd ever said that to another man and felt myself blush.

He smirked, fire in his eyes, and came down to lie on me, resting his elbows next to my head.

I *hmmmmfffed* a breath—the guy was heavy.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sure."

“Sorry,” he said, this time smiling like a devil. He didn’t look sorry at all, he looked like he was very happy to crush me beneath him. His whole body was feverish. His smile softened, and he looked into my eyes, running a finger through the hair on my brow, around my eye, down the side of my nose, to my cheek. “Is this okay?” he asked again, gently.

“It’s great.” No complaints from me. He traced my lips, which he bent to lick softly. I parted them and his tongue invaded my mouth, taking me and my breath away.

A blacksmith must’ve been hiding somewhere because someone had been heating his steel rod. Never had I felt a dick so hot it was almost unpleasant. Mine seemed almost cool next to it. I turned slightly and said, “Man, you’re hot,” which made him laugh.

“Thanks.”

“No, I mean your skin is burning. Are you alright?”

Dylan kissed my neck, trailing his fingers on my head, through my hair. “I’m fine. My temperature goes up when I’m excited,” he mumbled under my ear.

Good to know; if he got hot when excited, he must’ve been about ready to erupt.

“Why? Does it bother you?” he asked, pulling his head back so he could see my reaction.

“No, no, I was just worried you were coming down with something,” I said reassuringly. I had been running my hands over his back and ass this whole time. I cupped his face with both hands. “I’m glad you’re excited.”

“That I am. I don’t think I’ve ever been this hot before.” The wonder and desire in his eyes moved me.

“Good to know.”

I brought him down for a hard kiss, crushing his lips with mine, no tongue but lots of heat as I crossed my arms behind his head and kept him close to me. Our dicks ground against one another, creating a blissful friction. These were very happy dicks, weeping from joy. I knew I could come just like this and wanted to last.

“How do you want to do this?” I asked, pulling his face away just a little.

“For now, just like this. That’s all I can stand,” he said, grinding hard against me. It was very good.

We kissed again and rubbed and rubbed and our breathing rhythms joined together so we were inhaling and exhaling as one person, one entity, one body living on one lung, one heart. “Come on, Tom, come for me,” he said against my mouth. “I wanna see you come.” That did it. Boom! Off I jumped from the cliff, the sensation starting from the base of my dick like a lighted wick and leading the fire to my tip in an explosion of pure pleasure, resonating through my whole body. I know I yelled, and I heard Dylan growl, a fierce, scary noise as wet hotness spilled on my belly, much hotter than mine, and I wondered for just one second if it would leave blisters. Dylan’s dick was still spurting when he bit me hard on the side of my neck, enough to hurt, and he hugged me in his arms tightly.

“Ow,” I said, not unkindly. He licked the bite mark, as if to soothe it, lapping at my skin until it did, strangely enough, feel better.

Dylan rested his head next to mine, his heart beating so hard I could feel it where our chests touched. “You’re mine now,” he whispered roughly.

No argument there.

Chapter 6

“How are you feeling?” asked Dylan as he kissed my shoulder, running a finger on my chest through our combined semen. He was lying next to me after the best non-penetrative sex I’d ever had. And he cared how I was feeling. This guy was too much.

“Fine,” I managed to mumble. When he looked up through his lashes, I took a deep breath to calm down and reassured him. “Very fine in fact, thanks. You?”

“I’m wonderful,” he said, nuzzling my ear.

To say I was content and sated would be a massive understatement. I had just caught my breath and I felt elated, like I had wings and I was ready to take off and soar through the ceiling and fly with the stars. I was turning into a romance novel before his very eyes and I didn’t care.

We lay like that for probably a few minutes though it seemed like hours. Suddenly I was very cold when Dylan got up and walked in all his naked glory out of the room. He had a beautiful, perfect body. When they draw Atlas for the books, they can use him as a model. I heard his footsteps down the hall to what must have been the bathroom near the kitchen. He came back with a warm washcloth and a glass of water. He sat on the bed next to me and proceeded to clean me up, smiling that sweet half-smile while I drank.

No one had ever cleaned me up before. I felt... well, loved. I decided to live in the moment and soak in that feeling. Tomorrow would be just another day like all the others after a night of good fucking: some calmness, lots of temporary satisfaction with a bit of loneliness.

When he had finished cleaning off the result of our mutual pleasure, he bent and kissed my lips softly. He dumped the washcloth and lay beside me, covering us up with the duvet.

“Maybe I should go,” I said, unsure of what was expected of me. I put the glass on the night table, ready to get up.

Dylan stiffened, his arm still holding the duvet. “You wanna go?” he asked, his face blank, not showing anything but his voice betraying disappointment.

“What do you want me to do?”

"I want you to do whatever you want to. You can stay. I'd like you to stay," he finally said.

I snuggled against this man with burning flesh and a tender heart and said, "Alright, I'll stay."

Dylan let go a breath he'd been holding. He covered us and wrapped an arm around me, throwing a leg over mine.

"Are you sure we're gonna need that?" I asked about the duvet.

He chuckled. "I sleep with only a sheet usually. I thought you'd be cold."

"Are you staying with me through the night?"

"Yeah...?"

"I won't need the duvet. You're a regular furnace on your own, babe," I said, laughing.

"I like it," he said softly.

"That you're a regular furnace?"

"That you called me babe," he said before kissing me again.

We kissed, this time without urgency, savoring it, making it last. This was fun but scary. This was not your typical hookup. I didn't know what it was, but I didn't want it to stop. Of course, after a few minutes, the passion flared again and I felt his erection on my thigh, which caused a similar reaction in my own body.

"Do you have condoms?" I asked anxiously.

"We won't need condoms tonight," he answered, kissing my face everywhere: my eyelids, my nose, my cheeks.

"I really want you to take me, Dylan. Please," I begged.

"If I take you, I can't give you back."

What?

"What does that mean?"

"Just what I said. If I take you, I'll never give you back. You'll be mine forever." His expression was dead serious; he wasn't even joking.

I disengaged from his arms, my erection wilting.

"I don't understand. You don't fuck people unless they're yours for eternity?"

"People I fuck aren't mine forever." Where was Captain Subtext when you needed him? I had a feeling I was supposed to understand something more than the cryptic shit he was saying.

"So it's just me that you don't want to fuck? Listen, if I'm not your type or you only bottom, just say so—" Dylan cut me off, bringing me back in his arms and holding tight.

"I really wanna take you, Tom, you have no idea how much. I've dreamt of taking you since you set me free the other night. You're exactly my type. In fact—" He stopped and hid his face in my neck.

"Say what you were going to say."

"You're not ready to hear what I have to say. I'd better be careful or I'll scare you away," he said, rubbing his face in my hair.

"You're an obnoxious bastard. Who are you to decide if I'm ready for something?" I was more than a little insulted. He was taking this knight-in-shining-armor thing a little too far now.

He sighed deeply and flipped onto his back.

I needed that duvet then. I reached for it and turned on my side, facing him.

"I can go," I said sternly.

He closed his eyes, sighed again. "Please don't," he whispered.

"Then tell me what it is you don't think I can handle."

"Let me ask you this. Do you believe in magic?"

Sccrreeetch, the sound of a needle scratching an LP rang in my head. Talk about changing the subject. Unless he started talking about his magic dick...

"Uh... what does that have to do with the fact you won't fuck me unless I give myself to you for eternity?" Maybe staying over with a guy I'd only known a few days wasn't such a good idea after all, but I was willing to give him a chance to explain. In fact, I felt compelled to. Don't ask me why.

"Do you? Believe in magic? The supernatural? Mythical creatures?"

Well, fuck me. I was completely stunned and didn't know what the correct answer was. Was it yes and he would tell me he was a unicorn and I would

leave faster than you can say cracked? Or was the correct answer no and we would laugh and have great sex? Was this a test?

I considered it for a second.

"I never really thought about it. I guess there could be truth to all those stories, you know, since people have been talking about stuff like that for centuries. Obviously some people do believe—maybe they saw proof. Me? Not really. I mean, I never had reason to believe in the supernatural."

"So if you could prove they existed, you'd believe? It's not a definite no?"

It had become an interesting conversation, although talking about mythical creatures was not what I had been expecting three minutes before.

"Sure, I guess. What kind of creatures are we talking about here anyway?"

He had been looking at the ceiling since we had started talking. He turned on his side and we were face to face.

"What if I told you werewolves exist?"

My eyes grew wide and my jaw dropped a little, I couldn't help it.

"Werewolves? I don't know, I'd probably say, show me one, or ask how come we've never seen any? What about vampires? Do they exist? And what about dragons? I wouldn't mind seeing one of those..." I got caught up in my imagination and hadn't noticed Dylan closing his eyes in frustration.

"If I can prove to you that werewolves exist, would you be scared?" he asked, looking at me again, dead serious.

"Of course I'd be scared! We're always scared of what we don't know. What if they get rabid and start running around eating everybody?"

Uh oh. Dylan's nostrils flared and his glare turned furious.

"Don't be ridiculous. We don't eat people."

I would have been less surprised if he had told me he was from the future and all he needed to go back was a DeLorean and some plutonium.

Then I started laughing. Really busting a gut.

"You're funny," I said, chortling. "Okay, you got me. So what about werewolves? You believe in them?" I said with mirth.

Dylan flipped on his back again, blowing out a breath with his cheeks swollen.

“Tom, did you notice anything weird or funny about me?”

Shit, he was serious. Again.

“Like what?”

“Like my body temperature, for example. You noticed that was a bit higher than normal.”

“Yeah?” More a question than a statement. Where was he going with this? I had not had enough beer to imagine this conversation.

“What else did you notice?” asked poor Dylan, looking patiently at the ceiling.

“That you like to be tied up?”

“No! Not that! And for the record, I don’t like to be tied up. Stop thinking about that. Christ. Okay. Moving on. What else?”

Testy, testy.

I thought for a bit. Every time he touched me I tingled all over, but I was certainly not going to mention this to him now. As wonderful as it was, this guy was turning into a mental case right before me.

“I don’t know. What was I supposed to notice?”

“My size?”

I snorted. “Yeah, you’re a big boy.”

He blushed. “Not just my dick. My size. Would you say I’m average size?”

“Definitely not. You’re huge.”

“Did you hear me growl?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I did. How do you do that? It’s freaky!”

He didn’t answer this. He kept on with the questions.

“Did you wonder how I didn’t get frostbite that day I ran around naked?”

“Well, yeah, I did, but then thought maybe you’d had to do something, you know, desperate to stay warm and you didn’t want to tell me. Or you were downright lying.”

“Did you really think I was lying?”

I thought about it. “No, never.”

“You didn’t question my honesty?” he asked, smiling at me sideways.

“No, actually, I’m still wondering how come you didn’t die naked in minus twenty-degree weather. But I never really thought you were lying.”

“When you followed me out after cutting my ropes, did you find me?”

I was beginning to see where he was going, but I didn’t want to follow. This was getting scary but in a bad way.

“I drove around. You disappeared.”

“Did you see anything in the alley? Anything at all?”

I tried to remember, but I was having difficulty concentrating on the memories of that night when all I could do was try desperately to ignore the hair standing at the back of my neck.

“You know what? I feel like I need to be wearing at least boxers before continuing this conversation,” I said, deflecting. I had just had a flash of what I had seen at the end of the alley that night.

I got out of bed and looked for my boxers in the heap of clothes on the floor.

“What did you see, Tom?”

“I’m sorry, Dylan, I’m gonna have to go. I just remembered something. I have to...” I couldn’t lie to him. “I’m getting really uncomfortable with all this and I’m gonna go. I’m sorry. I know I said I’d stay but...”

“You’re freaked out.” He sighed deeply, a hopeless and forlorn sigh that ripped through me. I hated myself for disappointing him.

I finished getting dressed. He got up and put on his underwear.

We walked to the door together. I shrugged into my coat and pulled my hat on my head. Then I faced the man I’d thought I could maybe, possibly have a future with before finding out he was delusional.

Dylan was standing there, glorious and beautiful, with his amber eyes resting on me full of tenderness and affection.

“Can you tell me one thing before you go, Tom? Please?”

I owed him at least that.

“Okay?”

“What did you see in the alley?”

My heart sank. “A dog. A big, fucking dog, Dylan.”

I turned to go, unable to hold his gaze much longer, my heart breaking.

“It’s okay,” he said as I opened the door. “You’ll be back.”

I stopped abruptly. Arrogant much? I pivoted my head to look back at him over my shoulder.

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re my mate.”

Chapter 7

Three hours before I had been planning a night of beer and dancing with my best friend Paul. Three hours later I was standing in the door of an apartment rented by a gorgeous guy, with whom I had had great sex, who was hinting at being a werewolf and on top of that I was his (its?) mate.

I was having a wonderful evening.

“Do you know how crazy you sound?” I asked, utterly bewildered. This guy was too much. What was I still doing there?

“Think about it, Tom. Really dig deep. Don’t you feel it too?”

“Feel what?”

“The electricity when we touch, the connection. I know you feel it. You felt it when our legs touched under the table at work the other day. You almost jumped out of your skin. That was pretty funny, actually,” he said, chuckling.

I was miffed. “Well I’m glad you had fun, Dylan. But the joke’s over. I’m leaving.”

I turned and he grabbed my arm to stop me.

“I’m serious, Tom. You’re my mate. I’ve known since I smelled you when you showed up unexpected the other night. Remember I asked who sent you?”

Oh yeah, I had forgotten about that. Hold on—smelled me?

“You smelled me?” I knew I sounded disgusted, my nose scrunched up. I couldn’t hold it back.

“You know I did. I know you noticed. Come on, give it a chance. Think. You’ll see what I mean.” He had started sounding desperate.

“Okay, what about who sent me? Why did you ask that?”

“I thought someone from another pack sent you. I was tied up as some sort of ridiculous initiation by the new pack I’m trying to join. If I could get out of the ropes by myself without any help and without changing, I’d be accepted into their pack. They tied me up by force. Idiots.” He shook his head.

Was he for real? I decided to go with it for the time being.

“Why tie you up? Can’t you get out of anything? Don’t you have superstrength or some shit like that?”

“The whole point of tying one of us up like that is that if you change, you’re gonna break the rope. Also, if you manage not to break the rope, the position is extremely uncomfortable. Remember my arms and legs were bent back?”

If a human was tied up like he was, and changed into a dog, for example, two things would happen: either the ropes broke or the bones...

“Okay. I see. So what does that have to do with me?” I was tired, impatient and irritated. This night was going down the toilet fast.

“You’re not one of us, at least not completely. I could smell you were mostly human. But there’s something there. And you’re my mate. I can’t explain it. I can just smell it, sense it on you. Anyway, if someone had sent you to free me, it had to be from another pack. I don’t know any other packs in Montreal yet. So I was wondering if I was caught in a pack conflict.” His eyes softened. “But you were just a nice guy worried about me. You freed me. You don’t know what you did for me that night. I was off the hook. I was freed without changing. Although I ruined it immediately after that.” A frown had appeared at that last thought.

“Why?”

“We’re not allowed to change in or near a city. Ever. It’s an unbreakable rule. I broke it. I had to. I would’ve frozen if I hadn’t changed. That’s the dog you saw. It was me.”

I was just staring at him, his amber eyes—hold the phone! The color of his eyes! I’d never met anyone with amber eyes like that before. Another detail for later—all sweet and warm and I could see the hope in there, to be believed, to be trusted.

“What happens when you change in the city? When you break the rule?” Then, as another thought popped in my head, “Hey! That’s how you followed me! You weren’t running after my truck naked, you were in... you were changed to...”

“I was in my wolf form. Yes. And the punishment is less severe when you do it to survive but as the last resort, after you’ve tried everything else. I didn’t have a choice. My skin was blotching white, my feet were cut and I was getting really thirsty within a couple of hours. In wolf form, not only do we heal much faster, we don’t feel the cold.”

I closed my eyes and leaned on the doorframe. I couldn’t take much more of this. Dylan guessed my state of mind.

"Tom, do you want to come in and sleep a bit? I promise I'll leave you alone if that's what you want. I know it's a lot to take in. If I were in your position, I'd probably break my face and leave." He sounded dejected.

"Violence never solved anything. At least that's what my grandmother told me," I mumbled.

"And that's why I love you."

Oh for fuck's sake. I opened my eyes to find Dylan standing there with his huge hand on his mouth, as if he could somehow hold the words in. Too late.

Talk about overwhelming.

"I'm going now. Goodbye, Dylan. Good luck."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to blurt that out. I'm really fucking this up." He sounded like he was about to cry. "This is not how I imagined it would go..." I heard him mumble.

I was halfway down the stairs by the time he said, "You'll have more questions. I'm here. Anytime, Tom. And I'm sorry," he added quickly when I opened the door that led to the street.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I started walking west, to my home. It smelled like winter, like dirty snow and car exhaust. I checked my phone. Paul had texted me four times.

What was that?

Hey! U Ok?

Then

Shld I send the cops?

And the last one

Pls call WHATVR TIME.

I phoned Paul, holding the phone under my hat to my ear. It rang three times.

"Are you alright?" was the first thing Paul said when he picked up. His voice was groggy but he seemed alert.

"I'm fine, thanks. Very tired though and I'm going home. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Where are you now?" The wind was making it difficult to hear him clearly.

“I’m on Sainte-Catherine, walking back. I’ll catch a cab.” I was walking into the mist from my breath and it was making my skin damp and cold.

“Booty call? You dawwwwg!” He was wide awake now.

“Yeah. Anyway. Go back to bed. I’ll call you tomorrow,” I said again before hanging up.

I woke up the next morning, groggy and slightly ill, feeling like I was missing something. Or someone. My heart was broken, I was sure of it. It was a dull ache, like pain from a chronic ailment, not throbbing but just there, dragging me down by its weight.

I missed Dylan. It was ridiculous, I hadn’t known him that long, but after our lovemaking—it certainly wasn’t fucking—the night before, I had felt close to him. Never had I felt so wanted, so cared for; never had my happiness been so important to anyone I had had sex with. No, not even Jeff. Far from it. I had always been convinced his orgasms, and especially his happiness, were more important than mine. I had been content in giving in to him and not asking for more. That was my mistake.

Then sex itself had been amazing with Dylan. Toe-curling, blood-boiling, blindness-inducing amazing. You didn’t get that from being with just an ordinary guy.

And Dylan was far from ordinary. All the proof, aside from seeing him change in front of me, was there. All the things I couldn’t explain before now had answers.

And that growl. Fucking sexy. And a bit scary.

Could I believe he was a werewolf? Yes. Could I admit to it? Phew... not really. Not yet.

That’s where I was at on that Saturday morning. I was falling in love with a guy who said he was a werewolf and I was his mate. I did feel the connection, I just couldn’t explain it.

But fuck me. A werewolf? To believe him, I had to accept that werewolves existed, then I had to believe he was one of them, therefore I had to believe there were more of them out there. Maybe I already knew some of them without knowing what they were. I had started listing people: Miss Mabel from next door—not. Jeff—definitely not. Chris, this cute guy I’d hooked up with a few times last year—not. My cousin Linda—no way. Her hands were always freezing. I went on like that for a while and couldn’t uncover any clues that people I knew could have been werewolves.

I spent the whole day eating cereal and watching television. I didn't get dressed. It kept turning around in my head, and I couldn't make sense of it. It was grueling. Aside from that, I had the heartbreak to endure.

Around suppertime, Paul phoned.

"Hey! You said you'd call me. What's up?"

"I'm not very good company today."

"You sound down. What happened last night after you left with Sasquatch?"

He didn't know how close he was to the truth.

"Don't call him that." If I knew how to growl, I would've.

"Ooookayyyy. What happened?" he asked again.

"We went to his place, had sex and I left."

"That's it? Are you gonna see him again?"

"Probably not. I don't know, Paul."

"I thought you liked him? He's fucking gorgeous."

"I do. It's just... he's a member of a... of some motorcycle club and I don't know if I want to be part of that," I said, bending the truth a little but really it was sorta like that.

"What, like Sons of Anarchy?"

"I don't think they sell guns or produce porn, but yeah, with Harleys and everything. It's an exclusive club. I'd never really be a full-patch member." And that was the truth. How did I fit in a werewolf society? Even if we were mates, we hadn't had a chance to talk about me fitting in or being accepted as his gay mate. I had no idea how that worked.

And the fact that I was thinking about it was a sign that I was slowly losing my mind over this guy.

"Oh. Can he quit the club?"

"I don't think so." More like no way in hell.

Paul thought this over a bit and said, "Big deal, so he's a biker. Get on and enjoy the ride while it lasts, man!" Trust Paul to see a silver lining on a very black and heavy cloud.

"Yeah. Anyway, I gotta go. I'm gonna take a nap."

“Wild sex then, huh? Good for you! It’s been a while. Maybe you can keep him as a fuck friend?”

“No. I don’t think I could just fuck him and leave him.”

“Oh no, damn! You’re falling for him?” I could hear the glee in Paul’s voice.

“Shut up, Paul. Seriously. I’m not in the mood.”

“Hey, I’m here, man, if you need to talk or anything, you know that, right?” His tone had changed. Paul was my best friend, I could count on him if things got bad. I could also count on him if things got too serious.

“I know, thanks. I’ll call if I need to, I promise.”

“Have a good nap. Are you going to brunch with Grandma tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“Say hi and kiss her for me, would you?”

“Sure thing. Bye.”

The next morning, I woke up around nine thirty. I showered and shaved, put on a nice shirt and went to meet my grandmother for brunch at the home.

I tried to go every Sunday. They served brunch in the dining room, and every resident could invite guests, provided they call first so a portion could be prepared for them, and they pay five dollars after the meal. It made my grandmother beyond happy to have me there and show me off to her neighbors, and I got a hot brunch cooked for me for the price of an egg and bacon plate at the local diner.

Grandma was in fine form when I got to her room. The minute she saw me, instead of smiling as usual, she frowned and asked, “What happened?”

“Hello, Grannie. How are you on this fine Sunday morning? Paul sends his love.” Deflection never gets me anywhere with her but it gave me a minute to prepare.

“Tommy? What happened? What’s wrong?”

“I look that bad?”

“You look like something the cat dragged in. Are you alright?”

In reality, I was far from alright. If I had thought I missed Dylan the day before, I was completely devastated that morning. Waking up was like right

after my mother had passed away. After sleeping profoundly there's a second, a very short one, just as you regain consciousness, when the present hasn't caught up to you yet and you don't remember that tragedy has struck. You're blissfully unaware of the pain. Then BAM! Just like in a Batman episode from the sixties, the pain hits you in the heart and you relive the loss all over again. I had managed to lose a part of me that I had noticed was essential only a day before.

"I'm alright, don't worry. Just a little under the weather."

"I'll say. Are you ill? Did you catch one of those viruses that are putting everyone on their keisters? I saw that on the news last night. Emergency rooms all across the city are swamped with sick people because of this flu epidemic. There's a thirty-six-hour waiting period at the Royal Vic. Imagine that." She had stopped worrying about me during her rant but I knew she'd circle back any time now. "They make you wait when it's the flu because there's nothing they can do about it. They can't give you pills; viruses have to run their course. That's what they said on the news. So what happened to you? Is it the flu?" And she was back.

"Remember Dylan?"

"How could I forget?"

"I saw him on Friday."

She looked dismayed. "It didn't go well?"

"It went fine; actually it went more than fine." She started to smile, then her lips froze midway. "So?"

"So, then he told me something about himself that I can't begin to understand and I don't know if I can ever accept it." Grandma's tentative smile disappeared.

"What is it? Maybe it's something that can be fixed? Is it booze? Or gambling?"

"No. It's something he can't ever change. He was born that way." I was just saying that, I had no idea if he was bitten by a werewolf or if he was born to werewolf parents. It didn't make a difference. He couldn't change it.

Grandma thought about it for a minute. I could almost see her little hamster turning in its wheel trying to figure it out.

"He's diabetic? He's got MS?"

“No, no. Nothing like that. As far as I know, he’s in perfect health. He doesn’t seem to have a drinking or a gambling problem. He drives a Harley and is part of a motorcycle club but that’s hardly anything to worry about.”

“Tom, you like this man. What is it that you can’t overcome?”

Should I tell her? She had always kept my secrets. On the other hand, I didn’t want her to think I was losing my mind.

I got up and went to lock the door. I didn’t want a caretaker to walk in and overhear this conversation.

“Grandma, I’m gonna tell you something really weird and I don’t want you to freak out and you can’t ever tell anyone. Okay?” I had come back to sit next to her in one of the folding chairs she kept in her closet. She put her hand on my arm in a supportive gesture.

“You can tell me anything. I’ve seen quite a lot in my day,” she said, smiling encouragingly.

“You know how I told you his skin is always hot and he spent a day naked outside without any injury and he disappeared after I cut the rope off that night?”

Grandma was frowning, attempting to follow what I was saying.

“Yes? What about all that?”

“He’s a werewolf.”

Grandma withdrew her hand slowly and her eyes got as big as saucers, shocked. “Tommy, no!” She grew agitated, wringing her hands, and she looked absolutely horrified.

“I know, he sounds crazy. But I’m pretty sure he’s not. There’s a lot more that I haven’t told you yet that points to him being an actual werewolf. But that’s not the worst of it. He said I’m his—“

“Mate,” Grandma finished for me. Her eyes were still wide as barn doors, and her hand flew to her lips.

Now I was shocked and probably looked horrified.

Grandma gasped. She whispered, “It can’t be true...” Then continued, “Oh Tommy, please tell me you didn’t have sexual relations with him! Please!”

What the fucking fuck? My grandmother had *never* asked about my sex life, what the hell was she asking me that for? Ugh.

“Tom, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry, I know I’m being indiscreet, but tell me you didn’t have complete sexual relations with him. Did you?”

After I had recovered from my shock, I was able to ask her, “Why are you asking me that?”

“Just answer the question, and I’ll tell you.” She was still wringing her hands, a look of utter horror on her face. She muttered, “This can’t be happening.”

“No, in fact, he didn’t want to. He wanted to wait. He said I wasn’t ready,” I finally said.

She sagged in her chair, like a deflated balloon. She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Oh thank you, sweet baby Jesus!” And she crossed herself. Yes folks, my grandmother crossed herself upon hearing I didn’t have full-on penetrative sex with a guy. Kill me now.

I grunted my embarrassment. That brought her back to the subject at hand.

“Tom, I’m sorry. It’s just that if you had had complete relations, then you would be bound to him for the rest of your life, you see, and I don’t think you knew that, right?”

“What? What are you talking about? And how come you’re not on the floor from shock after learning your grandson is dating a werewolf?”

She had recovered her composure enough to smooth the blanket on her knees.

“There’s something you need to know about our family, Tom. Something my grandmother told me on her deathbed. Or what was to become her deathbed, seeing as she just wouldn’t die! Four years she stayed in that bed, lingering and hanging on, even though the priest kept giving her the last rites. The lady just wouldn’t give up. She died when she was a hundred and six.”

That fact I already knew. “What does this have to do with Dylan and sex, Grandma?”

“Right, right. Well, my Nonna Josephina told us stories sometimes when we went to visit her. Most of the time, my sister and I didn’t pay any attention to them as they were old stories we’d heard many times before. One day, when she was having an unusually good day, she told us about her father having been the son of a werewolf and a human woman. The human woman had died giving

birth to her father because only female werewolves could survive childbearing. Anyway, my grandmother only had a sister, and the werewolf gene was lost, but she still had some wolf blood in her, so our dad had some too and he passed it on to my sister and I and so forth. She said we had to watch out because other werewolves could sense it in us.”

Something about my conversation with Dylan jumped back at me. He had said I smelled mostly human. Was this what he was talking about? Just more questions. Great.

Grandma continued with her story. “My sister and I asked our dad about it, and he scoffed at it and told us to forget about it, they were just the ramblings of an old woman, but we didn’t forget. On our next visits, always thinking it would be the last time, we asked her about it, and she told us all about the mating. One werewolf would meet his mate and know right away who it was. They would have an instant connection and fall deeply in love with one another. She also told us how they would have to, well, consummate the union to complete the bonding between mates. Then the mates would live happily ever after.” She paused, smiling at the memory, her eyes unfocused. “Well, you can imagine how much we loved her stories. My sister and I would talk about how we’d wish to be mated to someone forever and if we could just meet the perfect werewolf. Of course, nothing like that ever happened to either of us but we sure would hope.”

“You never told me that, Grandma.”

“Of course I didn’t. What would you have said if I had told you? You would have thought I was nuts. Or that my grandmother was nuts and that craziness ran in the family. No, no, no. That was my thing with my sister. We never told anyone. My father had been very clear that we were to tell no one.”

“And now you believe your grandmother was right?” I was still processing all about Dylan and now I had my grandmother’s sanity to consider.

“Well, I always believed there must have been some truth to what she said, you know, where there’s smoke there’s fire and all that. Plus, my father was too quick in denying it and as I got older, I realized that probably meant he believed it and didn’t want us to get too curious. You can get hurt when you start poking in other people’s business sometimes and the more people have to protect, the more dangerous they become. I’m saying this to you now, Tom, be careful. You can’t ever tell anyone else about him.”

“I already know that, deep down. It’s like something I know but don’t know how I know. Like I feel he’s telling the truth, but I couldn’t tell you why.”

“Oh Tom, you’re in over your head already. The bonding’s started. You fooled around, didn’t you?”

I felt a hot flush creep up my face from my neck. I was more embarrassed now than when I told her I was gay, for Christ’s sake.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she said. “Your face says it all. It’s too late now. But he’s a good guy. He could have had sex with you without telling you first, and you would’ve been bonded to him for life without you knowing anything about it. He’s a good man.”

There was a knock at the door. I went to open it quickly so the caretaker wouldn’t have to use his or her key. As I opened the door, the lady said, “Is everything alright in here, Mrs. Colucci?”

“Yes, Edna, everything’s fine, thanks,” Grandma answered with a big smile.

“Brunch is served. Come on,” Edna said.

I wheeled Grandma to the dining room and we had a nice brunch. I wasn’t very hungry and ate much less than I usually do. My grandmother patted my arm a couple of times. When she was done, she said, “Why don’t we take our coffee in my room?”

I was all for that. I wasn’t in the mood to talk to the other seniors at her usual table. I noticed Mrs. DeSotto was disappointed that I wasn’t engaging her in conversation like I do every Sunday and, although I felt a bit guilty, my mind was on Dylan and how important he had become to me in such a short time.

Back in her room, Grandma got comfortable again and continued right where we had left off. Her mind was still sharp, no doubt about it.

“Tom, you’re gonna feel bad until you fix it with Dylan. You have to go talk to him.”

“I just don’t know what to say to him, what he wants from me. I have so many questions, and I don’t know if I want the answers.”

“That’s not what I mean. You’ll feel physically ill until you and Dylan work it out. He’s probably in worse shape than you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Nonna’s story’s true, when two mates find each other but don’t complete the bond, something happens to them, like they get sick, until they fix it. I don’t remember exactly what Nonna said about that, but I recall there’s something

about the magic, and you can't stop it, and if you try, bad things happen," she said, smiling warmly. "You'll see, everything'll work out, honey. It's started anyway, you can't do much to stop it and if you try, you'll just be miserable."

I kissed her and hugged her longer that day than I usually did. What was I gonna do without her? Someday, life would take her away from me, then where would I be? Who would tell me about life and love and werewolf blood?

Chapter 8

I went to work the next day. I still don't know how I managed. It was very difficult to get out of bed. Depression had set in like the smell of skunk after you drive by roadkill. Even after you think it should be long gone, you can still smell it, taste it even. Great analogy, no? That's the mood I was in on that Monday morning.

We were almost done with the drywall; meanwhile another team was cutting and installing bricks on the outside. I would have thought the noise alone was enough to make me forget about Dylan for a while but no, he was always there, in the back of my mind, when he wasn't starring in the forefront of it.

Questions came to me without warning, random thoughts of what our future could be like if I was to concede that we could live together, with him turning into a beast once in a while. The plus side would be that I would never want for heat on cold winter nights for the rest of my life. But I couldn't come to a decision without answers first.

I needed to talk to Dylan. Grandma was right. I couldn't postpone it much longer.

That night I went home, managed to swallow scrambled eggs for dinner before falling into bed by nine o'clock. Unfortunately, I didn't get to sleep until one in the morning, tossing and turning more than the previous night which had been unpleasant already.

When I was alone without any noise or distraction was when it was the worst. If I closed my eyes, it was excruciating. Visions of Dylan crying, tormented and sick, calling out to me for help, made me want to vomit. I almost did once but dry heaves were the only relief I got. This had to be the most horrible time in my life, worse than when my mom died. And that had been massive.

The next day, I was ready to face George and ask him for Dylan's number. I didn't think I could stand seeing Dylan face to face but calling him seemed like a good alternative.

When I stepped into the site office, George looked up and gasped.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

“Listen, I know you probably have some confidentiality issues about this but do you think you could give me Dylan Scott’s number? I need to reach him,” I said without further preliminaries. I just wasn’t up to chatting and just getting those words out had taken a lot out of me.

“Why do you want his number? And are you sick or something? If you have the flu, you should go home. I don’t want everyone catching it.”

“I’m fine, just tired. Can I have his number? I’m pretty certain he won’t be angry, I’m sure he meant to give it to me. I saw him last Friday,” I added to make it sound more convincing.

“Oh yeah? Last Friday? Where?” What did he care all of a sudden?

“We bumped into each other at a club and had a beer. I wanted to talk to him about something he mentioned.” Just give me the number already, I thought.

“Did he tell you we belong to the same motorcycle club?”

“In fact, he did. But that’s not what I want to talk to him about.”

George was looking more and more wary. Maybe he didn’t know Dylan was gay?

“What do you think of him? I wanted to ask you in case he needs a job sometime when he gets his papers. Did everything go alright with him last week?”

“Yeah, he’s a good worker, from what I can tell. I didn’t get to see him much in action, he was here just one day,” I said.

“Did you get a chance to talk to him at all? Get to know him?”

What was he getting at? And I had thought I was acting weird.

“He seems nice,” I said, not knowing what he wanted me to say. He makes me want to dive off a cliff for him, I want to lick him from head to toe, I want to have his children even if I can’t bear them myself, I want to grow old with him. I didn’t think George was ready to hear this.

“Shit. So it’s you.” I looked up to watch George squinting at me with his hands on his hips like he’d found the cure to hangnails.

“It’s me what?” The number, George. Focus.

“I never would’ve guessed, but I should have...” he muttered to himself. Whatever.

“Do you think you could look up his number, please?”

“You’re the reason Dylan’s so bent out of shape, aren’t you, you bastard?”

Whoa. That was not what I was expecting. I had been prepared for arguments about privacy laws and confidentiality regulations that prohibited an employer from giving out an employee’s information, but this, no.

“What are you talking about, George?” I had no patience for this.

“You’re Dylan’s mate, aren’t you? I thought there was something when I introduced you both, but that was fast. What happened? Why did you turn your back on him?”

Fuck. George was a werewolf. It made sense with all the tying-up issue and his coming to get Dylan on that fated morning when my life was turned upside down.

“What do you know about that?”

“Oh come on, Tom. You’ve figured it out already, I can tell. How can you let him die like that? That’s just plain cruel.”

“What? Die? What the fuck are you going on about, George? What’s happened to him? Dylan’s dying?” My depressive state was quickly turning into a panicked one. My knees almost gave out.

“Calm down. You didn’t know, did you?” he said, stepping toward me. He led me to a chair. “Sit down. You’re white as a sheet. Don’t faint on me,” he said while getting me a bottle of water. “Here, drink this.”

I took the bottle he pressed in my hand, but it went unheeded. “What’s wrong with Dylan?”

“We can’t live long without our mates, Tom. Didn’t he tell you what would happen?”

“No, he most certainly did not tell me. I would’ve remembered that.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Who cares? What’s wrong with Dylan? We should go see him. Does he need a doctor?” I tried to get up but George held me down.

“Relax. He’s not dead yet. It’ll take longer than that. What’s he told you?”

When I didn’t answer, he added, “Talk to me so I can help you, Tom. Start by breathing, then talk.”

I gulped in some air, tried to put my thoughts in order and miserably failed. I just sat there.

"It's okay, Tom. Tell me what you know," George said soothingly.

"I'm his mate. He's a werewolf," I said, then I looked up at him and added, "but you already know that."

"Yeah, I'm one too." He had almost admitted it to me earlier anyway.

I took a second to digest all this and went on. "That's it. I freaked out and left. Since then I've been feeling sick and very depressed. I don't know what to do or what to think."

"How do you feel?" George asked, pulling a chair in front of me and sitting down, facing me, watching me with keen eyes.

"Bad, I just told you. Really bad."

"No, I mean how do you feel about him?"

"I think I'm falling in love with him." The realization hit me as I said the words.

My eyes stung behind my lids. George went to lock the door.

"Okay, Tom. I owe you an apology, I thought he'd explained how it worked, and you knew what it was doing to him. But apparently you're suffering too so it's not only one-sided."

"What's wrong with him?"

George sighed. "When mates don't bond or one leaves the other for whatever reason, which almost never happens by the way," he said with a hard stare, "they get sick and wither away. For some it takes longer than others, but some die quickly, within months. You can't live without your mate for long. Usually, nature works well and bonds you with the perfect match. Other times," he said this with regret in his voice, "nature screws up and connects the wrong two people. It happens. Not often, but it does." He lifted his hat, scratched his head and put his hat back on. "Why did you freak out?"

"George, he told me he's a fucking werewolf! What did you expect me to do?" I said, surprised and pissed off.

"But as his mate, you're supposed to be in love with him. Did that not happen?"

"I can tell you this now, after three days of pure torture without him, I can honestly say I'm falling in love with him, but I wasn't ready for that on Friday night at two o'clock in the morning. But most importantly, how's Dylan? What's happening to him now?"

"I don't know how much you know about magic. Did he tell you anything about that?"

"He told me there's magic involved with werewolves. I learned from another source about the bonding ritual and what it entails," at this I stared at George to make sure he understood what I was talking about, "and I know we didn't complete it."

"You mean to tell me you didn't fuck each other's brains out already? Wait a minute, if you didn't, then how come you're all twisted out of shape? Humans don't react like that unless the bonding's complete and they lose their mates."

"I may have a drop of werewolf blood, George. I'm thinking that's why."

He managed to look even more surprised than when he realized I was Dylan's mate.

"Oh shit. That's why you smell so sweet." That smell thing again. He got up and went back to the table, the discussion apparently over.

"There's nothing worse than an incomplete bonding, man. Take the rest of the day off. Go see Dylan and fix this before you both lose your minds. You poor, dumb bastards."

Chapter 9

Just driving over to Dylan's, I started feeling a bit better. The massive pain weighing on my chest became lighter and was soon mixed with anticipation. The closer I got, the better I felt. If only he hadn't changed his mind about me, we'd be okay. And if Grandma was right, he wouldn't be changing his mind anytime soon.

I parked on his street and looked up in time to see him let go of the curtain—or rather sheet—on the window. When I got to his door, he was opening it.

When I was a kid and went to La Ronde amusement park, there was a ride called the Rotor which is no longer there. You went down in a wooden circle and stood with your back against the wall and this thing would start turning and spinning around and the trick of this ride was that the bottom would be lowered and you would stay stuck to the walls by sheer centrifugal force. When poor unsuspecting girls wore skirts, if the wind decided to lift their skirt right before the centrifugal force was at its strongest, the skirt would be stuck in that position for the whole ride and the girl wouldn't be able to lift her arms to put her skirt back down, hence showing her underwear to one and all. Fun times.

Dylan was my Rotor. The minute he opened his arms, sheer force drew me into them, and I was stuck to his body, my head spinning and my breath cut off. Same thing. Except with him, the feeling was wonderful and I almost didn't feel like throwing up.

Being in his arms felt like home. "You feel like home," I told him without thinking too much.

"You are home to me," he answered, his voice choking.

"Is it always going to be so intense?"

"No, it gets better. Unless you decide you don't want this," he said, and he really sounded like he was about to cry.

I pulled my head back and noticed the dark circles under his eyes, his sunken cheeks, two-day-old beard flecked with silver making him look older, thinner.

"I did this to you?" My heart was sinking fast. As much as I was getting better on the way over here, it struck me that I was the reason for Dylan looking so rejected and sad. It made me feel like such a shit.

"You didn't do anything. It's the magic. Come on, let's talk. I'm sure you have questions." He pulled away from me but still held my hand and took me to the couch.

"Do you mind if I hold you while we talk? Please?" he asked gently.

I pushed him on the couch and sat in his lap. "Sure," I said, putting my arms around his neck and leaning on him. My legs were dangling from the armrest but I didn't care; I was where I was supposed to be. I would've killed anyone who tried to pry us apart. Now that I was here, I wasn't letting him go.

He breathed a sigh of relief and it tugged on my heart.

"Dylan, are you alright?"

"I am now. I'll be better in a few minutes. Don't worry."

"What's happening?"

"I wasn't sure so I called my uncle."

"In Colorado?"

"Yeah. It seems we started the bonding Friday night but we didn't complete it. The magic is draining from me."

I looked up into his eyes. "What does that mean?" That's what George must have been talking about concerning the magic.

The light in his eyes was dim, like the amber was cooling after a fire. "It means if you don't want this, and nothing can force you, I'll lose my magic."

"What happens then?"

"Don't worry about it."

"What would happen to me?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I've been feeling awful since Friday but on the way over I started feeling better, like I was coming to find a cure. I'm feeling better and better since I got here."

"That doesn't happen to human mates. I don't understand," he said, frowning.

"I have something to tell you. Apparently you're not the only weird one, babe." His eyebrows shot up. "My grandmother told me I have a few drops of werewolf blood from seven or eight generations ago."

Dylan's whole body stiffened under me, his jaw had dropped and he stared at the wall.

"That's what it is! I knew there was something about your scent!" His hug crushed my ribs. "I didn't even stand a chance!" He laughed, and it was a fantastic sound.

"A chance of what?"

"Of not falling in love with you. I need to kiss you now."

Wow, what a kiss. He really needed it. It felt like he was drinking me in, like a plant deprived of water for too long when it starts to rain. His mouth was hot, his lips were soft but demanding, it was glorious.

But, wait...

"Are you saying you love me only because of the bond?" That was sadly a disappointing thought.

"The bond is magic that connects you to the person who's perfect for you. You're perfect for me, Tom. With your beautiful green and gold eyes, and your honest smile, and your big, strong heart willing to help a man you don't even know by welcoming him into your house and feeding him and clothing him and giving him money, and being concerned enough for a stranger to go look for him in the cold... I could go on and on, Tom. You're just so perfectly kind and good and thoughtful and beautiful," he said as he kissed me again. "You didn't even hesitate to lie for me to your boss, you kept my secret and you took care of me when I had no one in Montreal. That's why I love you, because you're my mate in every sense of the word."

Wow. Hearing him talk about me that way, even I would've fallen in love with me.

He hugged me close with a hand on the back of my head. I felt cherished, valued, loved.

"I didn't think it would happen so fast with you. When you came in and cut my ropes, I couldn't stay but I wanted to. You smelled like heaven and sunshine. I had to find you again. Sure, I would've preferred to be dressed for it," he laughed at this, "but I didn't know anyone else besides George, and I couldn't go to him since he was part of the pack that requested that stupid initiation. And I admit it, I was drawn to you. I wanted to see you again. And you were so nice. I thought I'd have time to date you properly, to woo you and impress you and you'd fall in love with me because after all, we're mates and I knew it already."

“Lucky you. I didn’t get the memo,” I chuckled. I was feeling better and better, my depression was lifting slowly, the nausea was almost gone. Dylan looked a lot better too, although not recovered completely. “Is there anything I can do to help you right now?” I asked.

“You’re doing it. You’re here. I can feel the magic working. It’s very weird. I never felt that before. The elders tell us how it’s gonna happen when we meet our mates. How the magic takes over and you just know. And I’ve seen people from the pack lose their mates and slowly deteriorate, but I didn’t understand it, really. The magic just drains out slowly. I watched my dad wither away after my mom died.”

He flinched, and I held him close, kissing his neck. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. She was only eighty-eight but, you know, shit happens.”

I lifted my head at that. “Only eighty-eight?”

“We live long lives, we don’t age as quickly as humans do.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m fifty-four.”

I would’ve fallen to the floor if Dylan hadn’t caught me. He chuckled.

“You’re fifty-four? Fuck! You look thirty-five! How does that happen?”

“We don’t get sick, we heal quickly in wolf form and we can live up to a hundred and twenty, a hundred and thirty sometimes. If your family has wolf blood, you’ll probably live long too. Which side of your family carries it?”

“My dad’s.”

“How old is he?”

“He died at sixty-two.”

“Oh. Sorry. Well, maybe it’s thinned out too much. Bummer...”

“He’s not a good reference. He smoked three packs a day for forty years. Lung cancer got him. His mother, my Grandma, is still alive, she’s ninety-four. Her father died at ninety-three and his mother died at a hundred and six.”

That seemed to cheer him up. His smile lit up his whole face. He was certainly gorgeous.

“Great! I’ll keep you with me for a long time!” Then his smile fell. “Unless you don’t want this life. We still haven’t talked about that.”

I pulled back from his neck so he could see my face. There was raw anguish in his eyes.

"I'm falling in love with you, Dylan. Make no mistake. It's fast and it's out of control and it's scaring the living crap out of me, but I don't want to leave you again. I can't, even if I wanted to. I can't seem to function without you near me." My voice was rough. "These last three days have been hell. Worse than when my mom died. Worse than when I left my ex, Jeff." He growled.

"What?"

"I don't like to hear about you with other men. I know I'm not your first, but I really, really hate it. I should've been your first." His eyes were downcast, as if in shame or regret.

I put my finger under his chin and lifted his head so he'd look at me. I was surprised to see jealousy and possession in his eyes, not shame or regret. That was fucking sexy. Shouldn't have been, I hated jealousy, but in this case, I'd let it go. It made me feel desired.

"I'm sure you've had other guys in your life, Dylan. Come on. I mean, look at you. I'm sure you weren't wanting in the sex department." I stroked his jaw, the two-day-old beard making a scratching sound. I wondered if he'd let me shave him.

"Getting my rocks off and making love to my mate are two very different things, Tom. I've never made love to anyone. I've never had a steady relationship either. I was waiting for my mate. You." The honesty in that statement was humbling.

Wow. In fifty-four years this guy had never felt loved. I would be his first. Talk about responsibility. Well, I'd do it right if it was the last thing I did on this earth.

"I can tell you that the first time you kissed me, on Friday, on this very couch, the thought that came to me was that the other guys who kissed me before you were just practice along the way, leading me to you. I swear. It's like you were the first to kiss me like that. It was glorious, babe." I kissed him softly, hoping to convey my gratitude for making me feel that.

His hand at the back of my head held me there, and the kiss grew hotter, more passionate. He bit my lower lip, and I moaned. "You like to bite, eh?"

He laughed in his chest, soundless. "I like to bite you."

"I have a mark from Friday! You bit me after you came, then licked it better. Is that a wolf thing?"

"I guess. I wasn't thinking, but I know my wolf was close. Everything with you is different. Even that orgasm was ten times, no a hundred times more powerful than any I've had in my life before, by my own hand or someone else's. I'm scared too, just so you know. This is new for me. I've watched my friends find their mates and go nuts for a couple of weeks, but this is unexpected for me. I didn't know it would be so strong. At first I wondered why that was, but now I'm thinking it's the wolf blood in you. It's not as crazy or fast as if you were a full werewolf, but it's not the full-on romance that happens when a wolf's mate is human either. I felt it really fast and it's overwhelming, but you need time like a human. I'm sorry I can't rein it in, give you time."

"It's okay. It'll work out. We'll work it out, Dylan. Where there's love, there's a way, right?"

"I love you, Tom. I really, really do," he said, and I believed him completely.

"I know. I feel it."

"Can we go to the bedroom? You're probably not very comfortable here, and if we could be skin to skin, I'd feel better faster. Do you mind?" A glint of amusement lit up his eyes.

"Why do I have the feeling you're milking it?"

He laughed. "Maybe a bit. But I would feel better faster, that's true. You don't have to, though, I'll be fine like this too."

I untangled my legs, and Dylan helped me to my feet. "Come on." I walked to his bedroom, undressing and leaving my clothes wherever they fell. I was pretty sure he wouldn't mind. I heard him growling close behind me and I jumped and turned.

"Sorry, did I scare you?" His face wore a devilish grin.

"How do you do that? It sounded like a big fucking angry dog right next to my ear ready to pounce!"

"I wasn't holding back this time. The other times, I tried to catch it before it was out, but I failed a couple of times."

He was down to his boxers by the time we reached his bed. He was pulling those off when I asked, "You growled at the club, when I was dancing with Paul."

"Couldn't help it. Just came out. Jealousy. You were mine. Couldn't stand to see you with a guy." His stare had turned hot and heavy as he was fixated on my body, and his sentences were suddenly shorter.

The hair at the back of my neck had started rising, but in a good way.

"Dylan? You alright?" His nostrils had flared, his stance changed to that of a predator ready to pounce, his head down, his eyes flashing through his lashes, arms outstretched, erection stiff and proud.

"Tom, I don't think I can hold back. My wolf wants to come out and play. Can't control it. Last chance to stop and get dressed. Are you ready to be mine forever?"

This was it. I was more than ready. I walked forward, into his outstretched arms.

"I already am," I said as I crushed my mouth on his, teeth scraping, my tongue invading him, wanting to be possessed by this man in every possible way. Fuck the questions, fuck their answers. There would be time.

One of his hands was stroking my back, my ass, my shoulders, my head cradled by the other. I had one arm around his ribcage, with my other hand I took hold of his dick, hot and silky and so, so hard for me.

"I love you, Dylan," I said, and he growled, low and deep. So fucking sexy.

"I'm the luckiest man in the world," he muttered against my skin.

His hand reached into my crack and rubbed the entrance. The nerves were so sensitive it drove me wild. Dylan's temperature rose again, so much it was almost unpleasant, but it was also exciting as hell. I had never in my life wanted a dick inside me like I wanted Dylan's. He pushed a finger into my hole, and I almost cried out in pleasure. So fucking good. Without lube. It was different, that's for sure. It was as if his finger was supposed to be there, this whole time. His tongue was mimicking the in and out of his finger in me as it took possession of my mouth. My eardrums were ringing from my pulse beating in them so hard.

Dylan let go of my head and caught my hand on his dick. "Stop. You'll make me come."

“You have to come in me, Dylan. Please.”

“Oh I will, baby. I will,” he said, kissing me again, ravaging my mouth.

Then he pulled away and spun me around, throwing me on the bed so I lay flat on my stomach.

“Is this okay?” he asked as he opened the drawer of the nightstand, rummaging in there.

“Yeah, it’s more than okay.” I heard a bottle cap snap off, then his finger was back, all greased up and ready.

“Tell me if I hurt you. I’m having trouble holding back.” He lay down next to me, burning my skin.

“Don’t hold back,” I said, before I moaned as he entered two really hot fingers in my ass. The high temperature ignited my prostate, and I almost came right there, no need for a hand on my dick.

“Wait!” I cried out. “I’m gonna come!”

He growled as he pulled his fingers out and straddled me. That was such a turn-on, my dick was crying long streams of pre-cum on his sheets. I heard the bottle being handled again and then he was right there, at my entrance, asking for permission to enter.

I got up on my hands and knees and pushed back until his tip was past my muscles. A hot, white sensation went from my ass to my groin all the way to my throat, and I couldn’t breathe. Flashes of color were splashed behind my closed eyelids. His hand came up to my throat and pulled me up, so my back was to his chest, and our hearts were pounding as one. He was holding my weight with his other arm around my chest, stopping me from falling as I was only on my knees then. I reached back and put my hands on his ass, and he pumped into me, full of love and promise, as more colors flashed behind my eyes, greens and blues, and I was flying in a forest. No, I was running over a forest ground, protected by hot, soft fur. It smelled of fresh-cut grass, morning dew, sunshine, and snow, and it was wondrous and glorious and I started to come. The hot, white sensation boiled to red and shot through my ass, into my stomach until it burst from my throat in a loud groan, ribbons of cum flying out of my dick. Dylan was coming in my ass, and I felt it all, burning me, branding me. I heard his scream before his hand squeezed my throat, and he bit my neck, hard. He was still pumping into me and my prostate loved it, prolonging my orgasm.

The skin on my back felt raw. We fell forward, Dylan on top of me for a second before he leaned sideways as his dick disengaged from me. The loss I felt from that organ leaving my body almost made me weep but then my ass was on fire so it wasn't too sad.

Dylan gathered me in his arms and kissed my neck where he had bitten it. "Sorry, it's bleeding a little," he said as he kissed and licked it.

"You're an animal," I said, and that made me crack up. I laughed. Whether from nervous energy or just from an overload of emotion from what had just happened, I still don't know.

"Yes, but I'm *your* animal now. And you're mine forever. No one can touch you anymore. Are you ready for that?" My laugh quieted.

"If this is the kind of sex we're gonna have for the rest of our lives, I don't want anyone else touching me," I said lazily, letting myself relax in his arms. "Hey! The same goes for you, no?" I asked, lifting my head up.

"I can't get it up for anyone else anymore, Tom. You're it for me now. I hope you never stop desiring me or I'll be one poor, frustrated bastard."

"No danger of that. I'm psyched my mate is one gorgeous hunk of man and he's all mine," I said, cupping his face in my hands and kissing his nose.

"You think I'm gorgeous?" he said modestly.

"Oh come on, Dylan. You're fishing for compliments, now?" I teased.

"I'm serious. You think I'm gorgeous? Or is it just after-sex talk?" he asked.

I stared right into his amber irises. "You're beautiful to me, Dylan. I love you. But you're one hell of a good-looking guy. You must know that."

"Thanks," he said, eyes downcast. "I'm happy you think so. You're so handsome, I wouldn't want you to feel like you're settling."

That made me laugh. Hard. He looked up, and the sincerity in his look cut my hilarity off.

"You're serious. Dylan, why would you think that?"

"You're not compelled to find me attractive. You're mostly human. I just hope I please you as much as you please me."

"Are you saying you think I'm handsome because you're compelled by magic to do so? That's almost insulting." I pulled back a little, but his arms pulled me tighter to him.

“No, no, no. You’re beautiful to me, you’ll always be. But you’re so handsome too, with your green eyes and your auburn hair and your long muscles and lean stomach. I’m so lucky it’s you, you’re quite a catch,” he said, giving me a sweet kiss.

I flushed from the compliment. Really, this guy was good for my ego.

“How come you came to Canada? Did you know where I was? How does that work?”

“I came here because my mom was from Montreal. When I was forty, and it was pretty obvious that my mate wasn’t close to home, my mom suggested I come here. She spoke French with me, so I know enough to get by. It was her idea I might find my mate here. She was right. It’s too bad she’s not around for me to tell her. She’d be so happy,” he said the last part with a choked voice.

“I’m sorry she’s gone. How did she die, if werewolves don’t get sick and heal quickly?”

“Getting hit and dragged a hundred feet by a semi’ll do it.”

“Shit. I’m really sorry. That’s horrible.” I hugged him to me and stroked his back.

“She died instantly. There’s no coming back from that. Her neck was broken, her body mangled and torn apart. It was my dad that was hard to watch. Every day, the magic leaked out of him, little by little, until he was an old human with a failing body. He was glad to go, he told me. He wanted to be with her again. It took a little more than a year. It was agonizing to watch him. He’s at peace now.”

“Is that what would’ve happened to you if I hadn’t come back?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“That’s terribly sad. Couldn’t you get over it? Do any of you ever do?”

“For some it takes longer, they find reasons to hang on. But the point is that we don’t want to go on. Once we meet our mates, if we can’t have their love, we’d rather die. It’s the curse of the magic. You live for a long time, you’re strong, you’re healthy, but you need love. If you don’t have it, you can’t hold on to the magic and you die.”

“That is the most romantic, idiotic thing I’ve ever heard.”

Dylan chuckled. “It is what it is. I wish I’d had time to date you, Tom, explain all this to you before mating. How are you feeling now that the

bonding's complete?" He was rubbing his hand on my back and ass, down my thigh.

"Perfectly happy. By the way, is that your wolf I felt?"

Dylan was taken aback. "You felt that?" he asked, his eyes wide, a look of hope and wonder in his eyes.

"If by 'feeling that' you mean being carried through a forest with wonderful smells, protected by soft fur and feeling loved like never before, then yeah, I felt it. It *was* your wolf, right?" He smiled so wide I thought his face would break. A warm feeling swept over me, like I absorbed his joy.

"Yeah, that was me. My wolf. Wow. You're the first human to experience something like this that I've ever heard of. That little drop of wolf blood is really great," he said, nuzzling under my ear. "I'm so happy, Tom. I don't want to overwhelm you, but I'm so fucking happy I could cry," he said, and I felt something hot and wet on my neck.

My heart burst, and the back of my eyelids tickled. "It's okay, babe, you can tell me whatever you feel," I said into his hair, my voice catching. We stayed like that, in each other's arms, until I couldn't stand lying in my cum any longer.

"Do you mind if we get up and change the sheets? These are sticky," I finally said.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't even think of that. Do you want a washcloth?" he said as he disentangled his limbs from mine and started to get up.

"We could shower perhaps?" I asked, feeling horny suddenly.

He just turned his head over his shoulder. One look at my half-erection and his eyebrows raised in a suggestive manner. "Sure, we could do that," he answered, grinning. "Come here," he held out his hand.

I took it, and we stumbled to the bathroom, his erection growing by the second. It was entertaining to watch.

How he managed to blow me in such a small bath, being such a big man, I'll never know, but it was fucking awesome. I returned the favor and drank his hot cum down my throat like it was the best fucking liquid in the world. Delicious. Which made me think of something.

As we dried each other off, I said, "Dylan, we didn't use any protection."

“Not a problem. I can’t catch anything, and you’re fine. I can smell it on you. Your blood sugar is a little high, we’ll have to watch that. No more Sugar Crisps for you, babe,” he said, smiling.

“You’re shitting me.”

“Yeah!” He started laughing. “I can’t smell your blood sugar, but I would be able to smell disease and decay, and you smell just delicious,” he said, leaning in to sniff my neck before licking it.

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about your cum.”

“What?”

“It’s delicious,” I said before I gave him a short but hot kiss. He growled. “I love it when you do that.”

“As delicious as my jizz is, and I’m happy you enjoy it, you must be hungry for some real food? I know I am,” he said, slapping my ass on his way out of the bathroom.

We dressed, and he made us pasta with cream sauce and spinach, sprinkled with parmesan. The man could cook too. I was in heaven. Maybe I’d died when he’d choked me during his orgasm?

“I’ve never had anyone in me without a condom. That was really awesome.”

“I was your first?” he asked, proud and gleeful.

“Yup.” I was glad he was happy about that, but what did it say about Jeff and I that we had never trusted each other enough to stop using condoms? Jeff always said it was faster to clean up, but after we broke up, and he found someone so quickly, I had my suspicions that he had fucked around on me. Water under the bridge now.

“I’m gonna need a bigger couch,” he said as we were finishing our meal sitting at his small table.

“My couch is big enough. I even have a big bathtub and a separate shower. What do you think?”

“Are you asking me to move in with you, Tom?” He had been bringing a forkful of pasta to his mouth, and his movement had been interrupted by my statement. His fork just hung there, on the tip of his fingers, ready to fall.

“Why not? That’s where we’re gonna end up eventually, sooner or later. Whenever you’re ready, babe,” I said, and I was elated at the thought. Paul

would be so pleased I'd finally have someone to share my huge bath with. He had even offered to come over with his conquests so as not to waste the tub, but I had refused. What an ass.

Dylan just smiled at me, forgetting the food on his fork which fell limply back to his plate. The raw honesty of his feelings was stamped all over his face. I forgot my food too, although I was almost finished. We just sat there, gazing at each other like all those movie scenes when the heroes know they're in love. I had always thought those scenes were a bit much, but now I understood perfectly. Dylan was glowing and everything around him had disappeared, he was all I could see. My face was flushed, it was as if my skin was thick and warm, and my neck swelled, full of love and hope and promise.

This bonding thing was fantastic.

"Can I bring my bed?"

"Yeah, it's bigger than mine."

"What about my Harley?"

"We'll find a space nearby. We'll figure it out." I got up and took my plate and his to put in the sink which was... just behind me. "This place is tiny."

"I know. It was temporary anyway."

He had come up behind me and had wrapped his arms around me. I spun around to face him and gave him a kiss. "I really like doing that," I said.

"Cleaning up?"

"Kissing you."

"Oh. Good," he said, smiling again. He was doing a lot of that. Since our lovemaking, he was looking more and more like when I met him. His cheeks had filled in, the circles under his eyes had almost disappeared. I was good for him, and it made me giddy as all hell.

"So what do we do now?" I asked, almost jumping on my feet.

"What's that look for?" he asked, looking at me sideways.

"Nothing. I'm just wondering what we do now. How's this going to work? By the way, George knows about us." He flinched, but caught himself the next second.

"My uncle must've called him. He was pretty worried. I should probably call him again, tell him everything's fine."

"I should call my grannie too, she was pretty worried after that wolf blood conversation."

Dylan stiffened. "You can't ever tell anyone else about me, you know that, right?"

"Of course I know that. You think I'm stupid or something? I don't want anyone grabbing you and stuffing you in a cage and poking you with needles to experiment on you!"

He blew out a breath he'd been holding. "Good. I know that humans usually protect their mates by instinct, but I just wanted to make it clear. This is new to me too, you know. And I don't think you're stupid. How close are you to that friend of yours, Paul? Did you and he ever...?"

"No, never. He's my best friend, has been since school. He's great, you'll like him. He'll love you. But he'll never know about you, rest assured. I don't want anything happening to you, baby," I said, hugging him close. That Rotor ride thing again. I was sucked into his energy field like a magnet. He was the positive to my negative, and I was fine with that.

"Oh, I should mention that George will smell me on you. You'll carry my scent from now on. Don't worry, only other werewolves will be able to tell you're my mate." He kissed my nose, the corners of his eyes crinkled.

"Oh great. What, will I have guys smelling my ass everywhere?" That made him laugh.

"No. But a couple of werewolves in the club last Friday were looking at you with interest. I had to stake my claim." I pulled back from him, keeping my arms around his neck.

"Is that what that was?" I said, chuckling.

"Your scent is intoxicating, babe. Well, not anymore. Now it's mixed with mine so other werewolves will keep away from you. You're no longer available. But that's how I knew you were there. I had gone in for a beer to see if I could get a job bartending. Then I caught your scent, and you were all I could think about. I had to get to you. And don't I see you dancing with a guy?" He closed his eyes at the memory. "Christ, I almost changed right there."

This was flattering and a bit unnerving. "There were other weres at the club?"

"Yes, a few. We're everywhere, Tom. But in a city like this, with so many people, we have to be really careful, and we can never change in the city. I'll

have to refrain from changing for a month as punishment for what I did on the night we met.”

“How can they tell?”

“They can smell it. When we change, our scent is more potent. Other weres will know if I change, and it’ll get back to the pack. That’s why I had to stay with George that day after I changed. He had to vouch for me.”

“You would have died if you hadn’t,” I said, angry.

“Yeah, but what I should have done was send you away and take the initiation and what came with it. Instead, I escaped but had to change into my wolf form to survive. It was stupid, just like the initiation.”

“Why put new members through such a dumb initiation anyway?”

“When you have a pack in a big city, you don’t want a hothead who can’t contain his wolf, ready to change at any provocation. It’s to prove you can stay calm, face any situation without losing control of your wolf.”

“Oh. That makes sense. It’s not so stupid after all.”

“There are other ways of making sure the new member is okay without stripping him and tying him up like a hog.” He sniffed his contempt. I found that funny.

“It’s the naked thing that bothers you?” I said, chuckling.

“Why did they need to take my clothes? Those bastards.” He was funny when he was annoyed.

“Grandma sure liked that story,” I said, before thinking about what I was revealing.

His eyes got wide with shock and embarrassment.

“You told her?! Your *grandmother*? Oh fuck. I can’t ever meet her. I’ll die,” he said, his head dropping on my shoulder with a big sigh.

I laughed. “Once you get to know her, you’ll see, there’s not much that shocks her. She was worried about you though.”

“You talked to her about us?” He wasn’t embarrassed as much as curious now and maybe a little flattered.

“Well. I told her I found a guy naked and tied up—don’t worry, I played it down as a prank. When she got worried about you, I told her I went looking for

you and you were already gone, so you were probably safe at home. It made her feel better.”

“That was really very kind of you, Tom. I’m very touched you did that,” he said, all snugly again.

“You should probably know that she told me about the werewolf blood because I told her you were a werewolf.”

“I know. It’s okay. We can trust her, right?”

“She won’t tell anyone. She did tell me to fix it with you.”

“When I get over my shame, I’ll look forward to meeting her.”

“And Paul?”

He squinted, but said, “Sure. Paul too.”

“Don’t worry, he’s harmless.” I patted his ass reassuringly.

“Does he know about the rope and the nudity too?” he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“Well... yeah,” I said, laughing. “Him I told all about your beautiful body and mesmerizing amber eyes—hey! Is that from the wolf thing?”

“What?”

“Your eye color. I’ve never seen anyone with amber eyes like yours before.”

“Yeah. A lot of wolves have brown eyes, just like humans, but some of us have gold or orange eyes, more like the grey wolf.”

“I thought you might be wearing contacts at the bar, I could still see your eye color clearly even in the dark,” I said, remembering.

“We have super night vision. Maybe my pupils don’t dilate as much. But contacts? Do I look like the type of guy who’ll take the time to put contacts in every morning?” He seemed slightly peeved.

“No, that’s why I meant to ask you. But now it makes sense. It’s the wolf in you.”

“I can’t wait for you to meet my wolf. It’ll have to wait a few weeks though,” he said, disappointment etched on his face.

“It’s okay, we have all the time in the world.”

Chapter 10

I went to work the next day after spending the night with Dylan, refreshed and energized.

“Good morning, Mr. Colucci,” George said with a big smile on his face. “Had a good evening, did you?”

“Yes, boss, thanks for the time off. Did a world of good,” I said, unable to hide my joy.

“I can tell. In more ways than one,” he said, winking.

Oh yeah, the scent thing. So he knew we fucked. Big deal.

He gestured toward the office, and I followed him. Once inside, he locked the door.

“Now you’re gonna have to come introduce yourself to the pack. Did Dylan tell you?”

“No, he didn’t. We talked about many things, but the pack wasn’t one of them.”

“Maybe they don’t do it that way in Colorado. Anyway, I’ll have to talk to Dylan. He’s not a full member yet, still affiliated to the Denver pack. Plus, he’s being punished. Did he tell you that?”

“Yes. You might as well know, I’m the one who cut the ropes that night and helped him escape.”

George’s eyes squinted, but he nodded. “I thought so. You were here before we came back to pick him up. He’s a feisty one, that Dylan. He’ll have to introduce his mate and you’re a guy. Many of us don’t care, but some elders aren’t too keen on the homosexual thing. Just beware, okay, Tom? It might be difficult, but I’ll do all I can. You’re a good man.”

He came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder, squeezing hard for a second. He let go and left the office. I stood there, processing this new development. I wondered if Dylan was aware of this. Probably not.

I went to work but miscalculated on hand-eye coordination and dropped my hammer a couple of times, enough for the guys to rib me for it.

I sent a text to Dylan.

Need to talk to u soon.

He answered quickly.

Meet u after work.

I confirmed and waited for the work day to end.

At four, Dylan was waiting by my truck. Just seeing him there lifted my spirits. I came up to him smiling, but held back on demonstrating my affection, not knowing if he was okay with that or not. I got my answer when he grabbed me and kissed me hard, in front of everyone. Some of the guys still around started hooting and clapping. I know I blushed bright red.

"Sorry, should've asked if that was alright," Dylan said, smiling like the devil. I grunted, closing my eyes.

"Payback for telling my grandmother about the rope, I'm guessing?"

He laughed at that.

"Didn't think of that, but sure, that works. I should have asked you first. Is it okay for me to kiss you in public?" he asked solemnly with a hint of amusement.

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm just not used to it. I love it, in fact," I said, giving him a quick kiss.

"You had a boyfriend. Didn't you guys kiss in front of people?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"No, he didn't want to attract that kind of attention," I said, looking away.

"Well, I want to let the whole world know this beautiful man is mine, and I love him, and I want everyone to know it," he said, hugging me close.

This guy could melt my heart with just a few words.

We got in the truck and headed to my home, which would soon be our home.

"Something on your mind?" he asked, facing me with his back to the car door.

"Yes. George said you had to introduce your mate to the pack and some of them wouldn't be too happy with the gay thing. Did you know that?"

He blew out a breath. "I was expecting to have to introduce you, but I wasn't expecting to have a problem with the gay angle, being in Montreal. People are more open here, or so I thought."

"We're open, but we still have the few homophobes, especially the older generation. But have no illusions, there are still people who think being gay is unnatural or an illness, and these people raise kids with these ideas. Sometimes those ideas stick."

"Hmmm... well, I don't care. If they're not happy with us being together, I don't need them. I can apply to a different pack."

"How would that work?"

"It's a bit complicated. I'd need to meet with them, I won't have anyone to vouch for me, so they can do whatever they want to me in terms of initiations or requesting payments, and basically during that time, I have no protection, which means you have no protection either."

We were almost home. I had been looking forward to an evening of discovery, preferably sexual, with my new boyfriend, but the dark sky and damp weather seemed to be a premonition of the night's mood.

"What do you mean, protection? What kind of protection do you need?"

"If anything happens to me, like I need medical attention or I need to change, or some wolf decides to challenge me for some reason or other. Normal pack stuff. If you're not part of a pack, you don't get the protection."

"It's pretty serious. What happens if you have an accident?"

"Like what? A car accident?"

"Yeah, let's say you're hit by a bus. What happens?"

"I have to get picked up by other wolves and taken to a safe place where I can change and heal. No human doctor can examine me because my body temperature and my bone density and other stuff would give weird vital signs. They could potentially harm me if they treat me as if I were human. And I couldn't change into wolf form in a hospital, so I couldn't heal from whatever they did to me. I could die. Other than that, not much."

"What about the challenge you mentioned?"

At this, his face crumpled.

"That's another thing. But that hardly ever happens anymore. We're civilized people now, and that kind of event attracts attention. Don't worry about that."

I was worried anyway.

“That means we have to make it work with this pack, Dylan. If you have to leave me, do it. I don’t want anything to happen to you because of me. Maybe we should wait until you’re a full member before introducing me?”

He had jumped in his seat when I said, “if you have to leave me”. “Are you nuts? I can’t leave you! Ever! Worst case scenario, you’re coming with me and we’re going back to Colorado. That’s it.”

“Wait. I can’t leave Grannie here. She’s too old to travel and get settled somewhere else. I’d follow you anywhere in a minute, but I can’t leave her behind.”

He sat back and sighed, frowning. “Okay, we’ll make it work with this pack. We’ll see what they have to say. They may put conditions on my acceptance. I’ll talk to George and my uncle.”

I found parking not too far from my place, and we walked hand in hand till we got to the door. Dylan leaned in and gave me a quick kiss as I put the key in the lock. “Don’t worry, okay? It’ll be fine.”

Easy for him to say. This was supposed to be fun, a new beginning in our lives, full of happiness and great sex.

When we were settled, Dylan phoned his uncle Jamie. I was making supper when Paul sent me a text.

What are u up 2?

I answered

Dinner with D.

My cell rang two seconds later.

“What’s going on, man? The monster’s there?” I looked up guiltily and yes, Dylan’s brows shot up when Paul said that, which reminded me to ask about super wolf hearing. That had happened at the bar too. I smiled lamely at Dylan before turning around.

“Don’t call him that!” I whispered. “Dylan’s here, I’m making supper. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks. You sound better than last weekend. Anything good happen?”

“Yes, I’m with Dylan now. We’re together.”

“Alriiiiiight Tom my man! Good for you! How’s the sex?”

“I’m not telling you.”

His tone changed. “This is serious?”

“Yeah, very serious,” I said as I turned to watch Dylan. He was smiling at me, even though he was listening to his uncle. Touching and unnerving.

“Well, then, I’m happy for you. I won’t ask about the gorilla sex, I’m guessing this guy can perform, what with his size and those hands and—”

“Shut up, Paul.”

“Okay, okay. Sorry. So how’s Grannie?”

We talked about my grandmother for a while, then we talked about mundane stuff.

“You wanna go out for a beer Friday? Or dancing at Club 80 again? We were rudely interrupted last time,” he said, and I heard the smirk over the phone.

“I don’t know. We might have to do some club thing with the biker guys soon, it might be Friday, I’ll let you know.”

“Don’t forget me now that you’ve found true love, T, alright?” he said sounding forlorn, but I didn’t buy it.

“Yeah, yeah. Like you didn’t ignore me when you were going out with Roger-the-dick.” He laughed at that.

“Right. Keep me posted about Friday. Have a good night and kiss Dylan for me.”

“No way. Bye, Paul,” I said affectionately before hanging up.

Dylan was right behind me when I turned, and I jumped.

“Christ! Don’t do that!”

He laughed. “So, what are you waiting for?”

“For what?”

“Paul said to kiss me for him. Where’s my kiss?” he said, a bit too cheerfully.

“You have super hearing, don’t you.”

"Yup. First, my kiss." I gave him a big, sloppy one. "Thanks. Second, he calls me the monster?"

"Only this time. You *are* a tad big, you know. And you did growl and practically carry me away from him. I told him not to call you that anymore."

"I know, I heard you whisper it really loudly," he said, chuckling.

"You heard his comment in the club, right? About you being hot? Or huge? I don't remember exactly, but I could see it on your face you'd heard, although I thought it was impossible."

"I heard him. Funny guy. I have extra sensitive hearing, more so in wolf form, but even like this."

"So if I whisper dirty things from another room, you'll hear me?"

His gaze turned hot and heavy. "Yes, I will," he said, nodding. "Feel free to experiment." He gave me a quick kiss, smiling against my lips. "Okay," his smile faltered, "I spoke with my uncle. He knows of only two elders who don't like gays in this pack, but they have a lot of influence. We'll see. George will confirm it, but there's a meeting at the clubhouse in Pointe-aux-Trembles on Thursday evening. Can you make it? I need you there."

"Sure, I'll be there." I turned back to my task, but the lump of worry that had formed in my gut earlier was still there, cutting into my appetite.

We had a quiet dinner and sat in front of an episode of *Walking Dead*, snuggling close. Then we showered, had great quickie sex, and spooned in my queen-size bed that was a bit small for both of us. We'd be moving his bed in on the weekend, provided we didn't have to relocate to Colorado.

On Wednesday, George came over for a beer after work to discuss the meeting at the clubhouse. Dylan had come to pick me up so we arrived at the apartment at the same time.

"Sit down. What would you like to drink? Heineken? A Maudite?" I was picking up stuff and rearranging the magazines thrown on the coffee table.

George chuckled. "I'll have a Maudite, thanks. Leave that," he said, motioning with his hands at the coffee table.

I drew in a breath and went to the kitchen. Dylan had just sat down the minute his coat was off, and he was watching me with an amused expression. My boss and my new boyfriend were in my house, and I wasn't used to

entertaining. They knew each other before I met Dylan because they were part of the same motorcycle club but also because they were werewolves, which excluded me completely, and they were watching me flutter around like a hen. Yeah, nothing to be nervous about.

I went to get the beers, a Heineken for Dylan and Maudites for me and George, and I brought some nuts. My grandmother always said you should serve food with drink, and drink with food. I came back to the living room, and they just sat there, waiting for me, George smiling, Dylan almost laughing. No pressure.

I handed them their beers, and Dylan winked at me. Maybe he thought it would make me feel better, but it just made me feel more self-conscious.

“What’s gonna happen tomorrow?” Dylan asked George.

“John’ll introduce you to the whole pack. You’ll introduce Tom as your mate,” George’s eyes flicked to me for a second, “and you’ll state your request to join.”

“Who’s John?”

Dylan took this one. “John Tessier is the leader of the pack. George took me to see him that day I went in to work with you guys, because I had changed. John’s the one who sentenced me for a month.” I nodded and looked to George so he could continue.

“Then John’ll ask the members if anyone has something to say about that, and that’s when we expect either Lenny Bergeron, who sits as council, or Ted Smith, to speak up against your orientation. They’re both old-school and close to retirement, but they do have their friends backing them up.” When I sighed, George pressed on. “There’s no written rules here, boys, it’s usually just basic common sense, and the leader is bound to be fair and reasonable in all matters pertaining to pack membership and the safety of werewolves in general. I don’t see a problem with it, we have friends also.” He sipped his beer.

I looked to Dylan and saw his expression was calm and confident. He smiled at me and crunched some nuts before saying, “It’s not like in the books, Tom. We’re not gonna start tearing into each other. There’s no drain in the middle of the floor to make it easier to clean the blood.” He sniggered.

“Okay. What do I have to do? Or what can I do to make it easier?” I asked Dylan, then looked to George.

Dylan turned to George, who answered, "As a human mate, there's not much you can do. Just stand by your man. Your scent already confirms you as mated, you're not an overly aggressive man or challenging in any way, it should be fine. The others will sense your disposition. If you're nervous, it's alright. As long as they don't get the impression the new mates could be violent or threatening, things go smoothly. In your case, you have nothing to worry about."

I felt a little better, and I sensed Dylan was peaceful. I could feel his emotions sometimes, which was weird but not unpleasant and sometimes useful, like now. I trusted him completely on this.

"As for you, Dylan," George said, facing him, "you're already being punished for a major break in the rules, even if it was justified—which it could be argued that it wasn't, but you were lucky John was so lenient on you, so you can expect to have some kind of probation period or maybe a condition to your acceptance. Don't mention the gay part in your introduction, just say it like you would if you were with a woman, and let John take it from there. How did you guys do it in Colorado?"

"In our pack, gays don't introduce their mates to the pack formally. Too many elders are still against it and it just creates problems for nothing. One guy tried a couple of years ago and regretted it. The debate was just long-winded, bigoted comments being thrown around and it ended up hurting the couple. The guy's still part of the pack, but he doesn't get involved as much and lives with his boyfriend outside of pack territory. He's still protected and everything, and I'm sure the pack would protect his mate if anything were to happen, but they're happier being far away from the homophobes."

George was thoughtful for a minute. "We're lucky here in Canada, same-sex marriage is legally binding and everything, but there are still those who believe homosexuality is wrong. Maybe someday it won't matter to anyone; we can hope."

I didn't have much hope for that. There would always be people whose religious beliefs didn't accept homosexuality, groups who believed you could cure it, others who would still think it was gross because it tapped into something in themselves they didn't want awakened or seen. But at least, if gay rights were upheld and respected, we had a chance at a normal, happy life.

Chapter 11

Thursday came too soon. I wasn't ready to face these people. If there was a doubt that Dylan wouldn't be accepted or protected, I wanted out.

After a quick supper, Dylan held my hand while I drove to the clubhouse out in Pointe-aux-Trembles, at the furthest eastern tip of the Island of Montreal. Hidden in an industrial park, bleak and unassuming, stood a bunker-type construction with about sixty cars and trucks, most of them big monster trucks, in front. It wasn't hard to guess what kind of transportation Harley dudes preferred for the winter when they couldn't use their bikes.

We entered at the same time as others filed into the entrance, which opened on a great big hall with a raised dais at the far end. Three seats were set up behind a long table on the dais with a microphone in the middle. At least a hundred people were in attendance. Some people, men and women, stared at Dylan then took particular notice of me. I wondered if it was that weird scent I was giving off, mixed with Dylan's now. George was there with some other guys, and I was surprised to recognize Glenn and Henry from the construction crew. They just smiled at me in acknowledgement, no more.

Three men went up on the stage and took their places at the long table. The guy in the middle took hold of the microphone and addressed the assembly.

"Good evening, everyone," John Tessier said, and silence fell almost immediately. Wow. These people respected their leader.

"We're here to accept two new members with their mates in our pack. Dylan Scott and Terry Bower. First, Dylan Scott. Would you come and introduce yourself?"

Dylan squeezed my hand and walked up to a microphone set up on a stand on the floor, in front of the dais.

"Hello everyone, I'm Dylan Scott, of the Denver pack. I'm here with my mate, Tom Colucci, and I would like to pledge my loyalty to the pack, if you'll accept me," he said clearly. George moved to stand near him.

The man on the dais to the left of the leader stiffened when Dylan mentioned my name. There was some rumbling from the audience, but it soon quieted down when the leader tapped on the table right next to the microphone.

"Order, please. Thank you, Dylan. Who vouches for this man?"

"I do," George said in the microphone. "George Castonguay, sir."

"Great. Now, does anyone know of any reason why we shouldn't accept Dylan Scott and his mate into our pack and extend to them hospitality and protection?"

The man to his left raised his hand. "I do." He pulled the microphone toward himself.

My heart sank as I saw Dylan's shoulders drop. George had turned to him and had patted his arm in a gesture of support and patience.

"What do you have to say, Lenny?" the leader said.

"Well, sir, I have a problem with a stranger from another country asking to join our pack with a man as his mate. We don't know him or his mate, who is clearly not one of us and they, as homosexuals, can't contribute to creating strong offspring to continue our pack. I vote for them being denied."

A few people were nodding their heads, many more were shaking theirs. The leader pulled the microphone back.

"Is there anyone who wants to argue this point? If so, please do so now at the microphone."

The guys from the construction crew, Glenn and Henry, came up. Glenn spoke first, "I would like to point out that we have never refused someone's mate based on the fact that they can't procreate, as women not of our kind generally don't survive childbearing anyway so that argument is lame, with all due respect, sir." Lenny flinched at that.

"Duly noted, Glenn. Thank you. Next?" said the leader.

Henry came up to the microphone. "To refute the argument that we don't know Mr. Scott's mate, Sir, actually Glenn, George, and I have known Tom Colucci for three years and would be happy to vouch for his character. Not to accept them just because of who they sleep with, is not a proper reason to deny them our pack's protection. Tom is a good man, and Dylan is vouched for. I say we should grant their request."

Some people clapped and most nodded their heads.

The leader tapped the table again.

"I've heard both sides. Does the prospect have something to say?"

George nudged Dylan, who came up to the microphone again.

“Sir, with all due respect to you and to the members of this pack, I don’t feel the need to defend my orientation. If your pack accepts me as a member with my acknowledged mate, I’ll be very happy. If you don’t just because of my mate’s gender, then I probably wouldn’t be a good fit with this pack and I’ll move on, no grudges or challenges. If I am accepted, I will pledge my loyalty to all members and do everything in my power to protect this pack from any threat, as I would expect it of the other members toward me and my mate. Thank you.”

A general murmur spread across the assembly. George patted Dylan’s back. I was proud of my boyfriend, but found him a little reckless. I hoped this worked.

John Tessier tapped the table once. Silence once again swept the hall.

“We heard both sides of the issue. All those in favor of refusing membership to Dylan Scott and his mate Tom Colucci, based on the argument expressed by Lenny Bergeron, please raise your hand.”

Twelve hands went up. Mostly older people but some younger ones too. Disappointing but not too damaging.

“All those in favor of granting membership to Dylan Scott and Tom Colucci, based on the opposing arguments, please raise your hand.”

Eighty or so hands went up.

John Tessier said, “In light of recent events dealt with last week concerning Mr. Scott, it is hereby ordered that this pack is honored to extend its protection and loyalty to Dylan Scott and his mate Tom Colucci as of today, with a probation period of three months as is usually done with a new member from another country, pending the safe conclusion of the punishment Mr. Scott has yet to complete. Welcome, Dylan and Tom.” He tapped the table again and almost everyone cheered. Lenny didn’t; he just sat there, fuming.

Some people around me greeted me with smiles and congratulations. Dylan strode back to me through the crowd and hugged me fiercely to him.

“It’s done! Nothing to worry about anymore,” he said, letting go.

I saw George across the room and when our eyes met, he winked. Glenn gave me a thumbs up, and Henry gave me a warm smile.

Glenn’s intervention didn’t surprise me, but Henry’s was a revelation. He had always been very quiet and reserved, had done his work and gone home

without ever participating in the ribbing and teasing common to most construction crews. I was of course teased because I was gay, Didier couldn't live down the fact that he was French, and no one would ever let Sylvain forget he was deaf in one ear.

The obscene signs the guys would make to "help" Sylvain understand were pretty immature but funny, and Sylvain always saw the humor. I'll let you guess what they did to mime "I'm coming" when Sylvain called one of them over. But Henry never got involved, never laughed, always minded his own business. To find out he was a werewolf and he was willing to vouch for me was moving.

When we left after the other new guy was accepted without any argument, I made sure to thank George, Glenn and Henry. They brushed it off and wished us a good evening. I was gonna see them the next morning anyway. A round of good coffees would be appreciated.

We drove home talking about the events of the evening, happy about the outcome.

"This is great! Now our life together can start without anything threatening it," Dylan said, squeezing my hand. Driving with one hand wasn't always a good idea in Montreal during winter, but I was getting good at it.

"You still have a three-month probation period," I pointed out.

"Pfff no biggy. What could go wrong?" Dylan said, smiling, content.

"Let's hope nothing does. How about a burger?" I suggested.

"We ate before leaving! You're still hungry?"

"A celebratory burger. No? You're not hungry?" I asked, glancing at him quickly.

"I'm hungry, but not for food," he said, that devilish smile showing up.

"Oh, I see." I was up for that. "Fuck the burger, let's go home," I said.

"I'd rather you fucked me," he said and blushed.

"Dylan! You naughty boy." I was laughing.

"Can't wait to take you out on my Harley in a few weeks. Winter's almost over," he said, looking outside.

"Yeah, but you blink and it's back. Summer is so short," I said. "But you'll see, at the beginning of winter, with fresh, clean snow and Christmas lights

everywhere, Montreal is beautiful. And let's not forget the start of the hockey season! We missed it this year."

"Yeah! Go Avalanche!" Dylan said cheerfully. I put on the brakes in the middle of Sherbrooke Street, after checking for anyone behind me. We were alone in our lane.

"What? Avalanche? You're shitting me, right?"

"No, I'm a big Avalanche fan. Why?" Dylan said, surprise etched on his face.

"Don't you know they used to be the Quebec City Nordiques? The Canadiens' worst rivals?" I was sleeping with a traitor.

"Oh yeah! So?" He obviously didn't see the importance of this issue. Fuck werewolves, fuck packs, fuck protection, fuck gorgeous. This just couldn't be.

"Dylan, we have a serious problem."

Epilogue

“J’arrive.”

Whenever Dylan spoke to me in wolf form, it was in French. I heard the wolf’s thoughts in my head, but I couldn’t speak to him telepathically. Still, most humans couldn’t hear their mates at all, so I was lucky to have a few drops of wolf blood. We presumed that was the reason for this weird communication skill.

“J’ai faim.”

I knew that, he was always hungry when he came back from a run. We had rented a small cabin hidden in the woods in St-Michel-des-Saints in Lanaudiere, north of Montreal, an hour away from civilization. Here, Dylan could let his wolf run free for a few hours a day. I loved it. I got to read in quiet solitude with the smells of nature and sounds of wildlife, and to cook for my wolf when he returned, in his human form, gloriously naked and sweaty, smelling of wet dog which always reminded me of the time he was in my kitchen that first day I met him.

“J’ai hâte de te voir.”

Me too, honey, I look forward to seeing you too. Hurry up.

“Okay, je me dépêche.”

“Tu m’as entendu?”

“Oui!”

Fuck me! He heard that!

This bonding thing was fucking fabulous.

The End

Author Bio

Phoebe resides in Montreal, Canada. She currently lives with a rock star, a make-up artist and a gamer. She reads an average of three hundred books and short stories a year on the electronic devices she keeps breaking and replacing.

She'd like to thank the make-up artist and the gamer for naming the characters in this book.

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NO ENEMY BUT TIME

By Angel Martinez

Photo Description

A handsome, dark-haired young man, reclining on his side, admires and rests his hand on the beautiful curve of his lover's back. The viewer can't see the lover's face, but the gesture implies a tender and familiar fondness.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I wonder what is going to happen now that Michael lost his wings because of me. I still remember the first time he protected me when I was five and some brat pushed me in the playground. Everything slowed down and I landed softly on the ground, facing a beautiful face. Before I realized, time started moving and my teacher was running to check on me. I saw a beautiful angel standing across from me smiling. From that day forward, Michael was always there when I needed him.

As you see, he is still beautiful. These dimples in his back are the only evidence that he was my beautiful angel. Now, I love to look at him when he sleeps. I like tracing his back muscles with my finger to see them respond to me. For some reason, I feel something may be wrong around us. Everything has been perfect for us for the last ten years, but as the days pass I believe something is going to change.

I love Michael and I will do anything for him. He gave up his standing in heaven to be mine and now I would give everything to keep him safe. Please dear author, help me tell our story; most importantly help us to get our happy ending. We are a passionate couple and love to express our love for each other physically and in new and experimental ways. So feel free to let your imagination run free. Michael may no longer have his wings or standing, but I am Hades true son.

Sincerely,

Zagreus (my friends call me Zack)

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: angels/demons/gods, fetish/toys, (brief) established couples, mythological references, mythical beings, gardener, bird rescue, disability

Content Warnings: some graphic violence, HoFN (Hopeful For Now)

Word Count: 19,140

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NO ENEMY BUT TIME

A Brandywine Investigations universe story

By Angel Martinez

*“What reinforcement we may gain from hope,
If not what resolution from despair.”*

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Chapter 1

If I tilt my head, I can still see the shadows of wings in this light.

An approaching late spring squall shoved the wind into gusts, causing the trees to sway and flail their branches in dismay. Shadows played across the moon, Rembrandt lighting Michael's body, making the illusory wings rustle in dark, restless twitches, so unlike Michael's own bright wings in his former life.

Zack shivered, a wave of unease rippling through him. The unsettling moments had increased since winter, fast-moving storms of dark spots across his heart that he could neither explain nor predict. At first, he had blamed them on reestablished contact with his father. An honorable god, yes, but he had lived too long in darkness and Zack still found his company disquieting. But they persisted, even when he hadn't seen Hades for weeks. His hunter's instincts screamed, though so far gave him nothing to go on besides a vague, burrowing dread.

Something's coming... something dangerous. He ran a gentle hand down Michael's back, a crooked smile curving up when the sensitive wing dimples twitched under his fingers. *I'll watch. I'll keep you safe. Whatever it is.*

"Hey." Zack leaned in to nuzzle into Michael's hair, blond turned to silver in the moonlight.

With a contented sigh, Michael stirred and turned his head on the pillow. "Are you going?"

"Few minutes. You want breakfast or should I let you sleep?"

Michael blinked sleep-blurred eyes and started to push himself up. Zack kept a hand on his back to keep him on his stomach. "If I'm going with you, I need to have breakfast with you."

"You're not even awake yet. Stay. Sleep. The birds won't mind if you miss the first day."

"All right." Michael rose up far enough to plant a soft kiss on Zack's lips before he snuggled back down with a smile. "Bossy."

Zack patted his muscular ass. "Damn right. I'll be back before lunch. Don't forget to bring in your columbines if the wind picks up much more."

A twinge of anxiety nearly stopped Zack as he eased the bedroom door closed, but he didn't have anything solid on which to pin his fears. *A leftover wisp of nightmare. Wind and shadows.*

He guzzled down coffee, wolfed down a bagel, and slipped into his water shoes, still shaking his head at his groundless fears. Michael would be fine on his own. While he wasn't the powerful being he had once been, their lives were quiet and peaceful. He had no need for wings and miracles to putter successfully around his beloved garden. Zack rolled his bike from the shed and set out for the park. Every year since they had moved to Lewes, he had taken three days off from his animal control business—catch and release only—to assist with the migratory bird census.

The empty early-morning road stared blindly at him. The only sounds accompanying his tires on the asphalt were night insects and the capricious wind. He could almost believe it was a century ago, when the world was larger and less crowded and his Michael was the one to keep him safe.

Though still early for most butterflies, Michael kept the butterfly garden for the few migratory wanderers who might pass through. He knelt next to the flowerbed, carefully teasing invasive plants out of the rows and replanting them in the wild bed. The varied reds of the bleeding hearts and wild columbine, the bright pink of the early blooming fuchsia, and the proud white crowns of Queen Anne's lace all bloomed against the backdrop of yellow and white fragrant stars of his honeysuckle vines on their wooden trellis. Zack called it his happy place, and Michael couldn't argue with that. The busy hum of bees, the riot of annual creation—it settled him, warmed him. He needed those things desperately, now, where once a garden would simply have brought him joy.

He had no regrets. From the moment he had been assigned to Zack, mostly god with a human birth mother for his third life, he had felt the universe shift. An Abrahamic angel watching over an infant Greek god was unexpected, but Zack's human mother, a devout Catholic, hadn't survived long after the birth. Her prayers for an angel to guard her baby had been fervent and powerful.

Some part of him had known, from that moment to their first kiss nearly eighty years later, that he was doomed. Michael's fall, white-hot agony and despair, followed swiftly after that kiss. Without Zack, he would have descended into madness and vengeful hate as so many of the fallen did. Gently,

carefully, Zack had coaxed him back from the darkness, had reversed their roles, and made himself the protector.

Zack never said it, but Michael knew he had bought this house with Michael's happiness in mind. Oh, yes, he made noises about wanting to be closer to his father and wanting to live at the beach, but the little house surrounded by trees, with a creek singing in the backyard and a sunny garden, had been what Michael needed.

He loved Zack for that, loved him more for it, if that could be possible. He squinted up at the sun trying to shove through the clouds. Rain wouldn't stop the bird count but it might make it a miserable process with wet sneakers and soaked clothes.

He should be home soon, though, and it's just started to drizzle.

The honeysuckle leaves rustled in the wake of a body moving through them. Michael leaned forward, trying for a glimpse of the creature. Bird, he thought at first, but it pushed forward in a straight line instead of flitting about. Small snake, perhaps? He parted the leaves and found himself eye to eye with a little green frog, its back peppered with black spots.

"*Rah rah*," said the frog.

Michael laughed, fascinated as its throat distended to the point of translucence for another *rah*. Slowly, he stretched out a hand, fingers extended, and held his breath as tiny feet took tentative steps onto his skin. Settled on his palm, the frog continued to sing its strange song of miniature terrier yaps.

"Hey, who's your friend?" Zack spoke softly near his ear.

His sudden appearance made Michael twitch, and the frog leaped away. "I wish you wouldn't do that. Mr. Silent Feet."

"Sorry. I forget sometimes." Zack peered into the honeysuckle vines. "Barking tree frog. We don't get many around here. Pretty rare find."

"He's so cute." Michael settled back on his haunches. "How did it go?"

"Noisy, as usual." Zack flopped down on the grass next to him and rested his head on Michael's thigh. "Good weight gain in the Red Knots overall. Sanderling count is up a little from last year."

"Every little bit, right?" Michael stroked his fingers through the windblown thatch of Zack's midnight hair. A hint of saltwater clung to it. He must have

gone in after the cannon nets, but then, he always did. The birds calmed in his presence, and the bird project folks were glad to have him there.

“Every bit.” Zack kissed his fingers and sat up abruptly. “You’re so cold. No shoes. No jacket. It’s not summer yet.”

“I was only doing a little weeding. Haven’t been out that long.”

“You’re shivering.” Zack tugged on his hand. “Come on. Inside. I could use some warming up myself.”

Shivering? Michael stared at the fine tremors running along his arm. “I... yes. Of course.”

Before heading in, Zack stepped around the wood screen to the outside shower. Every beach house seemed to have one, and after a week, they’d both seen the sense in it. Water shoes sailed over as the shower pattered on concrete, while damp T-shirt and shorts landed on top of the shower wall. Michael retrieved everything with a little smile before heading inside, knowing Zack would follow once he’d rinsed off the sand and the worst of the salt. His Greek god had no shame and would clomp into the house in nothing but a pair of garden clogs.

Once the warmth of the house enveloped him, tremors wracked Michael’s body, ripples of chill just under the skin. He leaned against the wall, arms wrapped tight around his ribs as he fought hard shivers. *I must’ve been colder than I thought.* After a few deep breaths, the tremors subsided, so he shrugged and spread Zack’s damp things out on the drying rack and headed down the hall to the bedroom. If Zack was tired, he’d appreciate the chance to snuggle in and nap, and if he wasn’t, Michael had a new toy he was dying to test drive.

The back door slammed. Cheerful whistling drifted down the hall. Zack turned the corner, stark naked, still toweling his hair dry, the hard muscles in his arms bunching and flexing. Not too tall, not too bulky, he would never be a stand-in for his cousin Heracles, but his proportions were perfection, his movements fluid art. Michael stared at the long line of thigh leading up to gorgeous, muscular glutes and a suffocating heat raced up from his knees. Stomach trembling, he took a step forward.

“Zagreus...”

“Hmm?” Zack raised his head, a hesitant smile tugging at his mouth. “What? What’s that look for?”

"I... I don't..." Michael's body moved before he could form a complete thought. Three swift steps and he slammed Zack against the wall, seizing his wrists and pinning them over his head.

"Someone's feeling aggressive today." Zack's eyes narrowed, but his expression was otherwise unreadable.

"I want you. Now." Michael pressed hard against him, nipping at his chin. "I want to make you scream."

"Mmm." Zack lifted his chin to give Michael better access to his throat, gasping and squirming when Michael latched on and sucked hard. "Does that mean you have something in mind?"

"Yes. Something new. Please, Zack."

"Hey, hey..." Zack wrestled an arm free and seized Michael around the waist. "Easy there. Since when do I say no to you? Ever? Let me get some water and I'm all yours, okay?"

Panting, Michael pulled back with a little laugh, shaking his head. "Okay. Sorry. I don't... I don't know what's wrong with me."

"This something new must be really wicked if it's got you this worked up." Zack gave him a wink and ducked under his arm to hustle to the kitchen.

I have to calm down. Am I getting sick? Can I get sick now? Michael counted out his breaths, slower and slower, forcing himself to focus on an image of clear, still water. When his heart had stopped its frenzied racing, he finally trusted himself to get out the items he wanted and turn down the sheets.

Colored light danced over the sandstone kitchen tiles. The sun had moved around the house far enough to illuminate the menagerie of suncatchers in the kitchen window.

"Don't look at me like that, Leonard," Zack muttered to the stained glass polar bear. "It's just... not usual."

He guzzled a second glass of water to give himself a moment, staring out the window through the glass animals. Michael grumbled that they obstructed the view of the garden, but he never made any move to take them down and he helped pick a name for each new addition. Leonard sat between Hortense, the otter and Priscilla, the cardinal. Farther down were Norbert, the squirrel and

Brunhilde, the seahorse and so on. It had become a game, trying to outdo each other with wildly inappropriate names.

Michael's sudden aggression excited the hell out of him, sure. His hard cock bumped the counter, defying him to say otherwise. But there was that strange shadow feeling again clouding his arousal. Something was off. Zack had no direction for the feeling, no trail, so it most likely had nothing to do with Michael.

Still.

"You think I'm imagining things, don't you, Kingsley?" The red and black glass ladybug, Michael insisted it had to be male, had no answer for him. "Smoke and shadows. I should call Dad tonight, though. Just in case."

His odd misgivings dissipated when he returned to the bedroom, mist shadows banished by a break in the clouds. Michael lounged naked on the covers, the early afternoon sun burnishing his perfect skin to rose gold and setting sparks in his hair. A plain black box sat in front of him, long and slender, piquing Zack's curiosity.

"Whatcha got there, gorgeous?"

Michael shook his head with an impish smile. "Oh, no. You don't get to see until you're secure."

"Ah. How secure?" A niggle of anxiety lodged in Zack's stomach. Michael did like to push sometimes.

"I need you still for this."

"Not like I'm three. I can stay still."

Michael let out a helpless bark of laughter. "No, you can't. You're worse than a three-year-old. Can you promise not to twitch too much if we do hands only?"

"Can't make promises without knowing what the surprise is." He climbed up on the bed to run a hand down Michael's hip. There was no established top in their relationship, not in bed. Made things a hell of a lot more interesting, but he struggled with certain things still, even for Michael. Negotiations were still part of the bargain. "Hands only. And if I can't..."

"You'll tell me." Michael rose up on his elbow to press his lips against Zack's ear, his whisper full of sin and promise. "You'll enjoy this."

Zack laughed, dismissing his nerves, his nightmares, his instincts. *It's Michael. You couldn't be safer, you idiot.* He spread his arms wide, grinning down at his former guardian. "I'm all yours."

"Oh, yes." Michael rose up on his knees, pressing Zack back to lean against the headboard. "Yes, you are. Hand, please."

At least this was familiar. They'd realized early on in their bed sport that if Zack was going to be able to tolerate restraints, he couldn't be flat on his back. Michael licked the inside of his right wrist, the wet trail sending lightning jolts through Zack's groin. Willing himself to relax, he allowed Michael to lift the hand and use a red bandana to tie it to one of the top spindles of the headboard. The left hand received the same treatment, his arms spread at shoulder height, secure, but not stretched uncomfortably.

Michael kissed the tip of his nose, the gentle gesture settling some of the ache in Zack's stomach. "Okay?"

"Yeah." He was. Staring into those bright blue eyes, he smiled, trust washing through him like a sudden spring rain in a parched gully. He loved this man, this former angel, more than the hunt, more than the forests of Arcadia, more than sometimes he thought his heart could bear. "So whatcha got in the box?"

"Something that came in the mail yesterday." One of Michael's golden brows quirked up as he picked up the box and opened the hinged lid. He turned it to Zack, revealing a thin ten-inch-long steel rod that appeared to be constructed of small orbs. His cock practically snapped to attention, the damn thing was so intriguing.

"Is that... a sound?"

"Yes. A bubble sound, the description said. Inventive shape, don't you think?"

They had tried sounds before, smooth ones. "Yeah... bumpity-bump," Zack said on a breathy chuckle. Michael cut off his words with a hard kiss, crushing his mouth down onto Zack's with bruising force, a rumble rising from deep in his chest.

Zack pulled in a sharp breath through his nose, the sound pulling hard on already sensitized nerves. He pulled back from the kiss to whisper, "Are you growling?"

"I... yes, I guess so. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Zack nudged his nose under Michael's chin. "Don't be. Sexy as hell. Do it again."

Michael laughed, but the rumbling sound returned as he nuzzled and nipped his way down Zack's throat. Eyes sliding shut, Zack thumped his head back against the headboard when Michael's tongue described a warm, wet path down his treasure trail. A nip at his thigh—damn but Michael's teeth were sharp—and then he cried out as soft lips pushed back his foreskin.

"Tease too long and we won't get too far with this," Zack whispered while Michael lapped at his slit.

His fallen angel had apparently slid past verbal. All he got back was another growl. His hands were still gentle when he grasped the base of Zack's cock to hold it steady and retrieved the well-lubed sound. He raised his eyes, searching Zack's face.

"I'm ready. Go. Please."

Zack shivered as cold metal touched his slit. His stomach muscles clenched in anticipation as the first orb slid inside, the sensation odd and shivery, his cock instantly rock hard.

"Rivers of night... yes..." Zack pulled against his restraints, fighting to keep still as Michael pushed the sound in slowly, one incredible orb at a time, invading his channel, sending waves of shuddering pleasure up his spine.

"More?" Michael's voice was a rasping snarl.

"Yes. Fuck, yes."

At five orbs, Michael pulled the sound out by two and then pushed it back in, slowly—always slowly—too slow for Zack, but he clenched his back teeth and managed to hold back the whimper. When the rounded end finally hit his prostate, he hissed in an extremity of pleasure, legs splayed stiff and taut, toes curled.

"Right there?" Michael pulled back and tapped his prostate again.

"Yes! Oh... holy mother of... Michael!" Zack slammed his head back against the headboard several times. "It's too much. Pull it out, pull it out... I'm too close..."

"No."

The single word snapped Zack's eyes open. He found Michael staring at him, a strange, cold hunger in those bright blue eyes. "Michael, please. I have to come. It's not... there's no channel in this one... Michael?"

He swallowed hard as he stared into eyes he had known for decades, suddenly gone flat and alien. His vision must have darkened, because he seemed to imagine a red tinge to them. Now the whimper escaped. "Michael, please. Please, love..."

Michael twitched and blinked, his expression suddenly puzzled. He glanced down at his hand still holding the sound, back up at Zack's face, and he let out a little sound of dismay. With a firm hold on Zack's erection, he pulled the sound out, bump by sensual bump. Zack managed to hold out until the last three orbs before he came, his cum chasing the sound up, shooting from him in pent-up geysers as he bellowed in relief and pained pleasure.

"Zack?"

A hand stroked his cheek. Pink clouds floated through his vision. He was lying flat. His hands unbound, his head in Michael's lap.

"Zack, I'm so sorry. I... are you all right?"

"What're you sorry for, sweetheart? That was amazing."

"You asked... I didn't... I don't know what I was thinking."

"Hey." Zack reached up to smooth back a curl of Michael's hair from his cheek, surprised at how his hand shook. "You pulled it in time. That was amazing. Intense."

"Too much?"

"Close. But not quite." He hated how shaken Michael looked, how pale and uncertain. So he'd had a true moment of dominance, so what? He couldn't let Michael dwell on it too much. "It was perfect. You're perfect, snookums."

Michael ducked his head on a snicker. "Babycakes."

"Schmoopykins."

"Kitten pie."

Zack smacked him with a pillow. "Butter butt."

Now Michael was laughing and smacked him back. "My little crinoline."

The pillow smacking turned into wrestling when Zack roared and rolled them both off the bed in a tangle of flailing limbs. In the ensuing tussle and

grope session, Zack managed to pin Michael and suck him off with them both still giggling like idiots.

He finally collapsed with his head on Michael's shoulder, both of them panting, sweat and semen drying on their skin.

"I'm all right. You didn't hurt me." Zack almost asked, *but are you sure you're all right?* Michael looked so peaceful and content, though, he didn't want him going back to fretting. "Want to drive down to Rehoboth for dinner?"

"Dogfish Head?"

"Sure, if you want. Good food."

"Good beer. On draught."

"Sold." Zack grinned up at Michael and added, "Schmoopy muffin." He got a pillow in the face for getting the last word.

Chapter 2

The next morning, Zack was relieved to see Michael more himself, cheerfully slipping out of bed early to make coffee and breakfast, determined to join the bird count even if he wasn't quite awake. He seemed so much better than the previous day, more present and even-tempered as he went out to the garden to say good morning to his tree frog friend and to retrieve their bikes.

Zack put the odd behavior from the day before down to isolation. They hadn't been terribly social over the winter, and Michael loved crowds, loved being around people and talking to new acquaintances. Aggression simply wasn't *Michael*, and the hints and stabs of it had obviously upset him, unbalanced him so badly. Good to see him catch himself.

I have to remember. I can't keep him all to myself. It's not good for him.

Michael chatted happily on the bike ride over and remained serene all day, running temporarily captured birds back to the weighing stations and helping Zack in the water. One of the volunteers had brought a cooler full of sandwiches for lunch, so they were tired but not starving as they biked home together. If Zack hadn't been so focused on getting home for a nap, he might have noticed the abrupt change in Michael's mood.

"Share the shower with me?" Zack offered as he propped the bikes up against the shed.

"You go ahead." Michael was staring toward the back of the garden, his voice flat and odd. "I need to check on something."

Zack blinked, caught off guard by the chill tone, but he shrugged and went to wash off the sand and salt in the outside shower. He had just rinsed the sand from his hair when a shriek set his heart pounding.

"Michael!" He flung the wooden shower door open, and raced into the garden without stopping for a towel, just in time to see Michael hurl a rock at a lesser blue heron standing at the edge of the wildflower bed. "Michael, what the hell are you doing?"

Face a mask of rage, Michael leaned down to pick up another stone since the first had only clipped tail feathers.

"Michael!" Zack lunged and tackled him before he could hurl his second missile. "What the fuck's wrong with you?"

For a moment, Michael struggled wildly, squirming and kicking underneath Zack. He risked a quick glance at the heron, in case it was something other than a heron, maybe a shapeshifter or a demon of some sort. No. Just a plain little heron. *With frog legs dangling from her beak. Aw, damn.*

"She killed him!" Michael roared, his angel's voice pitched to shatter granite. He flipped under Zack and renewed his struggles.

"Shh, shh, I see it. She ate your friend." Zack finally got hold of both of Michael's wrists and pinned him flat. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But she's just doing what she was designed to do. Mama heron has to eat."

Still trying to buck Zack off, Michael let out a frustrated sound full of hurt and betrayal. "You said he was rare!"

"Rare for here. Michael, stop. Damn it, you know how it works, that nature isn't all Disney butterflies and fucking rainbows."

"She ate my friend. She has to pay." At least Michael's voice had softened to a growl.

"You don't need me to tell you it wasn't personal. You're not a kid. But you're acting out of anger and cruelty. Michael, look at me. This isn't like you."

Michael turned his head to glare at Zack, an odd red tinge veining through the blue of his eyes. "Get off!"

"No. Not until you calm the fuck down."

Another enraged bellow, another desperate struggle, and this time Zack barely hung on. He was damn tired already. Finally, Michael collapsed against the abused grass, shoulders shaking.

"C'mere." Zack relented and sat back, not caring one rat's ass if the neighbors saw him sitting buck naked in the yard. He pulled Michael up and held him tight, letting him sob. "I understand being angry. Just not... the best way to deal with it, right?"

Michael's answer was incoherent mumbling against Zack's shoulder. At least he had dropped the rock.

"Worried about you, you know? Something hasn't been right the past couple days. Anything you need to tell me?"

Michael shrugged, arms going around Zack's neck. "I feel... odd sometimes. These chills and weird spots."

Yeah, me too. Wish I knew why. “Could you be sick? Are there, I dunno, angel viruses?”

A muffled, hiccupping chuckle came from Michael. “I’ve been asking myself the same thing.”

“Okay. Great. That’s just great. How about you take it easy today and let me fuss over you? I’ll call my cousins and see if they know.”

“Not Apollo. Please.”

Zack rolled his eyes. “Never. Stuck up, self-righteous twit. Hermes might have a clue. He knows weird shit.”

“Zack?”

“Hmm?” Zack moved his arms gently to help Michael up.

“You do know you’re naked?”

“Yeah, I figured giving Mrs. Pendleton a free show wouldn’t be a bad thing. I don’t think she has much fun anymore.”

Michael managed a snort, though he shivered in Zack’s arms. “She can download porn like everyone else, then.”

It wasn’t a bad afternoon, as afternoons stuck in bed went. Zack fussed, maybe a little too much, trying to coax Michael into eating and then napping. The strange fit of anger had made him nauseous, though, and edgy. Dark red, arterial blood-red anger, it had descended over his vision like a noxious oil slick, thick and slippery, making his thoughts hard to chase and harder to pin down.

He had acted without reason, without compassion, with... hate. Some of his fallen brethren spent their lives consumed with it. How did they live inside those choking, vile confines? Some part of him knew his reaction had been horrible, while a whispering, insidious voice at the back of his mind reminded him of the power coursing through him, the dark, inhibited strength. Michael shivered and burrowed deeper under the blankets, concentrating on Zack whistling in the kitchen.

That’s not me. It’s never been me. I am fallen, but not one of the ones who changed. I’m still Michael. Zack’s Michael. It was just a passing storm.

A storm stirred out on the bay. It reached fingers inland during the early afternoon, kicking up the wind and bringing the scent of restless waves. By the time Zack came back from the grocery store, dark clouds had obliterated the sky, shuttering the sun so midnight could visit early.

He had no fear of storms. The lightning would never dare touch him, beloved nephew of Zeus. But tonight the storm brought something with it, something dark and strange. He shivered as he got out of his Jeep and hurried to move Michael's hanging columbine planters to the door. Movement out in the garden caught his eye, furtive, clinging to the shadows.

"Michael?" Zack called, peering into the dark, squinting against the rising wind.

The shape moved, too large for Michael, misshapen somehow. Wishing he had a weapon at hand or at least one of his Arcadian hounds, Zack stepped off the porch to meet it. Whatever this was, it wasn't getting past him into the house where Michael slept.

"Who's there?" His voice cracked, not exactly the angry defiance he was going for.

A laugh floated to him across the garden, eerily familiar and oh-so-wrong. "Really? Already you don't recognize me? Zagreus... Zagreus..."

The figure stepped close enough for Zack to make out the humps at his shoulders. Wings. "Michael? But how—?"

"No stupid questions, Zack." The being took three steps closer. The voice was a chill parody of Michael's, as if some horrible soul leech had sucked out all the music and warmth. "No. You used to listen to me without question. I was the protector. The guardian. The guide. One way or another, I will be again. I'm asking you, now, to come with me willingly. Love me as I am, no matter what, as you promised."

"I... but what..."

This dark version of Michael held up a hand to cut him off. Huge wings spread out behind him, inky black, leathery wings so different from the beautiful, shining, white feathers Michael had as an angel. "I am fallen because of you. Because of your kiss, your love. I am this—" The wings shot out to their full extension, claws flashing in the single light on the back porch "—because of you! One chance, Zagreus. I am no mewling angel, now, no lickspittle lover for you to order about. Come with me willingly. Help me build

my domain as a god, or by all the rivers of the Underworld, I will come back some day and take you by force.”

Zack staggered back a step, icy hands around his heart. “Michael... whatever’s happened, we’ll fix it. We’ll—”

“No! I’m not some broken toy! I’ve—”

“Zack!” Michael’s voice, his familiar, soft voice, called from the house. “Who are you talking to out there?”

The dark Michael jerked back as if slapped. He snarled, and beat his wings as he leapt from the ground, a barely discernible blot on the tumultuous clouds as he flew away. Zack turned and dashed to the house, knowing he was wild-eyed and maybe a little crazy looking, but he had to see Michael, his Michael.

“Zack? Are you all right?” Michael’s eyes searched his face and then the now-empty garden behind him. “Was that some sort of huge raptor?”

Zack cupped his angel’s face in both trembling hands, uncertain of what to say, of how much to say, completely baffled by what he had seen. “Michael, I thought... it was the strangest thing. I thought it looked like you. But you were inside. Safe inside.” He pulled Michael into a fierce hug, breathing him in, stroking the hollow dimples where his wings had been. “I don’t know what that was.”

“Did it hurt you? Are we safe?” For a moment, Michael was the guardian again, pushing Zack behind him into the house. “Zack?”

“I think it’s... gone for now. It was just very strange. It felt like it shouldn’t have *been* here. Shouldn’t have existed at all. That doesn’t make any sense, I know...”

“We’ll lock the doors, just in case, and get your bow out of the closet. Did it say what it wanted?”

Zack shuddered once more before turning to flip on all the outdoor floodlights. “Me.”

Over the next three days, the dark Michael didn’t return. Zack would’ve been relieved over that fact if he had answers, but he’d talked to several of his cousins and no one could give him any useful tidbit. Worse, the real Michael’s odd shifts in mood did return.

There weren't any quicksilver rages like that first one over his little frog's demise, but he was surly and irritable. Zack found himself walking on eggshells. Any little slip or attempt to tease caused offense. More than once, he found Michael curled into a ball on the floor, sobbing, choking on garbled words. The little Zack could make out sounded as if he couldn't remember how he had entered the room, hints of dislocation and missed time that sounded like the beginnings of dementia.

Hermes had no helpful advice other than to say most fallen angels weren't like Michael.

"Really, Herm?" Zack had snorted at him. "Thanks for the newsflash."

"Sorry I can't help. But, Zack, if he doesn't get better, call your dad. I don't think this is a medical thing. It sounds metaphysical to me. Hades is better with that end than the rest of us put together."

Zack had let out an exasperated sigh. "Yeah, I'll call him and his new boyfriend'll answer."

"You, my darling cousin, are going to have to get over that."

He didn't have time for the bizarre turn in his father's love life, though. *Mom divorces him and he takes up with a homeless, alcoholic human.* Sure, the rest of the family seemed to like the guy, but it was still... Damn it, Zack had his own problems. Right now, his Michael-problem was singing They Might Be Giants songs in the kitchen, so he felt reasonably sure that he could go to his study and get some paperwork done. He'd make chili for dinner, Michael's favorite, and they would talk about getting him some help.

After an hour, Michael slipped through the study door and sat in the chair by Zack's desk. "Hey." Zack offered a smile, which faltered when Michael didn't respond to it. "What's up?"

"The dark. It's back." Michael swallowed hard, but his face remained disturbingly stoic. "The way it was at first. When I fell. I have visions of destruction and horror..."

"Sweetheart, we got through this before." Zack reached out to take his hands, blinking in shock when Michael jerked back. "We'll get through it again."

"It's not going away. We've just delayed it. I'm fallen, Zack. I can't help what I'm becoming. You need to leave me. Now."

“You think I’m leaving you now, when you need me? You’re out of your mind. No. Not before, not now.”

“Before, the visions, the need for violence, they were nightmares.” Michael leaned forward, his bright blue eyes earnest and haunted. “Now, they’re daydreams.” He stood and stalked out.

“Michael!” Zack’s chair fell backward with a clatter as he scrambled after his lover. “Michael! Damn it!”

Michael poked his head around the corner of the kitchen, dishtowel and plate in hand. “What? Zack, I’m right here. What’s wrong?”

Zack stopped in the doorway, taking in Michael’s concerned expression. “The *fuck*, Michael? You come into my study to tell me that your daydreams are violent horror shows and then ask me what’s *wrong*?”

Michael shook his head, his confusion all too real. “You’re not making sense. I wasn’t in your study. I’ve been in the kitchen this whole time.”

“Then what... oh.” Zack gathered Michael into his arms. “I’m sorry. I... something really bad is happening here. There’s you, and then there’s... other you. Damn it. I hate this.”

“How does this other person get in here? How did he leave without me seeing him?” A note of panic wormed its way into Michael’s voice. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know, hon. I don’t know anything. But I think we should pack a couple of bags and go upstate to see my dad. We have to get out of this house. Now.”

“All right. I think... that makes sense.”

“And I’m not letting you out of my sight again.” Zack kissed Michael’s forehead, trying to comfort him, trying to lay claim, trying to reassure himself of something real and solid.

They packed in haste, a single duffle with a few changes of clothes. Zack swept the contents of the bathroom counter into the duffle, not wanting to take the time to sort necessary from not. *Good thing we never got around to the dogs and cats we wanted. No one but us to worry about.*

Michael stayed close, his worried frown not budging an inch, but his hands moved with steady purpose, his eyes hard and determined. They locked up the house, something they rarely did on a normal day, and climbed into the Jeep.

"I'm going up Route 1," Zack began, as he backed down the gravel drive.

"No. I hate that road."

"Hell of a lot faster."

"I know, but it's not like the back way is that much longer. Route 9, please? So I can see the marshes. It's... it'll just feel better."

"Okay. For you." Zack patted Michael's knee. Long car rides made his angel nauseous enough, and the long stretch of boring toll road did tend to make it worse.

It was still too early in the season for all but the most dedicated beach migrants, so the roads were clear, and the back roads Zack took nearly deserted. The marshes they drove past slowly shifted from tidal to freshwater, green and rutting with life. He opened his window to hear the birds and frogs singing, pulling in a deep breath full of damp earth and relief.

No dark shape pursued them in the sky. No strange figure appeared along the road to stop them.

"We'll be all right," Zack said, as much to shore up his own courage as to reassure Michael. "Dad will know what this is all about, or he'll point us to someone who does."

"Of course." Michael managed a weary smile. "We're not alone and we should have done this earlier."

Yes. Damn it. I'm so sorry. "Yeah, the family's always telling me I'm too stubborn to accept help."

"You're not. It just takes you longer."

Zack reached across and took Michael's hand, their fingers entwined on Michael's denim-clad thigh as they rode for several miles in silence. The delicate whites and yellows of bloodroot and pale flashes of purple wild geraniums peppered the road's edges, peeking between the dancing green of marsh grasses. Peaceful, beautiful, all as it should be...

"Zack."

He turned to see Michael had paled, his free hand gripping white-knuckled on the door handle. "Don't feel so good?"

"A little off. Could we stop for a minute?"

Zack drove until he found a gravel pull-off and got out of the car with Michael. He'd hoped Michael would've held out a little longer, but this was the normal pattern. More than half an hour in a car and Michael needed to "stretch his legs," his euphemism for "stop the car before I puke on the upholstery."

A red-winged blackbird trilled close by, a short flash of wings betraying his position to the left. Zack came around the hood and took Michael in his arms, grateful when Michael leaned into him instead of pulling away. "Better?"

"Hmm. A little odd. But not like I'm going to be sick."

The sunlight caressed Michael's hair, creating a halo illusion as the wind toyed with white-blond strands. Water reflections danced along his throat, and Zack's chest expanded with fierce love and exasperated sorrow. He leaned in to kiss those shadow-dance motes, encouraged as Michael tipped his head back and gave a pleased little moan. Shoving the neck of Michael's T-shirt aside with his nose, he continued kissing along his collarbone as he kept an eye on where solid ground ended, and backed Michael behind a screen of waist-high grass.

"Zack, someone might see," Michael said with a little laugh, but it wouldn't be the first time in semi-public. They'd both agreed that the thrill of possible discovery added to the excitement.

"Too bad. You smell so damn good." *And I miss you. We haven't made love for days.* Zack sank to his knees, nuzzling the growing bulge behind Michael's zipper, smiling when Michael clutched his head with a gasp.

He popped the button and slid the pull down carefully since most days Michael went commando. Today was no exception, and that beautiful, pale cock practically leaped out to greet him. Zack hummed as he wrapped his lips around the foreskin, pushing back so he could lick the tip.

Michael cried out and dug his fingers hard into Zack's hair. His thighs already trembled, and he growled as Zack kept up his teasing licks. Suddenly the grip on Zack's hair became painful, and Michael's next cry wasn't a pleased one.

Startled, Zack tore his head from Michael's grip while Michael doubled over in agony.

"Michael!" Zack caught him before he fell to his knees. "What is it?"

Even as his panicked words tumbled into the suddenly too-quiet air, a terrible ripping sound came from Michael's back, two strange bulges threatening to tear through his T-shirt.

"No... oh, mother of us all, no." Zack held tight to Michael's shuddering frame, his horror mounting as black protrusions ripped through the cotton, growing outward and expanding.

Michael keened and sobbed, beating against Zack's chest with one fist until he finally had to yank away, retching on his hands and knees, the black bone-like structures at his shoulder blades twisting and reaching upward. All Zack could do was stay near, trying to help Michael through the terrible pain. He didn't ask what was happening. He knew. He knew, and had no way to stop it. Helplessness only made the gut-wrenching panic worse.

"I'm here, sweetheart," he murmured, as he took Michael's twitching body back in his arms. "No matter what. I'm here. I don't care what's happening. I do care, but it doesn't matter to me what you become. I love you. It's just another change. I'll always love you."

"Zack." Michael lifted his head, his eyes glistening with tears. "Run. Go. Please."

"No. Fuck, no. I don't care if you're changing. Not running."

Michael tangled his fists in the front of Zack's T-shirt, panting. He seemed to have a moment where the pain let up and he rested his head on Zack's shoulder, shivering hard. "I love you, too. Just... remember that."

The moment of peace shattered into a thousand cut-glass shards when Michael threw his head back and howled in pain. He shoved away from Zack, ripping off the remnants of his ruined T-shirt. The black wing stems shivered and unfurled in an explosion of growth. Red dendrites ran through the blue of Michael's eyes. He shrieked and spun, trying to tear at the horrible black wings growing from his back, whirling in mad, jerking circles.

"Michael, stop! I know it hurts, but they're just wings! It'll be okay! Sit the hell down before you hurt yourself!"

The only response he received was more agonized shrieking and a wing slapped in his face. The pain had obviously invaded all of Michael's brain since he snarled and snapped bone-white teeth when Zack reached for him. He struck out at Zack, knocking him to the ground, then with a final earsplitting howl, he leapt into the air, beating his wings in desperate, uneven downstrokes.

Zack tried to grab his ankle, to pull him back down, but it was too late. The last he saw of Michael was as a black blot winging away against the bright blue, spring sky.

Chapter 3

"I'll let the front gate know you're coming." The impossibly deep voice was flat and emotionless, but Zack didn't read into that. For his dad, that was normal.

"Thanks. Dad?"

"Zagreus?"

"I'm not sure any of this really happened. I might just have gone nuts."

A snort indicated his father's impatience with that line of thinking. "Point me to a completely sane god. You saw what you saw."

Zack appreciated his father's calm since he still had the shakes from the soul-wrenching interlude on the marsh bank. If he thought too much about Michael flying away from him, his heart would break into a thousand messy, screaming pieces. There wasn't time for that. He needed answers. He needed to solve this. Then he could track Michael down and fix this.

The ridiculously expensive condo Hades shared with his faithful companion, Charon, and, now, this human boy—man, overlooked the Brandywine River in the middle of Wilmington. Zack had tried to tease his father when he purchased it, asking if he thought he was a hobbit now. He knew better, of course. Hades didn't often understand jokes, and pop culture references were like a foreign language.

For the last century, his relationship with his father had been difficult, and Zack knew that was his fault, mostly. But his father's solid presence and his deductive skills were what he needed now. Thank all the holies that they were on good terms again. He was almost looking forward to the visit.

Then Dad has to ruin it by letting his boyfriend answer the door.

"Oh, hi! You must be Zagreus." The human in the doorway smiled at him, hand extended.

This? This was what he ran to when Mom tossed him out? The young man in front of Zack was gangly and scrawny, all knees and elbows, with a mop of rust-brown hair and mud-brown eyes.

"Zack. Everyone calls me Zack." The growl in his voice could be excused by a shitty couple of days, right? And the hesitation in taking that hand to shake didn't make him a dick. Too much of a dick.

“Your dad doesn’t.” The guy’s voice was soft and apologetic. Damn it, he had a name. Something Roman and weird. Whatever his name was, he’d flushed bright red.

Great. I really am being a dick. “Um, yeah. Is he here?”

They were saved from social awkwardness by a huge dog with dinner-plate paws and a broad mastiff build, bounding down the entry hall. Most people would have been terrified. Zack went down on one knee to greet her, ruffling her floppy ears. “Hey, Nike. Who’s a pretty girl?”

The young man—*Tiberius, that’s the guy’s name!*—let out a bark of laughter. “Well, if I didn’t know you were his son before, I sure as hell do now. The dog thing.”

He managed half a smile, despite his heart cracking in his chest. “Yeah, the dog thing. She’s a beauty.”

“Our princess. She knows it, too. Even has Charon wrapped around her little toe. Come on in. Your dad’s on the phone with Osiris.” Tiberius might have muttered *I can’t believe I just said that*, but Zack couldn’t be sure. “You okay? He wouldn’t give me details, but his muttering sounded kinda bad.”

“It’s... hard to explain.”

“Man of few, uncomfortable words.” Tiberius shook his head as he led the way into the condo. “Also like your dad.”

Zack had been in his father’s residence before—this new one in the human world—but both times, his human lover had been away on business. It was more than strange to finally meet him, this person who had stolen the Lord of the Underworld’s affections. Not that Zack could accuse him of trying to replace his mom. Persephone had initiated the divorce. Tiberius had come along later to pick up the pieces.

“Tiberius—”

“Ti, please. I’m not a Roman emperor. Or a Star Trek character. You want anything? Water? Cranberry juice? Iced tea?”

Damn it. Smart. Funny. Hospitable. Apparently, he wasn’t going to get a chance to hate the boyfriend. “Thanks, no. I’m good.” Zack sank into the leather of his father’s enormous sofa, absently petting the dog head that came to rest on his knee. Hades’s voice came from the study at the front of the condo, his deep rumble rising and falling in conversation.

Ti moved a sketchpad from one of the overstuffed recliners and sat with his feet tucked under him. "So. God of the hunt? Is that right?"

"Sort of. Not like my cousin, Artemis. I don't kill what I catch, but yeah. I'm more of a resurrection god, though, you know, like Mithras and shit like that."

Twirling a pencil in his fingers, Ti gave him a half smile. "Mithras and shit. Right. So you had... a bunch of lives?"

Zack stared out the window, trying to see anything besides black wings and Michael's agony.

"I'm sorry. I'm prying. Just thought you might want to talk about, you know, something else."

"Not really a happy subject either." Zack cleared his throat, trying to modify the growl. He held up a hand when it looked like Ti would apologize again. *Why does he have to be so nice?* "It's fine. Something else to talk about."

Zack rolled his shoulders, keeping his eyes glued to the dog at his feet. "It's really hard for Mom and Dad. You need to remember that. *Don't* bring up the subject with him." He glanced up quickly and got a bobble-head nod from Ti. "The first time was centuries ago. Grandma Rhea was babysitting. Grandma went out to her garden for a bit. Some of the great aunts and uncles were visiting. They were still pissed at Dad for the whole war thing."

"The war with the Titans?"

"Yeah. They, ah, ripped me into little pieces."

"What? Holy shit! That's awful!"

Zack shook his head. "I don't remember it. But Dad went a little nuts. He found my heart still in one piece and, don't ask me how, I don't know how half this stuff works, he planted it in a human woman's womb where I grew into a whole god again. He and Grandma Rhea don't talk much anymore. He thought she didn't try hard enough to stop it. She still blames him for the whole Titanomachy thing."

"And the second time?"

"Jealous lover thing. At least I was grown up this time. Tied down and ripped apart by crazy, carnivorous horses." *Still not good with restraints... Don't think about that.*

“But you didn’t really, um, die? I thought gods didn’t really...” Ti trailed off, probably unable or unwilling to voice the thought that most gods faded eventually and simply vanished.

“I did. Die. You know, resurrection god? I get to come back.”

“Do you remember being dead? How many times do you... how many chances do you get?”

“I don’t.” Zack fought his clenched teeth against that sore point. No, damn it, he didn’t remember being dead and it bugged the hell out of him. “And I don’t know how many times. This shit doesn’t come with a manual.”

“Sorry. I get curious. Just tell me to shut up if I ask the wrong questions. Charon does.”

Zack cracked his neck and managed a dry chuckle. “Yeah, Char would. I just don’t know how to answer. I mean, Osiris only came back once, right? And even that carpenter guy only did the resurrection thing once. But the Summer King does it all the time. Don’t know if there’s a limit per customer or not.”

Ti cocked his head to the side like a finch checking out a berry. “You’re not what I expected.”

Zack raised an eyebrow, wondering whether he was about to be offended.

“His son. I was picturing someone both hard and refined. Someone more Underworld-y.”

“That’s so not a word. Sorry to disappoint. I haven’t spent as much time down in Dad’s realm as you might think. I like the human world and my own realm better.”

“Forests of Arcadia.” Ti shot him a shy, wistful smile. *Fine, that’s a gorgeous smile. Maybe he is sort of good-looking.* “It must be beautiful.”

“I like it. We share, Artemis and I do, but we’re both cool with that. She doesn’t usually like guys in her territory, but she’s fine with me.”

“Cause you’re gay?”

“Cause I’m quiet and I know how to handle a bow.”

Ti burst out laughing, then clapped his hand over his mouth and blushed at the noise.

“You’re not what I expected, either,” Zack admitted, back to staring at the floor. “So long as you make him happy. All I ask.”

The “him” in question chose that moment to appear on silent feet and kiss Ti on top of his head. “He does,” Hades declared with a stone-serious expression.

Damn him for being the quietest being ever to walk the planet. When Zack stood, he was just a hair shorter than his father, but the volume, both physical and psychic, that he displaced in any room always made him seem so much larger. “Dad, I—”

Hades shocked the breath out of his only son by yanking him into a hard embrace and murmuring in his ear, “I’m sorry, Zagreus. So sorry this has happened to you.”

“Thanks,” Zack whispered, taking advantage of the unexpected refuge of his father’s broad shoulder to swallow back tears. “I don’t know what to do.”

Hades pulled back, blue eyes the shade of a clear winter evening regarding him steadily. “I know. Sit down. Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Everything.” Even during the simple act of crossing the room to sit in the largest black leather armchair, Hades exuded power and grace. He settled, regal, unhurried, reminding Zack that his father had weighed the relative merits of thousands of lives with patient, evenhanded justice. This was what he did, in his old life as a ruler of the dead and in his new life as a private investigator. He assembled bits of truth and decided how they fit together.

Zack sank back down on the sofa, and Nike put her head back on his knee as if realizing he needed the moral support. After a few slow breaths, he began, starting with his odd feelings of impending doom and ending with Michael’s agonizing metamorphosis. When he finished, his father prodded him through the telling again, and then a third time, Zack’s anguish and frustration mounting with each recounting.

“Hey.” Ti nudged Hades’s shoulder and set a bottle of water in front of Zack. “He’s your son, not a suspect, right? Ease up.”

“I merely—”

“Oh, I know what you merely, Mr. Dig Right Through No Matter What. Just turn off the interrogation spotlight and go gentle, okay? Zack’s trying, but making him more upset won’t help him remember.”

Zack thought he might have to pick his jaw up from the first floor lobby on the way out. No one talked to his dad like that. Maybe Dionysus, but Dio was

crazy. This skinny human said a few words and Lord Hades sat back and shut up? Any other day, it would've been hilarious.

"Thanks, Ti." Zack held up a hand. "But it's fine. Dad, it's fine. Whatever you need to do if it helps."

Hades's silver eyebrows stayed elevated a moment longer, then he nodded to Ti, some obvious understanding passing between them. Ti tucked back into his chair with his sketchpad as the questions focused on specifics, Hades pulling out things Zack didn't even realize he remembered. The quiet, methodical interrogation left him shaking.

"Here, your lordship." Ti handed over his sketchpad, doodles and odd diagrams from what Zack could see.

Hades looked it over with a heavy frown before he got up to pace. The dog left Zack to follow him with anxious glances up at his face. When Hades stopped to stare out at his personal view of the Brandywine, Nike sat beside him. The frown had only deepened.

"If Ti's timeline portrays events accurately—"

Ah, that's what the scribbling was.

"—and I believe it does, then there are other hands in this. Zagreus, I have things to tell you that you will not wish to hear."

"Dad, please. Just spit it out." Zack unclenched his fists, willing his hands to relax. The knot in his chest, he couldn't do much about. "Anything you can tell me. I have to help Michael."

Hades locked his hands behind his back, a granite statue glaring out the window. "I've known several of the fallen. They don't all descend into evil. Some retain the larger part of their compassion. But they all change. Soon, late. All of them change."

"Almost twenty-five years since his fall, Dad. That's a hell of a delay of symptom onset."

"True." Hades nodded without turning around. "Michael's nature, his relationship with you, I believe impeded the process. This is why I suspect interference. On his own, Michael may have changed soon, but most likely gradually, in increments he could have tolerated."

"What are you saying? That someone sped it up?"

“Someone wasn’t willing to wait. In order to accelerate Michael’s metamorphosis, this interfering hand reweave the fabric of time itself.”

Zack dropped his aching head into his hands. “Could you stop the mysterious pronouncements and just say what you’re thinking?”

“What he’s trying to say—” Ti reached over and put a hand on his knee “—is someone’s been shoving Michael back and forth through time. Think about it, right? The thing you saw in the garden was Michael, but future Michael. Not the one that was in the house at the time. The one who came into your study, same thing, different bit of the timeline. Someone messed with his timeline enough, yanked him back and forth enough, they made this happen before Michael was ready, before he could process it and deal with it.”

“How the fuck, excuse my language, do *you* know all this?” Zack yanked his knee out of Ti’s grip, furious for no reason.

Ti flicked a glance toward the window. “We talked about it before you came. He suspected. The things you said just firmed it up.”

“Great. Of course he has all the answers.” Zack hurled himself to his feet to pace, a frenzied mirror of his father’s actions. “Of course. So tell me, Dad, who is it? Who’s the piece of shit screwing around with my Michael?”

Again, Hades began with a non-answer. “Sometimes, when a god no longer has a place in human minds and begins to fade, he does not do so quietly. Some go mad. Gods of fate and time are more apt to become unstable.”

“Fate and time? You mean grandfather’s not dead?”

“Cronos is quite dead, never fear. No, the way in which this was done, the chaotic cruelty of it, I suspect it was Mammetun.”

Zack stopped his pacing to scrub both hands over his face. “And who in all creation’s pantheons is *that*?”

“She was... is the Sumerian goddess of fate. Reduced to a Wikipedia reference and a single line in the Epic of Gilgamesh. I can’t imagine she would be pleased with that.”

“Great. Fantastic. So I have to find Fading Angry Sumerian Bitch Goddess?”

Hades finally turned from the window and strode over to wrap his arms around Zack. “I doubt you need to. She has a purpose and will most likely find you.”

“What purpose? What the *fuck*, Dad?”

“I can’t even begin to imagine. She will come to you, though. I have no doubt. Stay with us, Zagreus. We have the extra room. Walk the banks of the river, the streets. Wait for her to come to you. More likely here, since she was a deity of cities.”

“I can’t just wait.” Zack shivered, and finally returned the embrace, needing his father’s solid warmth. “Michael... who knows what’s happening to him?”

“It’s already happened,” Ti said softly from his chair. “And you can’t fix anything without more intel, right? Know what’s behind it so you can figure out how to fix it?”

“I guess.” Zack rested his head on his father’s shoulder. “No enemy but time, right?”

“What’s that?”

“Sorry. Poem that Michael liked. I always thought it was too damn sad. *The innocent and the beautiful have no enemy but time*. Something like that.”

“Time is only the enemy of the unwary.” Hades backed up to take Zack by the shoulders. “You have been ever vigilant.”

Zack swallowed hard but he nodded. His father was, after all, the first to have killed time.

Chapter 4

“This is bullshit,” Zack muttered to himself, and took another sip of his beer. They didn’t have anything great on draught, which only made him think about how funny Michael would have thought this place was. A place that was trying to be casual upscale and yet listed Blue Moon as a “craft brew” on the menu. Incredible.

Over the last three days, he’d taken his father’s advice. He had wandered the city, through lunchtime crowds and deserted two-in-the-morning streets, through the parks and the riverfront district. So far, Mammetun hadn’t showed.

Even a grieving, angry minor god got hungry eventually, though. Today he’d picked one of the riverfront restaurants with a patio so he could stay outside and still feel like he could breathe. While the beer selection was sub-par, the hummus wasn’t bad.

He felt her before he saw her, a sharp, brittle presence. Such a strange, alien feeling—saltines with malice, flaking paint chips dipped in uneasy viciousness. For the second time that month, he wished he’d thought to go armed, but it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to whip out a forearm-long hunting knife in a crowded restaurant.

No stealth, no dissembling as she approached him. She wanted him to see her, and she smiled, lifting her oversized sunglasses from violet eyes when he spotted her. Perhaps she was fading as a goddess, but among humans? She was still incredibly beautiful. Thick, black hair tumbled in ringlets down her back, copper skin smooth and flawless. Regal assurance infused every step, aloof and serenely confident that men would worship her with their eyes as she passed.

Most did, poor fools, some practically falling out of their chairs to follow her passage. They couldn’t see what Zack saw, his eyes locked with hers. Those eyes were more than a little crazy. He fought a shiver and rose to greet her.

“Mammetun.”

“You know me,” she said in a voice of honey and dark raspberry wine. “Of course my hunter knows me.”

“Where’s Michael?”

She slid into the seat across from him, the dove gray of her sundress somehow bright in the patio’s shade. “My first Enkidu was a terrible mistake.”

“Pardon?”

“But you... you are magnificent. Intelligence and strength, a hunter who can both think and act.”

“Great. I’m not really up to flirting right now. Can we get to Michael?”

“He was to have destroyed Gilgamesh, the defiler, the arrogant blasphemer. He was my instrument. Brutish and stupid, he failed. He had no understanding of the winds of destiny and, instead, fell in love.”

“Um, I think I remember the story. But Enkidu died horribly, right? And Gilgamesh eventually figured out he was mortal and had to accept it. What does this have to do with Michael?”

“I have stirred the winds of time. A new Gilgamesh arises in your kingdom, my hunter. Walls of stone and walls of contempt. You will be my Enkidu this time. You will bring down this Gilgamesh in all his contemptuous vanity.”

“Don’t think I want to be your anything, honestly. Why should I do anything for you?”

She smiled, a crooked slash of full lips as she rose from her chair. “He will give you no choice. In Arcadia, you will be my Enkidu because you will have no choice.”

“Wait... what?” Zack took a step after her, but she was gone. He sank back down in his chair, shaking. “Well, that was bizarre. And unhelpful. But mostly bizarre.”

When he returned to the condo, Charon was there as well. All three of them sat waiting in the living room with variations of expectant expressions as if they knew. Hell, they probably did. His dad *felt* things that happened around him, especially in a place where he felt grounded. He probably had sensed Mammetun’s appearance in his chosen city.

Charon got up to offer him the recliner. “Good hunting, my young lord?”

Towering and cadaverously thin, sharp-toothed and sharp-tongued, most beings, mortal or otherwise, found Charon creepy. To Zack, he was the one who had taught him, twice, the names of the Underworld rivers, had shown him the wonders of the deepest caverns and had patiently taught him how to row. Eccentric, but not creepy.

“She found me. But you guys know that already.”

“Your dad thought so,” Ti confirmed, pulling his gangly legs up to his chest. “Did she tell you anything? I mean anything useful?”

Zack took the offered chair, suddenly exhausted and depressed. “She’s nuts. Completely, bug-fuck nuts.”

Hades leaned forward in his chair throne, arms on his knees. “Word for word, Zagreus. What was said?” Head down, eyes closed, he listened to Zack’s careful recounting as he tried to remember every phrase, every word.

There hadn’t been much. They waited, focused silently on Hades until he finally raised his head.

“You’ll find Michael in Arcadia. What seed she planted in his mind, I can’t tell you. But he will be there.”

Zack rose slowly, heart picking up speed. “Dad, you’re sure?”

Hands held out, Hades spoke softly as if he addressed a frightened dog. “Zagreus, listen to me. She manipulates you both for her own designs, using you to restage what she sees as her greatest failure. Michael as the Gilgamesh to your Enkidu.”

“But that’s good, right? They loved each other.”

“Um, yeah.” Ti shifted restlessly. “But, see, they weren’t supposed to. Enkidu was supposed to kill Gilgamesh ’cause he pissed off the gods.”

Right. Maybe I better read up. “I’m not killing Michael. Really doesn’t matter what crazy-eye goddess wants. I’m just going to find him and bring him home.”

“He may be changed, Zack,” Charon added, pointing a claw in Zack’s direction. “More than you thought possible. He may not want to come home. He *is* fallen. Maybe this was inevitable.”

Zack fought back all the childish things that wanted out—from *none of you ever liked him*, to *bunch of bigots, you think the fallen are all the same*. “It’s Michael. I can’t just leave him out there and hope he comes home. He lost his wings because I kissed him, because I love him. We fought through his dark moods then. We can do it again. He’s depending on me. He needs me.”

“The guardian’s guardian.” Charon shook his head, his long, white hair throwing bright sparks from the sunset. “Want help? Me, your dad, half a dozen cousins just a phone call away. For once, tough guy?”

“Love you guys for offering, but no.” Zack held up his hand at his father’s growl. “We all descend on Arcadia like an army and we’ll freak him out. He’ll fly away and I’d never find him again.”

A small twitch under Hades’s left eye made Zack flinch in response. He’d managed to hurt his father, again. The last time had been in nineteen thirty-one, when he told his father he was moving out on his own. Living in the Underworld was too dreary and confining for him. The stupid things young gods said.

Yes, Hades had known his son needed to rule over his own dominion at some point. Not that Zack, in his third life, was the powerful god he had been in his second, when he had actual worshippers. The Reborn God, the Tamer of Wild Things, he had cults all his own in the ancient world, for all the holies’ sakes. But he still had enough humans who remembered him to retain his power and sanity, enough that he couldn’t live under his father’s dark, protective wing.

But I have to get better at saying shit like that to him.

“Dad, I know you’d be careful. Diplomatic. But if it’s anyone but me, I’m scared to death Michael’s going to run.”

The barest lift of a silver eyebrow let Zack know he’d hit that just right. He wondered how Ti dealt with all the non-expressions or if Hades was miraculously more open in private moments with his lover.

“Do what you must. Though what you wish and what you must may well collide.”

Zack gave his father a nod, the lead ball in his stomach telling him it was true, and strode for the door.

“Hey!” Ti called after him. “Don’t you need to pack up your stuff?”

“Won’t need it where I’m going.” Zack stopped by the front door to retrieve his bow from the hall closet. Not that he would ever shoot Michael, but the weapon proved useful at the oddest times. “Keep everything here for when I bring him back.”

High clouds drifted overhead, the bird chorus echoing off the hills. He strode down the near bank of the Brandywine and walked out of the human world into the forests of Arcadia.

Chapter 5

Green so bright it blinded and pierced the heart, green so overwhelming and joyous it plunged without regard over hurt and sorrow—this was Arcadia. Zack dropped his head back, drinking in the machine absence and the exuberant life racket of his own realm, regrouping, recharging, and reconnecting with this half of his soul.

He opened his eyes to the forest, his forest with ash, oak, cedar, and pine murmuring in recognition. Deer poked their heads from a nearby thicket. Several squirrels ran toward him with crazy abandon, along the branch highways high above. If he stood still, every moving creature within the sound of his voice would come to greet him, the returning forest lord. Michael had always called it the Disney Moment.

“Is he here?” Zack whispered to the trees. “Have you seen him?”

Branches swayed, leaves murmuring a song of sorrow. Yes, Michael had come. He was here. The younger pines whispered of anger and dismay. Something had happened here that even the trees censured. Unlike certain Disney characters, though, Zack couldn't really talk to the creatures of his forest, not in human words. He would have to feel his way through his domain, find the disturbance on his own. In such a peaceful, unspoiled place, this would be absurdly easy.

But this would be on his terms, at his pace—

“Hunter.”

Or not. “Mammetun.” Zack turned to face her. “Quite a change of clothes.”

She stood barefoot, artfully posed on a mossy hillock in the clearing, her curves sheathed in a dress of shining black feathers that almost seemed to sprout from her skin. “Gilgamesh waits behind his walls. He defiles this sacred place, as he has ever defiled the sacred beauty in his reach.”

“Walls.”

“He builds a new city, my Enkidu, in defiance of holy law, in defiance of you.”

“Let's be clear on something. I'm not your anything.” Zack yanked off his boots and socks, letting his toes curl in the grass and leaves of his home. “And what the hell are we talking about here? What's the city a metaphor for?”

Her smile turned predatory, both condescending and threatening. "Come, hunter. Sometimes a wall is simply a wall." She walked away, toward the heart of the forest, her ebony and ink ringlets floating behind her despite the still air.

Zack stripped off his shirt, slung his bow across his body, and followed her. Naked would have been better to feel the flow of life energy around him, but somehow he wasn't comfortable stripping in front of Mammetun. Her creepy-crazy eyes made him feel exposed enough.

The forest had grown silent around them, birds and insects alike hiding in hushed silence from what they felt as an unwelcome presence. Mammetun strode on, undisturbed by the eerie hush, her twisted half smile not at all comforting. At a screen of junipers, she stopped and plunged her hands into the branches preparing to part them.

"Behold, Enkidu," she announced in a gloating purr. "The new city of Uruk."

Anger and horror slammed into him as he stared at the abomination in front of him. Rough-hewn granite blocks rose in a storm-gray wall in front of him, four stories high. Here was the source of all the trees' anger and dismay, dozens of trees ripped from the soil, thrown carelessly about the artificial clearing to make room for this monstrosity. Bits of smaller bushes and understory plants littered the carcasses of old-growth trees, uprooted saplings tossed onto the piles.

My beautiful trees, how could anyone do this?

"He will not cease in his destruction," Mammetun whispered in his ear. "It will continue until your domain is in ruins. You must end it."

"Fuck, yes. Who the hell would do this?"

A figure appeared at the top of the wall, peering down, the face horrifyingly familiar.

No. Please... no.

"Zagreus!" Michael called down from the wall in the chill voice Zack recalled from the strange garden visitation. "You've come!"

Zack rounded on Mammetun, prepared to ask what the hell she had done, but she had vanished again. "Convenient. Damn it." *It's not Michael's fault. He's been manipulated every step of the way. Breathe. Calm. Calm.* When he felt he could speak without snarling or breaking down, Zack tilted his head

back and bellowed, "Michael, come down here! Talk to me! What in the name of all the rivers is this?"

"This?" Michael perched atop his ugly-ass granite wall, feet swinging over the edge. "My city, sweetheart. Where we'll live when you finally realize the truth."

"What truth? That you've murdered my trees and erected this abomination in my domain?" *So much for staying reasonable. Crap.*

Michael's laugh chilled him, tarnished silver falling on cold stone. "Your domain? Oh, no, no. You're a weak minor godling. You hit your peak a couple thousand years ago. But it's all right. I'll take care of you, as I always said I would. My domain, my love. Not yours anymore."

"I don't get it, Michael." Zack took a step back so he didn't have to tilt his head quite so far back. "You've always been welcome here. I never closed Arcadia to you. And you've always loved the trees so much. Why build this... fucking monstrosity?"

He didn't ask how Michael had done it in less than four days. That was an indication of power, of the terrible surge of it Michael must have experienced.

Michael tipped his head with a frown. "It's my city. My fortress. To keep us safe from the world. Some day, someone's going to try to kill you again. I have to keep you safe. And I certainly won't destroy all the trees. You'll have plenty of space to play with your animal friends, still."

The condescension, the arrogance in those words made Zack swallow hard against the knot of rage and anguish in his throat. "I love you, Michael, but when you slice into my domain, you stab at me. No more."

Of course, he didn't have wings like some people. He stalked along the perimeter, not surprised at all to find no door or gate. Along the way, he pulled a couple of thick ivy vines and looped them over one shoulder to use instead of rope. Closer inspection of the wall showed close-set stones but no mortar. With cracks just wide enough between for fingers and toes to get a grip, Zack began to climb, grimly determined to take Michael down, truss him up, and take him home.

"Oh, my love." Michael rose on leathery wings to hover just over the wall, his laugh cold enough to freeze nitrogen. "You'll have to learn the hard way. Of course, you will. So damn stubborn."

Those huge black wings drew back, blotting out the sun, and swept forward with a rushing boom of displaced air. The resulting wall of air slammed into Zack's chest, breaking his grip. As he fell, another whirlwind struck him, throwing him thirty feet back into the trees. They tried to cradle him, branches catching at him as he fell so he landed nearly on his feet, scratched, sore, but whole.

Fine. Frontal assault without a plan. Not my best idea.

He retreated into his forest to think. Michael had wings, but once snared, Zack was certain he was still the stronger of the two of them. After dark, he had the advantage. Michael had never liked the dark, and his night vision sucked. Yes. Better. Maybe with actual rope for a lasso, in case Michael simply took wing. He was badly shaken but not beaten. Later, he'd have to figure out what to do with the stinking wall, but that would have to wait until Michael was sane again.

The moon set sometime after midnight. Under the heavy blanket of stars, Zack had just enough light to see, where most diurnal creatures would be blind. He hung his bow from the branch of the yew that kept guard over his hunting horn while he was out in the human world.

The horn... he could have used it to call Artemis. Even if his cousin were visiting the human world, she would still hear it and come to him. But, damn it, he could fight his own battles. She was the best, no arguments from him there. Problem was she was as likely to shoot Michael as to help trap him. Certainly wouldn't be the first time she shot first and asked later. The horn would also call his beautiful Arcadian greyhounds, but he didn't want them in harm's way.

Stripped to his boxer briefs, vine rope slung across his body, grappling hook fashioned from a gnarled bit of fallen ironwood, Zack set off at a run toward the invading wall. Here in his own element, he was silent, his feet flying over the uneven ground as sure as any deer.

At the bottom of the wall, he crouched, listening. A few yards to the left, Michael slept atop his monstrous construction, and Zack's chest ached at the familiar, peaceful rhythm of his breaths. That sound should have been in their bed, Michael's head nestled on his pillow, or more often, Zack's, since he rooted closer most nights.

Or he used to.

No, he couldn't think that way. Fear lurked in the corners of his mind, terrible fear that Michael would never come home, that nothing would ever be the same, that he would lose his heart and his reason to live because of the machinations of an unstable, dying goddess. If he gave the fear room to maneuver, it would spread into every corner of his thoughts like invasive weeds and choke him, paralyze him. No. He had to keep going, keep moving. Action drowned fear.

He shook out his impromptu grappling line and swung the hook in a tightly controlled circle before he tossed it at the top of the wall. A soft *plink* let him know his aim was good, and he tugged carefully until it caught on the edge. A few harder tugs to make certain the hook was settled, and Zack pulled himself up, setting his feet against the rough stone to take some of his weight as he climbed.

When he reached the top, his breath caught hard in his throat. Michael lay on his side, one wing folded against his back, the other draped forward across his body. Despite the leathery wings, he looked like Zack's angel again, his face vulnerable and open in sleep. It gave him hope that his Michael was still in there, simply lost and hurting. Zack silently retrieved his rope and hook and crept to where Michael lay sleeping.

With tears stinging the backs of his eyes, Zack reached out and stroked hair silvered by starlight. He leaned in to wake Michael with a tender kiss, blood thundering in his ears as those soft lips moved under his, responding with familiar warmth and passion.

"I love you, Michael. More than I can ever say," he whispered against Michael's skin, so cold in his stone bed. "Please come home. Please. I can't make it without you."

Michael's eyes flew open on a gasp. He sat up slowly, wrapping his arms around Zack's neck, and lunged in to lock their lips together again, his kisses hungry to the point of desperation. For a brief, bright moment, Zack was certain love alone would be enough. *Love conquers all, and by all the ancients, I love him so much it hurts.*

The moment shattered when Michael broke their kiss with a soft, arctic laugh. "My darling, my own, you came to me after all. Nice of you to save me the trouble of hunting you down. But we can't go home, not to that ridiculous little house in the human world. This will be our home, Zagreus. The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can get on with our lives."

Zack swallowed hard, muscles tensing for the fight he knew was coming. "You loved that house. We've been happy there."

"I was in transition, don't you see?" Michael ran his fingers through Zack's hair, suddenly tightening them in a painful grip. "I know it's a lot to take in. I know. Shh. It's better this way, though. You won't have to be my keeper any more. You won't have to pity me and coddle me."

"I never pitied you. Never."

Michael chuckled. "I don't think you realized you did. It's all right. Now you'll be the consort of a god." He surged forward, pinning Zack against the stones, grinding his hardening cock against Zack's thigh. "Mine. To kneel at my feet and adore me."

"No! Damn it, Michael! Get off!"

Zack yanked a leg free and flipped them, wrestling for position, for enough leverage to secure Michael's hands. They rolled and slid on the wall's broad top, precariously close to the edge several times. Michael slammed a knee up into Zack's groin, but he twisted at the last moment, saving the most vulnerable bits. The blow still hurt like hell, and he roared, adrenaline singing through him as he trapped first one, and then the other of Michael's wrists behind his back.

Chest to chest, they panted in each other's faces, snarling. The impasse lasted only a moment. Michael's grin blossomed suddenly as his wings snapped out behind him. "Oh, my darling, you will learn."

Those huge wings beat downward once, and they both lurched into the air, Zack's legs dangling and throwing off Michael's balance. They dipped in stomach-dropping plunges, and rose again by slow degrees as Michael's wings beat skyward, over the top of the wall, above the highest oaks. Zack clung tight, though gravity worked against him now, making it impossible to keep Michael's arms behind his back. With a sinew-creaking wrench, Michael freed one arm and pulled it out of Zack's reach.

"Michael, don't. You don't want to do this." Zack managed to keep his voice soft, though anger climbed up his throat with his fear. They soared above the treetops now, the wall a child's building block construction far below.

Slowly, with a terrible strength Michael had never possessed even as an angel, he pried Zack's fingers off his wrist and held him suspended by a grip on his right forearm. "I do love you. You know that. But we can't be together again until you know your place."

“Michael! Don’t!” Zack made the mistake of looking down. *Holy mother of us all.*

“Come back to me when you’re ready to kneel.” Michael smiled, blew him a kiss, and let go.

Falling a short distance is oddly more terrifying than a long one. Over a short distance, the body only has time for that terrible *oh, shit* moment of the drop before the sickening jolt of contact with the ground. Over a longer distance, without physical references, the sensation of freefall takes hold, an illusion of standing still while the wind rushes past.

Zack had time to watch Michael recede against the stars, farther and farther out of reach, as if he watched his lover flying away down a dark passage. Michael hadn’t moved from where he hovered, of course, and the illusion soon shattered as Zack crashed through the treetops, his momentum too precipitous for the trees to catch him. Head, back, and limbs all smashed into branch after branch, through the canopy, harder and harder into the larger branches and finally through the scraping, skin-tearing fingers of the understory.

He lay on his back as the stars above faded, his vision darkening as agony wrapped him in its cruel embrace, crueler still since he knew he had failed.

Chapter 6

“Hey. Zackie.”

The voice wasn't Michael's, new or old. Something thumped against the sole of his foot.

“Hey.”

Zack cracked an eye open. *Oh, crap. My head hurts. Everything hurts. My eyelashes hurt, for fuck's sake.* He lay on something soft, morning light filtering through the leaves. Someone stood near his feet, and he had to squint to make sense of who it was.

“Artie?”

“Yeah, it's me.” Artemis leaned on her silver bow, silver eyes regarding him with what might have been concern. “Starting to think I'd have to get some help out here for you. Nice landing.”

“Thanks. How bad?”

She helped him sit up and gave him water from her own flask. “Could be worse. Broken ankle. Broken ribs. Two. Your brain's probably all banged up but that shouldn't slow you down much.”

“Great,” Zack managed in a dry rasp. “You saw me fall?”

“Was just coming back from the Taiga Forest. Heard a scream. Saw something big and clumsy crash through the trees. Figured the bears hadn't learned to fly, so it was probably you.”

“Ha. Funny. Thanks, though, for coming to check.”

“Yeah. About that.” Artemis settled beside him. “Want to tell me why the wingless flight, and why some damn fallen angel's made a mess of our forest?”

“The damn fallen angel's Michael.”

“Not a time for jokes, Zackie.”

“Wish it was.”

She flipped her single black braid over her shoulder and stared at him, maybe checking for practical joke twitches. “Okay, so spill. From the start.”

Because it was Artemis with her calm, no-nonsense demeanor, he was able to get through the whole narrative without choking on his words or breaking

down. Anyone watching them would think she wasn't listening, as she stared off into the woods, twirling a dried leaf in her fingers. But she drank in every word, asking soft questions when he had finished.

Finally, she patted his arm. "You're an idiot."

"I know."

"Love isn't always the answer, no matter what the songs say."

He shifted uncomfortably. "But it should be. It should be enough."

"But it isn't, and sometimes it makes things worse. Makes you blind to things you should see. Makes you deny things you know are true. Sometimes when you have a responsibility, you have to get around love and still keep going. It's hard. It hurts." She shrugged. "But it's not always the most important thing."

"What's more important than love?"

She smacked his shoulder. "Keeping your promises. Keeping the things safe that it's your duty to keep safe."

"Yeah. Not doing great on those, either."

"You promised to keep him safe, too. You still have to keep that promise."

Zack winced at the thought of all the Olympians descending on Arcadia to put things right. Despite Michael's new power, he'd end up a smear on the forest floor. "I know."

She chewed on the leaf stem, obviously lost in thought. "You have to rest up a couple of days, anyway. But start thinking, Zackie. Shake the cobwebs off your brain. Think like a hunter."

"Right."

"I'll check on you every few hours, but I have to see what's happening." She rose in one fluid motion, then cocked her head at him. "Maybe think about his first change. How it happened. What happened. I don't know. There has to be something."

"And if there isn't?"

"I'll take care of it if you can't." Her frown said she didn't like that option, but that she would do what she had to.

Zack lay on his bed of moss, staring at the leaves. He had to resolve this before Artemis or any of the family decided to step in. Michael wouldn't survive if they did.

Two days later, Zack met a small, worried contingent in the parking lot of White Clay Creek State Park. While he could walk in and out of Arcadia at any green spot he wished, this was the most convenient for everyone involved. While he recuperated, he'd sent messages back and forth with Artemis, asking the family to gather what he needed.

While he healed quickly in the human world and even faster in his own domain, he still limped. His ribs were still a misery, but he was out of time. Artemis reported ziggurats rising up inside the walls, and she was becoming edgier by the hour, her fingers twitching on her silver bow. Zack couldn't delay any longer.

"But I could help," Dionysus insisted again, as he settled the pack frame on Zack's shoulders. "You know I'm good with the wilderness shit."

"I know. Thanks. I can't... ask anyone to be there for this." Zack pulled his youngest cousin into an awkward one-armed hug. "I got this, Dio. Promise."

Only younger gods were present, Hermes, Dionysus, and Artemis, Zack's favorite cousins whom he could trust not to run to the older gods unless the situation was hopeless, and trust not to interfere if he asked them not to.

Hermes shoulder-bumped Dionysus. "Besides, you'd forget you were supposed to be in stealth mode five minutes in."

"Would not!" Dio was outraged for a third of a second. "Okay, yeah, probably."

Artemis tapped Zack on the forehead. "Think, all right? No more rushing in."

"I got it. Love you guys, but you're a pain in the ass sometimes." Zack gave them a final wave as he limped off into the trees to make the transition back to Arcadia. While they had all wanted to help and Hermes had even offered to lend his winged shoes, Zack needed to do this his way, with the methods and tools in his comfort zone.

Dusk was gathering in Arcadia as he limped toward the ever-growing city bisecting its heart. Zack settled in a thicket within sight of the walls but hidden

from above by a thick canopy of blackberry brambles. Here he waited and rested. First light was the best time to catch Michael unaware. He never had been a morning person.

With false dawn shading the sky leaden pewter, one of the nightjars confirmed by dropping an acorn that Michael still slept soundly atop his new ziggurat. He had, according to Artemis, built his first two towers by flying granite blocks in from hell-only-knew-where and assembling them with blinding speed. Clearly, Michael's new wings were more than just wings...

This was the thought that had brought Zack up short a day and a half ago. He mulled through Michael's original fall, all that had occurred, the horror of that moment when the angels had descended on him with blazing swords. Horrible as it was, the solution had presented itself.

Zack just hoped he would be able to do it. The thought alone made him ill.

This was Michael's last chance, though. What he wished and what he must do were about to collide like two runaway Eurostar trains. With a lead ball threatening to drag his heart down to the Underworld, Zack hobbled out of his hiding place and set up his net cannon. It wasn't a precise instrument, but the net opened up to cover a wide area and he had a lot of experience aiming the thing. He whispered a mantra to forgiveness, knowing he might never know its blessing, and loosened his long knife in its sheath.

Dawn began to paint the sky in long veins of red. "Michael, I'm sorry. I wish... I wish I could have done something to stop this sooner."

He dropped to one knee behind the cannon and bellowed, "Michael! Yo, Michael! Time to get up!"

His voice echoed crazily off the walls of New Uruk, ricocheting back at him like shrapnel. For a moment, he wondered if he'd misjudged, if the new Michael might be too wary and suspicious. But no, within two minutes the beating of huge wings floated down to him, Michael's sleep-tousled hair silhouetted against the sky.

"Zack?" he called down, his voice sleepy and uncertain.

That befuddled morning voice nearly made Zack hesitate a moment too long. He just wanted to take Michael into his arms, huge black wings and all. The moment shattered when Michael's cold, sharp laugh drifted down to him.

"Trying again, love? You really sh—"

With a prayer sent up to the laws of physics, Zack fired the cannon, the net whistling up through the morning mist and spreading out as it flew. If he misjudged the distance, if Michael reacted in time and simply flew higher, he would have lost his first chance. He had other contingency plans, though, rather more horrible ones.

With the first piece of luck to come Zack's way in weeks, Michael turned his head toward the sound and was only able to jerk sideways as the net hit him, tangling in his right wing. Chirping and cawing gathered behind Zack in the trees. The birds were flocking in to watch, perhaps cheering him on or simply curious about the outcome.

"Really, Zagreus? This is the best you could come up with?" Michael tsked in annoyance, struggling to keep aloft as he twisted to grab hold of the net.

Unlike the birds, Zack hadn't simply been watching, though. He pulled back his bow of black yew, held the string at his ear while he aimed, and let fly. Michael shrieked as the arrow flew at him, but with his wing fouled, he was unable to maneuver properly. The shriek turned into a bark of laughter when Zack's arrow only pierced the net.

"I'm so sorry, darling! I think that fall ruined your aim!"

Jaw set in grim determination, Zack wrapped the rope tied to his arrow around his forearm and began to pull, dragging Michael out of the sky. Michael cursed but went back to the task of methodically freeing his wing. If he succeeded before Zack could ground him, Zack had laid out other arrows to use, barbed tipped, hemlock laced, thick-shafted arrows designed to pierce bone if necessary.

Great mother, don't make me use them. Michael, please, please...

Still thirty feet in the air, Michael shot him a triumphant grin, his wing nearly free of the net. Zack's heart plunged into his feet. This would be the end of both of them.

Just as he reached for his next arrow, a tremendous chattering went up behind him. The air buffeted him as hundreds of birds took flight at once—jackdaws, crows, grackles, starlings, ravens—a sea of black converging on Michael with single-minded intent. Zack froze, bow half-drawn as the birds swarmed Michael's wings, fouling them with their sheer numbers, weighing him down under their collective greater mass.

Michael twisted and contorted in midair, trying to swat the birds away, but there were too many, always more to take the place of any one dislodged.

Shrieking, Michael plummeted to the ground outside the wall, the birds lifting from him in a giant cloud the moment before impact. Still stunned, Zack flung his bow aside and rushed forward to flip Michael onto his stomach before he could draw a full breath.

He jammed his left knee against the middle of Michael's back, his right foot stomping down on Michael's wrist to keep him down. Cursing, battering at him with his wings, Michael writhed under him. Zack knew he didn't have long before he lost the advantage.

"You'll never forgive me, so I won't ask," Zack whispered. "But for fuck's sake, I wish I didn't have to do this."

He pulled his knife and took hold of Michael's left wing, trying to keep it from his face so he could see. Wings, legs, free arm all striving to break free, Zack wasn't sure he could do this without a misplaced knife stroke. Suddenly, Michael screamed in rage and his struggles lessened.

"Do it, Zack!" Artemis yelled at him while she held Michael's legs down.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping you, you jerk! Do it!"

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of both Dionysus and Hermes nearby, as well, though Dio faced away from them, staring into the trees, and Hermes simply stood there with an unhappy frown.

"Zack!"

Back teeth clenched hard, Zack lifted the knife and stabbed it down into Michael's back, right at the joining of wing and bone. Michael's screams bled over from fury to anguish as the serrated edge carved into him. Trying to keep his heart locked away in a terrible cold place, Zack sawed at the wing joint, ignoring the awful sounds of metal against bone. The wing snapped in an ugly, split fracture like a tree branch under too much stress, but Zack kept at his sawing, tears filling his eyes as Michael's cries faded and his struggles ceased.

"He's passed out," Artemis told him softly, but Zack didn't lift his head from his grisly work.

"Thank fuck."

He dug out the stub of bone from below Michael's shoulder blade, carving into his back to work it free. Flinging the broken, wilted wing away from him, he twisted to begin on the second one. He reasoned that he had to get all of it, like a tumor, if Michael was to have a chance.

When he finished, he fell back on his ass, sobbing, hands covered in blood and gore. Gentle hands pulled him back out of the way, and now he understood why Hermes had come as his cousin began packing Michael's gaping wounds, pulling energy from the life around him to lend to the broken angel sprawled in the dirt.

Strange, tuneless humming came from behind Zack, and he turned to see Dio with his head flung back, eyes closed, singing an unearthly, dual-toned aria, as the plants crept around his feet—ivy and flowered vines reaching around them—moving inexorably toward the wall.

Zack wiped his hands on his jeans, though he was certain a gallon of bleach wouldn't clean off the blood. He walked on his knees to Michael's head and lay down so their foreheads touched. "I'm so sorry. That was so fucking awful. I'm not even going to say it was for your own good, 'cause right now? I don't even know. I'm here, though. I'm here. No matter what."

"I don't think he can hear you," Hermes said gently.

"Don't care. Not even a little." Zack stroked Michael's blood-flecked hair, watching his corpse-pale face for any movement. *Not even an eyelid twitch.*

The vines reached the wall and began to climb in slow increments, working hairy root tendrils in between stones, crawling ever upward as if storming a fortress in slow motion. The wall would crumble. The fledgling city would be left a strange ruin in the heart of Arcadia, an eerie reminder of what happened to ill-advised invasions of another god's domain.

Hermes took heavy gauze from his messenger bag and Zack helped to lift Michael so he could bandage the bleeding wounds tightly. "That'll do for now. Are you staying here with him?"

"No." Zack shook his head. "No, I don't think it would do him much good." He slid his arms under Michael, cradling him close to his chest. "Let's get him back to Dad's, get him in a warm bed."

Hades asked no questions when Zack and his cousins trooped back into the condo later that morning. He took one look at Michael and led the way to the spare bedroom, bringing extra blankets and water while he shoed the cousins out.

"Shower," he said pointedly when Zack wanted to crawl into bed next to Michael. "I'll watch over him."

With a nod, Zack moved to obey, unable to meet his father's eyes. A heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“We’ll do all we can, Zagreus. You’re not alone.”

The family had made that abundantly clear that day. But some burdens he still would have to carry alone. “Thanks, Dad. I... I’m glad you were all here.”

He couldn’t get the water hot enough in the shower, trying to scald away the stain of Michael’s blood. It looked like it washed off, but he could still feel it on his skin. He probably always would. When he got back to the bedroom, he was surprised to find his father perched on the edge of the bed, stroking Michael’s hair.

“Did he wake up?” Zack whispered.

“Briefly.”

“Did he... say anything?”

Hades heaved a slow breath. “I’m not certain he was truly awake. He said he couldn’t move his legs.”

Zack sat down hard on the bed, shaking. “What did I do? Dad...”

“Hush. We can only wait. Time, Zagreus. He needs time.”

“You’re certain he’s ready to travel?” Hades stood with his arms crossed over his chest in a belligerent stance that bellowed how much he didn’t agree.

“Maybe. Probably not.” Zack rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I just think he’d be more comfortable at home.”

“Let Charon drive you, then.”

“It’s all right, Dad. Really. Just a couple of hours. We’ll be okay.”

“Has he said anything to you yet?” Ti called over from the kitchen where he’d insisted on packing them lunch.

“No.”

Michael had said nothing since the first time he’d woken two weeks before to say he couldn’t move his legs. The family had reacted with typical outraged drama to the whole incident. Both of Zack’s uncles and his least favorite cousin, Ares, were all for hunting Mammetun down and making her pay. Hades didn’t often play the big brother card, but this time he did, insisting that they leave Mammetun in peace. Her slow fading was more than punishment enough. Every family member who had a stake in the healing arts wanted to help with

Michael, too—Apollo, Auntie Hestia, Athena—but Zack wouldn't let anyone in to see Michael besides Hermes. His shame over what he'd done weighed on him so heavily, it felt like a mountain had decided to perch on his head.

"Zack..." Ti put the cooler by the door. "You're not really in great shape yourself. We'd all feel better if someone, at least, went with you."

An automatic, irritated denial was on Zack's tongue before he stopped himself and tried to regroup. If he didn't sound reasonable, no way in hell were they letting him go. "Thanks, Ti. Look, everyone's been wonderful and I'm really grateful. I know it hasn't always seemed like it."

Charon patted his shoulder on his way by to add to the growing pile of supplies by the door. "You've been pretty horrid, but we forgive you."

Zack successfully fought the eye roll that wanted to follow that. "But I think it'll be better for him. Just the two of us. A place he knows, where he felt peaceful."

"Zagreus," his father growled. "You have a phone. Use it."

He took that as permission to go without further fuss. Sometimes Dad was obtuse about what other people felt, but sometimes he got Zack faster than anyone else did. He left them with the task of loading up the Jeep, certain there would be several items (like the cooler) among the groceries and supplies that he would be expected to return. Not something he could worry about.

The blinds were drawn in the guest room, Michael propped up against his pile of pillows. He did turn his head and blink at Zack. No smile, no word of greeting, but Zack saw it as progress. His heart had broken a little more each day since he'd taken Michael's second pair of wings, until now... Now he wasn't sure there was enough left to put back together. Left with a smear of heart, could you really still love someone? Or was it a sense of duty that he told himself was love?

It didn't matter. He had destroyed Michael, completely, utterly. With his own blood-drenched hands, he had ripped the light out of his eyes. Some nights, Zack still woke up screaming.

In theory, it had been the only way. When the angels came to banish Michael from heaven, they ripped out his glorious, shining wings. Zack had reasoned that the brushfire, transient power of the fallen came from their second set of wings. Fallen angels who gained human followers sometimes became godlike, their lives extended indefinitely. Of course, the angels'

instruments had been better suited to the task, and though Michael had suffered horribly, he hadn't fed the ground with three-quarters of his blood when he lost his first wings.

Zack had removed his second wings by sheer, brutish force. This was obviously not the recommended method. No one could tell him what happened after a fallen angel's second wings were removed. Maybe no one had ever done it before, but the forcible ripping away of that much power had caused devastating psychic and physical trauma, almost as if Michael's spine and brain had been injured in a high-speed collision.

"All set to go. We're going home." Zack wrapped the blankets around Michael and lifted him, his body achingly light. The wheelchair was already packed. It should have been harder to carry him to the elevator and down to the parking garage, but Zack wasn't even breathing hard by the time they reached the Jeep.

"Love you," Zack murmured against Michael's forehead as he settled him into the passenger seat and buckled him in. He didn't need a response, but he still needed to say it.

Numerous hugs and promises later, they were on the road home. Zack took the back roads Michael liked best, though he regretted it when Michael's breath caught and he gripped the armrest on the passenger side as they passed a particular bit of marsh. Zack wasn't certain how Michael recognized it, but from the timing and the crossroad they had passed, he was certain Michael had changed at that spot.

The panic in Michael's eyes was the closest sign of emotion since his second fall and Zack's heart smear broke just a little more. He reached over and squeezed Michael's free hand, the one not holding the door in a death grip. Michael didn't respond but he didn't pull away either. Maybe that was good.

The house... Had they really only been gone a month? Everything looked the same. Oh, the grass was a little shaggy out front, but Zack had hired a service to cut it once in the interim. Someone watched as he pulled into the drive and got Michael's wheelchair out. He didn't care. Let the neighbors stare and wonder. Most of the houses were farther up the street anyway, only their house and Mrs. Pendleton's at the end by the creek. He moved Michael gently from car to wheelchair and then into the house, all his hopes dying when there was still no reaction.

At least I can take care of you here, in peace.

He debated putting Michael right to bed, but that didn't seem healthy. He'd already spent three weeks curled up under the covers. Instead, he left the wheelchair in the kitchen, facing Michael toward the window so he could see all of their suncatcher friends.

"I think they missed you." He kissed the top of Michael's head. "Norbert probably most of all."

Again, he received no response, but he could be patient. He had to be, now. After he had brought everything in from the car and had put the groceries away, he had a better idea. With a lot of grunting and a little swearing, Zack carried Michael, wheelchair and all, down the back steps and into the yard to set him down by his butterfly garden.

Have to put a ramp in there. Especially if Michael starts trying to get around by himself.

There it was again, that little niggle of optimism that refused to go away. He wished it would. At least the weather was beautiful and Michael's flowers were in full bloom, busy with bees and yellow sulphur moths. The chime of the doorbell reached him in the yard and he tamped down on exasperation. Maybe he wouldn't open it...

It rang again, and a third time. "All right, all right..." Zack clomped back through the house and yanked the door open. At first, he saw no one until a throat cleared and he looked down at Mrs. Pendleton, their only next-door neighbor. Tiny, white-haired, and carrying a casserole dish that had to be half her body weight, she smiled up at him.

"Hello, there! I saw you come home and wondered if you could use some dinner." She peered around him, trying to see into the house. "Is Michael all right?"

No, he's not, you nosy old biddy... Zack closed his eyes on a slow, indrawn breath. Mrs. Pendleton was just trying to help. If he'd managed not to alienate most of the family through all this, he could deal with a nice old lady.

"Come on in. Michael's out back right now, enjoying the sunshine." Zack took the casserole with a murmured "Thank you" and led her back into the kitchen.

"Is he sick?" Mrs. Pendleton asked in a hushed voice. "Does he have that AIDS thing?"

"No, ma'am." Zack put the casserole on the counter and fussed with making coffee. There. He could be hospitable, too. "We... went upstate to have a couple of... growths removed from his back."

"Oh, dear. Do the doctors think they got it all?"

Zack had to stop for another slow breath. *Who the hell knows?* "We hope so. But the... the operation... There's, I guess, neurological damage. He can't walk yet. Doesn't always..." *ever* "track what's going on around him."

"You poor boys." Mrs. Pendleton patted his arm. "Give it time. My Harold, rest his soul, regained most of the use of his legs after his first stroke. Let me know if you end up needing a walker or anything to help with mobility. I still have everything in the garage."

"Oh... thank you." Zack had to turn away for a moment, all the sun and the dust in the house apparently irritating his eyes. She was kind enough to let him collect himself without comment, and they chatted a few minutes more about the weather before she said her goodbyes.

Just a quick peek outside to see if Michael's all right... oh, fuck.

Zack dashed outside to where Michael lay sprawled on the grass, his wheelchair having rolled out of reach. With a little cry of dismay, he took the back steps in one jump and flung himself down beside Michael.

"You okay? Did you fall? Were you trying to get up?"

Michael, propped up on one hand, his useless legs bent at the knees, wasn't sitting stock-still, though. His left hand trembled like a caterpillar-laced leaf in the wind, but he reached and tugged methodically at the little shoots of chickweed cropping up between his marigolds.

"Michael?" Zack stared, afraid to move and break the spell. Michael was *weeding*.

"The lupines are coming up."

"The... what did you say?" Zack's heart cracked just a hair more to hear that beloved voice again.

"The lupines." Michael pointed a shaking hand toward the back of the bed. "Wasn't sure they would."

There it was. The final crack. Zack's heart finally lay in nothing but shattered pieces in the grass. "Michael? Do you know me?"

After three weeks of blank stares, Michael finally looked at him with those impossibly blue eyes, free of red, free of malice. "I know you. I... do. Could you help? This is hard for me."

With tears streaming down his face, Zack helped Michael into a more comfortable position, letting him lean back against Zack's side. He kept having to wipe his eyes on his T-shirt sleeve, but it didn't matter.

Love wasn't the answer to everything. That was a hard lesson to learn. But it was more than enough for sitting in the sun, pulling weeds. It was more than enough to start the seeds of two new, stronger hearts growing again beside the butterfly garden.

The End

Author Bio

While Angel Martinez is the erotic fiction pen name of a writer of several genres, she writes both kinds of gay romance—science fiction and fantasy. Currently living part time in the hectic sprawl of northern Delaware (and full time inside the author's head), Angel has one husband, one son, two cats, a changing variety of other furred and scaled companions, a love of all things beautiful and a terrible addiction to the consumption of both knowledge and chocolate.

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NOT JUST A KISS

By Jennah Scott

Photo Description

In this black and white photo, two men embrace passionately. They are both nude, and the smaller of the two is in the throes of passion. His head is thrown back and he's grasping the bigger man's head. The male on the left is marking his partner on his neck, and he's holding him so his partner arches his back. His hand is supporting the man on the right's neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a kitten, well not those small baby kittens, but a Snow Leopard kitten. As a shifter we can live for a long time, way longer than humans as due to the Shifting of muscles and cells when we Shift, our cells remain young and healthy.

My first shift has just occurred, at 18 years old, so I am still a kitten within the Pride. The Alpha's son is looking for a mate and I have caught his eye. I am not going to give in, but I can't seem resist his charms and attention...

Lots of cuddling, Kittenish play and cuteness! I don't mind D/S relationship, not too hard-core.

Sincerely,

Cherlly

Story Info

Genre: new adult, paranormal

Tags: bonded mates, coming of age, competition, feline shifters, Himalayan, spicy

Word Count: 16,484

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Acknowledgments

This is my second story in the Love Landscape's Anthology, and I want to once again thank everyone for the opportunity to participate. The organizers have been incredibly helpful. Thank you, Cherlly, for the prompt. As this is one of my first shifter stories, this was a challenge, and I hope you enjoy the story. Thank you to my critique partner, Raven. Without your help I wouldn't have been able to do this.

NOT JUST A KISS

By Jennah Scott

Chapter One

Raju

I stared at the moon, high above the tallest peak. The white snowcaps glistened in its light. When tomorrow dawned I'd be a new man. No longer a boy, but a man. In three months' time I would have the opportunity to compete for my position in the Leap.

Eighteen.

I was finally eighteen and had completed my first shift.

As I lay in the snow, the desire to make a snow angel washed over me, and I realized while I was now a man, I was still a child—a gift from my mother no doubt. She told me to live life. Enjoy it. My father taught me to be respectful, confident, protective.

I think I fell in the middle of both of their teachings because, in truth, I was not the strongest in the Leap, nor was I the weakest.

Blue spots in the moon's surface drew my attention. It was so strange seeing them there. The color was familiar, and yet... not.

"Raju, you still up here?" my mother called out from below.

"Yes, *aamaa*, I am here." I sighed. *Time to go home already?* "I'll come home in a few. I just wanted to enjoy the moon a little longer."

She stopped at my side and crouched in the snow next to me. "My dear Raju, you've had an eventful day, and now you lie here in the snow with nothing more than a thin pair of shorts on. I know we do not get cold easily, but I would feel better if you were inside."

"Of course. It's just so... beautiful."

"I would have never guessed. My son, the romantic."

I pushed up and bent my knees. She squeezed my shoulder and stood. "There is another reason I came to find you."

"What's that?"

"You have a visitor."

For the first time since she came up the hill, I looked at my mom. Pride and excitement shone in her eyes. A flush colored her cheeks, but not from the cold, I was sure.

“Who?” There were only a few people who would have come by tonight. The Leap had run together to celebrate the first shift for a few others and myself. My friends had all gone home, saying they were too tired and sore to hang out.

Not me. I wanted to run longer, farther, but at the insistence of our alpha, I returned home.

“Sujan.” His name was a whisper on her lips.

My entire body tensed. Sujan was the alpha's son, the second in command. Only his father could and would contradict Sujan's orders.

“What's he doing at the house? Is everything okay?” He had no reason to visit. We weren't friends. Sujan was three years older than me. We didn't run in the same circles.

“Everything's fine, *chora*. He just said he wanted to check on you. See how you were doing after this evening. I think it's very kind of him.” She squeezed my shoulder once more. “Come speak with him.”

I stood and brushed the snow from my back. “Fine. I'll come down, but I don't know why he's here.”

Mom started toward the house, and I followed close behind, ready to catch her if she stumbled. If the trail had been wider I would have walked with her arm twined in mine.

Dad and Sujan were sitting in the front room when we walked in, oil lamps lit around them. Dad preferred to entertain out front rather than in the back room where the TV was. He said it was too much of a distraction.

I stepped foot inside the doorway and Sujan jumped from his seat. He held his hand out for me, and I took it. Electricity shot through my arm.

Whoa. What was that? I glanced up at him, eyes widening. He winked, and I flew backward, nearly knocking over a small table where we dropped our keys and things.

My father rose from his chair. “Raj, you and Sujan chat in here. Your mother and I are going to call it a night.”

Mom met him near the back hallway and they linked hands. She turned to me with a smile and mouthed, "Good night."

I narrowed my eyes. What was going on here?

Sujan indicated the chair next to him with a sweep of his arm. I hesitated, taking him in. The man was gorgeous, tall, with more muscles than I could ever hope to possess. There was a reason no one challenged him as second—and it wasn't his status as the alpha's son. Sujan's gaze caught mine, and I swallowed. Beautiful. Clear blue, like the sky on a clear summer afternoon. The spots on the moon flashed in my vision. Was that where I'd seen the color? Sujan's eyes? I shook my head. *No*. There had to be another reason the blue stood out. I mean, how often did anyone see blue spots on the moon?

"Raju, please join me." His deep timbre slid over my skin.

I found myself purring, literally, which brought on thoughts of Sujan in his leopard form: white fur with black spots, just like the rest of us; slightly bigger; more powerful. His eyes stood out more against the white of his fur than they did against the dark tones of his skin. I saw myself running with him, rubbing against his side, curling next to him when we stopped to rest.

"No. I have changed my mind. Sit at my feet. I would like to touch you."

Once more I jerked back. "Sit at your feet? What the hell? I am not submissive to you, Sujan."

"Are you sure about that?" He tilted his head to the side.

I wasn't sure. Actually, I was fairly certain I was more submissive, since I'd never once been an aggressor. But submissives within the Leap were not allowed to do much more than care for others. We needed them, but I didn't want to be with them. I wanted to help. Be there to fight for our people. To do that, I had to compete in the challenge. I had to finish in the top five. Submitting to Sujan, or even going to him in a submissive way, was counterintuitive.

I sat in the chair next to him.

"What can I do for you tonight?" I sat with my back ramrod straight and shoulders squared.

Sujan massaged his forehead. "Are you planning to race?"

"Of course, I am. It's what we all do. You competed, despite knowing your place in the Leap was secure. Why wouldn't I?"

“Because I asked you not to?”

My jaw dropped. Surely he wasn't... no. I had to have heard him wrong. “Are you?”

Sujan nodded.

“I have to run. If I don't then I'll be at the bottom. I don't want that, Sujan. I'm a better man than that. Your request won't keep me from entering.”

“What if you didn't have to worry about your place in the Leap?”

“How is that possible? We all have a rank. It's how responsibilities are divided. Only couples...” Only couples shared rank and responsibilities. To not be concerned would mean I would be in a pairing. “Do you mean me and you?”

It was a risk to ask, but I couldn't wait any longer for him to get to the point. The adrenaline high from my first run was fading quickly. My bed called my name.

“Since you have to ask, it appears I haven't made myself clear enough. Yes, I mean you and me. Us. Together.”

“W-wh-why?” There was no reason for him to want me. I wasn't anyone special. My parents weren't special. None of us had done anything to truly stand out.

“Does it matter why? You are eligible to take a mate. I want you.” He shrugged. “That's all we need.”

“I'm eligible, and you want me. That's enough?” I repeated his words, not sure I'd heard them correctly. Surely he didn't mean I had no say. What if I didn't want him? Which I didn't. He was attractive, but hell, I'd just shifted for the first time. I hadn't even had a chance to look for a mate.

“Do you not want me as your mate?”

“Not right now, no. You're attractive, Sujan, but I've been eighteen for less than twenty-four hours. I just experienced my first shift. Gotta admit... I'm not ready to be tied to only one person so soon.”

Sujan shook his head. “I am the second in command. My father is alpha. Why would you not want me?”

Cocky much? Sure, I hadn't spent much time around Sujan, but I had no idea the guy was as egotistical as this.

“The reasons I just gave aren’t enough? What if I’ve already got eyes for someone my age? What—”

“You don’t,” he interrupted.

I flopped back in the chair with a long sigh. Damn him. “How do you know?”

“Easy. I’ve been watching you, Raj. You have friends. But you aren’t attracted to them.”

“And you think I’m attracted to you?”

I had closed my eyes and didn’t see or hear him get up from his chair, so I wasn’t expecting his lips on mine, hard, with a hint of desperation. But his hands on my face were tender, gentle. To add to my surprise, I kissed him back. I didn’t touch him, left my hands on the arms of the chair. But my lips parted for Sujan. I purred when the tip of his tongue touched mine. He wasn’t the first guy I’d kissed, but he sure as hell was the best. As quickly as the kiss began, it ended. Sujan pulled away, leaving me panting.

“Yeah, Raj. You’re attracted to me.”

I opened my eyes to see the smirk on his face. *No. I’m not attracted. That wasn’t interest. He just knows how to kiss. Why would I turn down that opportunity?*

Then again, why was I turning down the chance to mate with Sujan? Because that wasn’t me. Dad had taught me to take pride in my abilities. I knew I could help this Leap.

But I couldn’t do that as Sujan’s mate. No matter what, he’d outrank me.

“Just because I kissed you back doesn’t mean I want to mate with you, Sujan. You should know as well as anybody, a kiss is just a kiss.”

Sujan lifted me from the chair, his hands under my arms, holding tight. He took the seat and pulled me into his lap. *Damn, he’s strong.* I tried to maintain my stiff posture from before, but his hand rubbing up and down my body did weird things to my equilibrium. My mind blanked completely, and the next thing I knew I was curled into his chest. My head lay on his shoulder. Sujan pressed his mouth to mine once more, softer this time. It wasn’t a heated kiss, more sensual, warm.

“You put on a show, Raju. But inside, you are a kitten. And you will be my kitten. You will not compete. I will not allow it.”

“Don’t call me a kitten.” I sat up and gave him my best glare—not good enough since he smiled rather than bristled.

“I called you a kitten because of your place in the Leap: newly shifted, young. It was not meant to hurt you. The way you snuggle, you really are a kitten.”

I don’t know how long we sat in the chair, Sujan touching me, while I tucked closer to him. I didn’t argue with his demand. I would race, and he could demand the opposite as much as he pleased. I would earn my rights within the Leap.

Sujan leaned over and kissed my forehead then whispered, “You will be mine.” He nudged my thigh, and I slipped off his lap. “Get some sleep, kitten. Tomorrow will be a new day.”

He left me standing in the front room, exhausted and confused. Yeah, tomorrow would be a new day—my first day of training. Three months. The countdown was on.

Chapter Two

Sujan

I stood on the back porch of our house and stretched. Dad had gone for his morning run, so I took advantage of the quietness. Being the son of the alpha sucked. A lot of people wouldn't agree with me, but really, it did. There was always someone coming or going. Dad spent two-thirds of his day in meetings. A member of the Leap constantly needed his opinion.

That left me as the gopher boy. Dad didn't speak in any way other than commanding. It had always been that way. I wanted to change things when I took over the Leap.

Movement to my left caught my attention, and a couple of guys burst from the trees the next second.

Raju was quick on their heels. Good lord, that guy made my heart pump. It could be negative twenty degrees outside and one look at him would heat my body enough to make me sweat.

He was shorter than most, smaller too. The guy had a spine of steel though. If I hadn't known it before, I would have figured it out last night. It had taken everything in me not to toss him over my shoulder and carry him home to my bed. I've been waiting for him to turn eighteen and shift. Until our mate shifted, we didn't know for sure they were meant for us. One look and I knew; he was mine.

Although, from his rejection, he hadn't figured it out yet. But he would. Sooner rather than later if I had any say. And I did, because I was the alpha's son.

"Raju," I called out before vaulting over the deck rail and landing in the snow. He and his friends came to a sudden halt and turned back toward me.

I couldn't hear their exact words, but from the blush on Raju's cheeks—a turn-on if I've seen one—I had a feeling he wouldn't be any happier with me than he was last night. Damn it, telling him how much I wanted him, I'd sounded more like my dad than I'd intended. I had to make up for that. Apparently, I wasn't starting off very well.

"What?" Raju asked when I was within hearing distance.

"You guys out for a run?" I knew they were and I knew why. He was training, even though I'd asked him not to.

No. That wasn't right. I'd commanded him not to. *Shit*. I really needed to get my head on straight. As alpha, I didn't want to be known as Mr. Commando. That was Dad's title. If I didn't stop with the man I intended to mate then how could I with my people?

One of Raju's friends, Markham I think, snickered. "Running is what we peons tend to call what we're doing, yeah."

I snarled then pulled back when I saw Raju flinch. "I deserved that."

"If you don't need anything, we need to get a move on. Mark's got work later, and I want to make sure we get at least five miles in. Then Prem and I are going to start on the obstacle course."

Was he purposely trying to point out his defiance? I looked at Raj with raised eyebrows. He gave a quick jerk of his head. "I thought..."

"Yeah, you thought wrong. See you around, Sujan."

I tried to conceal my disappointment when he left. He showed no indication he'd enjoyed a moment of the night before; just a jerk of his head and he was off running once more. Prem and Mark followed him.

"I suck at this. It should be easier." I stalked back to my house and up the deck to where my cup of coffee sat, now cold. I needed someone to talk to. Maybe Mom could give me something, anything. A romantic I was not.

Mom was in the kitchen when I walked inside. She gave me her patented mom smile and pointed to the barstool.

"Sit, my boy."

I did as she bid and propped my elbows on the counter, then rested my head in my hands. "He hates me, *mamu*."

"No he doesn't. He doesn't know you. What happened last night?"

"I was an ass." She swatted me with a hand towel. "Ouch. Sorry. But it's true."

"Then fix it." Mom turned to the stove where she stirred a pot of soup. She made it sound so easy.

"I'm trying. He was outside running, and I went to say good morning."

“You intended to say that, but what actually came out?” *Damn it.* It would help if she didn’t know me so well—even better than I knew myself apparently.

“I reminded him of my decree that he wouldn’t compete. Well, I tried to anyway. He turned his back on me and ran off.”

“You sound like a whiny little child, my boy. This is not the son I raised, nor your father. The problem is you haven’t shown him why he should love you the way you love him.”

Love. No. I didn’t love him. Or maybe I did. Wasn’t that what it meant to have a mate? You loved them and would do anything for them, including putting yourself in danger to protect them. Or pissing them off to keep them safe—perhaps by keeping them from competing in the annual endurance race?

“I do love him,” I whispered the revelation. Mom was right. I had to show him why he should love me. Since I’d started watching Raju over a year ago, I should have stepped up, made my presence known. I hadn’t. Now I had to pay the price.

“Of course you do. And he will love you, Sujan. Believe it or not, you are impossible not to love.”

The smile that formed couldn’t be helped. “You say that because you’re my mom. I think your opinion is a bit biased.”

“While that may be so, it also is true. The members of our Leap love you. They will be happy having you at the helm when your father retires his position as alpha.”

“Raju insists on running the race.”

“As he should.” She set her wooden spoon down and came to my side. “This is something you don’t understand. Mine and your father’s fault, I’d say. As the alpha’s son you haven’t had to earn a spot in our Leap. You inherited your place. The respect you may have had to work for, but it was a bit easier being who you are. People knew from the beginning they would someday follow your lead.”

She tapped me on my chest. “You mustn’t take advantage of this. While they may have to abide by your leadership, that does not mean they will respect you if you turn into an idiot. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. But if Raju were my mate, he wouldn’t have to worry either.”

“My boy. You see it that way, but he doesn’t. Nor will others within the Leap. To them, and to your Raju, if he were to mate you without competing then he would be seen as an opportunist. One who got what everyone would love to have without trying. Some of our people—though not all—would make him work three times as hard to earn their respect. Long after they should have given it, they would continue to push him. Test him. Make sure he was worthy of you and this Leap.”

“Ridiculous.” I tried to pull away, but Mom wrapped her arm around my waist and tsked.

“This is what I mean. You don’t understand. If you truly want Raju as your mate then you must let him train. For himself. And for you. Use his training to your benefit. Help him. Show him you truly want him as your mate.”

Something had been bothering me since our run, and Mom’s comment about wanting him as my mate brought the question to the surface.

“I saw for myself. Raju is my mate. But he doesn’t know. Why is that? Does it mean what I saw was wrong?”

Mom chuckled. “No. It just means he’s not ready yet. When the time comes, he too will know what you know. Raju is a kitten, Sujan. Give him time.”

Yeah, he was a kitten. My kitten. Although, I’m sure my mom meant it in a different way than I did. Thinking of him snuggled in my lap made my cock harden and my body tighten.

Time. I didn’t want to wait forever, and this would be the only run he’d make. I’d give him one, no more. And I’d sure as hell make certain he was prepared.

Chapter Three

Raju

Sujan was going to be a real pain in the ass. Prem and Mark led me right to his backyard, and I wanted to punch them both in the gut for it. Not that they knew anything about him coming to my house or my sitting in his lap.

“Looks like Sujan is finally making his claim,” Prem said from behind me as we ran through the woods.

“What are you talking about, finally making his claim?” I called over my shoulder.

“Sujan’s wanted you for a while, Raj. How could you not have noticed?” Mark caught up to me.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what either of you have seen that I haven’t. Sujan’s never said two words to me.” *Before last night anyway.*

A cold, wet splat hit me square in the back—a snowball. I turned to Prem, who was dusting snow from his hands.

“Hey!” I shook the snow from my back and neck and bent to gather my own, but Mark knocked me over.

“Wake up, Raj. He’s been watching you for at least the last year. Haven’t you noticed how he kept showing up where we were? In town? Hell, he’s stopped in the store when we had to run errands for our parents.”

They were both crazy, out of their minds. There was no correlation between seeing Sujan in town and him watching me. Was there? I shook my head. *No.*

“Shit. He really hasn’t noticed, Mark. Amazing. I saw him too. Thought it was coincidence at first, but then he started popping up more and more. He’s really never said anything to you? Not even yesterday?”

Lie to my friends or let them in on my surprise visit? It shouldn’t have been a hard decision, but part of me wanted to keep it to myself. Spending time with Sujan felt... special, even if I didn’t want to admit it.

“No, I’d never talked to him before yesterday. Well, last night.”

Mark wagged his brows. “Do tell.”

“There’s not much to tell. He came by the house, told me I couldn’t compete because I was to be his mate.” I shrugged. One day I’d tell them everything, but not today.

“Prem, did you catch that?” Mark looked at Prem and rolled his eyes. “Sujan came to this asshole’s house, said he was his mate, and ordered him not to compete.”

Prem’s brows rose at me. “Why are you still planning to race?” Mark shook his head at Prem. “He’s insane. A hot piece like Sujan said that to me and I’d drop to my knees and kiss his feet.”

All three of us broke into laughter. We finished our run, and Mark left to get ready for work. His parents owned a farm, and he had to help work the land when he wasn’t in school. This was our last year of school; in a couple of weeks we’d graduate, and his breaks would end. Mark would begin working in the fields daily, unless he earned a spot as a warrior within the Leap.

Prem and I used the walk to the obstacle course as a cool down. Soon enough we’d be dripping sweat once more. The course consisted of sparring, rock climbing, and fighting in leopard form. As new shifters we had to work on controlling our shifts, becoming quick and efficient. Practice until our muscles hurt so much we couldn’t move a finger. In its entirety the course stretched ten miles in diameter, which is why we set a plan to run at least five miles a day.

“Do you really intend to run the course?” Prem fell into step with me as we headed to the rocks for climbing.

“Yeah, I do. Why wouldn’t I? This is what we do. I don’t necessarily want to be part of The Force, but I want to give back to the Leap.”

“As Sujan’s mate you would help him. Be his second when he becomes alpha. The only way to help more than that would be to take over after him.”

I shook my head. “Nope, I would be his mate. He would still have a second. No way would they give me that title. Usually it would go to a son, but...”

“Well, yeah. But that’s why it makes sense for him to appoint you as his second. He could do that, you know. Change the way of things. Haven’t had much change in a long time. Some of our laws and practices are outdated.”

My jaw dropped. Prem was right about the lack of changes, but he was the last person I would have ever expected to voice his opinion out loud. Prem loved the Leap, worshipped the alpha. We all did in our own ways—some more than others.

“You aren’t happy?” I asked.

“No. Maybe.” He shrugged. “We need to move forward with the times, like the appointment of second. Why can’t it be the mate of the alpha? I’ve never understood why there had to be a separate appointment. And the annual run seems so... I dunno. If I were alpha, I wouldn’t have it as a requirement. I mean, we all have things we do well. Why not just use our natural talents and let things fall into place on their own? If you’ve got two who are strong enough, they could fight in some way to determine dominance—like our wild cousins.”

I thought about what Prem said. His questions made sense. But Ankit Malakar was not a man to question. I’d guess Sujan didn’t question him any more than we did. Was Sujan the same way? If I ever succumbed to his order, would I lose my ability to question? Or was he different than his father?

From what I’d seen so far, there was no difference. Sujan was as unyielding as the current alpha. *Definitely not a point in his favor.*

Ugh. Why was I even considering Sujan? I didn’t want his attention. I wanted to find my own mate, have a little fun. Yet, as we stood at the bottom of the climb, all I saw were Sujan’s blue eyes, his toned body. I imagined the soft touch of his hand on my back, how perfect we fit together in my chair.

Prem cleared his throat. “Don’t know what you’re thinking about over there, but I can tell you those pants don’t hide shit.”

I glanced down and groaned at the tent slowly forming. *Perfect. Just perfect.* I adjusted myself, flipped off Prem, and stepped into the safety harness. With members of the Leap settled deep within the Himalayan Mountains, it was important we had a rescue team to help in an emergency. Some of us worked for the teams at Everest full-time, but we were always at the ready to help our own family.

Forcing my focus to the wall, Prem and I made our way up and down a few times. I made three successful passes before switching to belay so Prem could take his turn. From there we moved to the next task—hand-to-hand combat. This was the area in which I needed the most help and training.

My mom was a schoolteacher and my dad an accountant. Neither position leant itself to knowledge in hand-to-hand combat. Prem tried to help, but he didn’t have much experience either.

“Punch with your right, block with your left. Don’t leave yourself open. Punch with your left, block with your right.” Sujan’s voice froze me in place.

Prem took a cheap shot, and I landed on my ass.

“What the hell? Warn a guy next time.” I rubbed my jaw where Prem’s right hook connected and glared at him. “Cheap shot.”

He chuckled. “Doesn’t matter. All about winning in this game. Want me to give you some privacy?”

“Nope. We’re on limited time here. He wants to stick around, fine by me. At least we’ll have a little eye candy.”

“No argument here.”

I stood once more and took my stance. Sujan’s advice lingered in my thoughts. When I did as he suggested my body fell into a rhythm. I no longer felt like I was all over the place, but moving with a purpose. And Prem didn’t have an open shot... until he kicked me in the side.

When I hit the ground the second time, I stayed on my back and stared at the sky. “I’m not cut out for this.”

How was I going to survive the gauntlet if I couldn’t even make it through a practice spar with one of my best friends? As I lay contemplating the upcoming torture, a phone started ringing.

“Hello,” Prem answered.

Sujan crossed his arms and peered over me. “You going to lie there the rest of the day?”

I ignored his question and concentrated on listening to Prem. Whoever had called wasn’t delivering good news. Prem’s words were short, his voice tight. Minutes later he squatted next to my head.

“Gotta go. Mom needs help with my little sister. Apparently she decided she could fly and hurt herself.”

Sujan jumped up. “Do you need medical help? I can call Doc and send him to your place right away.”

Prem waved him off. “Let me go home and check for sure. If we need Doc then I’ll call him. Thank you for the offer, Sujan. You stay here with Raj.”

Thanks a lot. Damn Prem. Sometimes I thought my friends were worse than the old maids who swore they were matchmakers. I closed my eyes and waited for his footsteps to fade. When I opened them once more, ready to get back to working out, I didn’t see the blue sky above me. Instead, Sujan’s eyes filled my vision, his hand extended for me to take.

I shoved him out of the way and pushed myself off the ground. "I've got it. If you don't mind, I need to move on. Now that Prem is headed home and Mark is working the fields, I'm going to have to work on shifting by myself."

"Let me take you to my place. I'll help you. Being in a secluded area can be a good thing. Especially in the beginning."

His offer was genuine, but I fought the temptation. If I went to his house, accepted his assistance, then I wouldn't have the willpower to stop what may or may not happen next, like kissing him. Or cuddling... I shook my head.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'll stay out here."

Sujan sighed. "Listen, I screwed up yesterday. I get that. Let me help you. You only started shifting. The way Dad sets this up, your last fight is in leopard form. He says only the true protectors can make it through everything and still find the energy necessary to not only shift, but win in a battle of dominance."

Interesting. Maybe Sujan can help me in other ways, like sharing trade secrets. How would that be any different than accepting him as my mate and sliding right in next to him in the Leap?

"You don't even want me to participate. You're intent on making me your mate and ordering me around. What changed that you're now handing out advice?" Good advice at that, but I refused to admit that much to him.

Sujan scrubbed his hand over his face. "I'm sorry, Raju, really. I do want you as my mate, but I've seen the error of my ways. The last thing I want is to turn into my father. What I did, commanding you, it was wrong. I get it. Please?"

Once more his sincere words threw me sideways. How was I supposed to stay away from him if he stayed like this—honest and open, almost sweet? Simply put... I couldn't. Sujan drew me to him. So this once, I'd follow him home. After all, a secluded place to shift would be helpful, at least for today. Tomorrow I'd come back out on my own, with or without Prem and Mark, and I'd prepare for the course.

"If I come over, no touching or kissing. Okay?"

He smirked. "Deal. No touching or kissing unless you initiate."

"That won't be a problem. I need to practice shifting. A secluded place will help." I hated the qualifier he added at the end of his agreement. I wouldn't touch him, no matter what.

I led the way to the bottom of the course. “You drove?” I nodded to the bike parked at the trailhead.

“Yep. Come on.”

Fantastic. I’d get to spend the few minutes with my arms wrapped around his muscular torso. I groaned and climbed on behind him. This was such a bad idea.

Chapter Four

Sujan

For whatever reason, I thought having Raju on the back of my bike would give me a chance to get my cock under control. My jeans had tightened to the point of pain, and having his hands around my waist only made it worse. *Karma's a bitch.*

I slowed the bike at the edge of our drive and carefully pulled into my spot in the garage.

"Would you like something to eat or drink before we get started?"

"No, Sujan. I don't want food. I don't want anything to drink. I don't want a tour of your house, and I sure as hell don't want to see your bedroom. You told me I could work on shifting out here. Should I go around back?"

"Enough," I snapped. "I said I was sorry. I'm giving you free rein with my backyard to work on shifting in private. Unless I'm dumber than even I know, nothing I've done today deserves being treated like this. Not once did I mention taking you to my room. So get over yourself and go around back. If you need me, holler. I'll come running I'm sure." No doubt about it. If Raju needed me, I'd be there, pain in my ass or not.

Raju's snarl turned to a frown. He looked at me with regret. "I'll be out back. Thanks... thanks for letting me come over."

His shoulders fell forward and he walked out of the garage. I fought back the urge to chase him, take him in my arms, and tell him it was okay. No matter how much I wanted Raju, we couldn't have a relationship based on constant apologies. To make a relationship work I had to figure out what made him happy. Show him what made me happy.

Give him time. Mom's words echoed in my thoughts. If she was right then letting him go off on his own was the right choice. Later, I'd go to his side.

"Sujan." Raj's voice was distant but not too far away.

I headed around the corner of the house. Raju leaned against the wall, one leg bent, his foot propped up on the stone. He'd shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah?"

"I... um... I mean..." Raju looked at me, then over my shoulder and to his left and right.

"What's going on, Raj?" He shook his head. Without second-guessing myself, I went to him. I lifted his chin so our eyes met. "Talk to me. I'm here to help."

"Can you... never mind." Raju slipped beneath my arm and started jogging to the tree line surrounding the house.

"Raj. Stop." I ran after him.

He was fast, I had to give him that. When I finally caught up, I grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled him to a stop. We tumbled to the ground, landing with me on top.

"Leave me alone. Please."

"Damn it, talk to me. What is going on? Is this about what I said at the house?"

"No. It's about me. I can't shift. Okay? Is that what you want to hear?"

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye. I lowered my head to his and kissed away the moisture. "Yes, it is. Not for the reasons you think. Everyone struggles at first. That's why I wanted you to come home with me. Better to struggle with no one around than in front of everyone, right?"

"No. It's better to not fucking struggle at all. How the hell am I supposed to earn my place in this Leap if I can't even shift without it taking forever?"

I sat back on my heels, still straddling his waist. My cock struggled against my zipper. *Oh, great. Please don't let it scare him away.* Now wasn't the time for him to notice my arousal. For that matter, now wasn't the time to be aroused, but my body didn't pay attention.

"Calm down, Raju. Getting worked up won't do you any good." He started to shake his head again, and I held him still with a hand on either side of his face. "Breathe with me. Deep breath in, and slowly blow it out."

We did this a couple of times, and all the while I studied his eyes, watched the fear fade with each concentrated inhale and exhale. Once he relaxed, I took more control. "I'm going to get off of you, and you're going to strip for me. Understand?"

"Why?"

I sighed. He wasn't going to do anything I said without a fight. "Because I said so."

"Right. This is piss-poor seduction you know."

"Raj, I'm not trying to seduce you. Seriously, I'm trying to help you shift. Remember: practice makes perfect."

"Ahh, yes, the age-old proverb."

Brat. I climbed off of him and opened my mouth to respond, but he sat up, reached behind his head, and pulled his shirt off. Then Raju shimmied out of his shorts.

My breath caught when he stood in front of me naked. He'd gone commando. Brat indeed.

"Good. Now close your eyes and imagine your leopard form."

"This is—"

"No more arguments. Do what I said."

He started to dispute my directive once more then snapped his mouth shut when I glared at him.

While his eyes were closed, I stripped myself and willed my cock to behave. Having someone else to guide and show how to shift made the first few times a lot easier. At least it had in my past. I hoped the same would go for Raju.

I watched him fall to his hands and feet, all the while keeping his eyes closed. His back arched and his leopard took control. In a blurred moment he went from human to leopard. The transformation took my breath away. Small. His coat had a hint of tan, with black spots just like the rest of us. But once again, his gaze captured me. Raju was so full of love and a desire to help others. His leopard spoke to me.

"Yours."

I nodded. Yes. He was mine. And I was his.

Once he had time to adjust to the change, I crouched in front of Raju and nuzzled my cheek against his. Raj stretched his front paws out, lowering into a bow of sorts. I ran my hands through his thick fur before standing up.

He grunted and nudged my calf with his nose.

“Like that, do ya?” I chuckled. “Shift back. I’ll shift with you next time and we can play.”

Raju stepped back, lay down, and rolled to his side. I watched him return to his human form.

“Welcome back. How do you feel?”

“Good. It gets easier doesn’t it? Changing back wasn’t as hard as the first time.”

“Sounds about right. Ready to go again?”

“Were you serious about playing?”

I smiled. Oh yeah, I was serious. In his leopard form, Raj wouldn’t be able to resist the pull to pounce and run. He was still a kitten after all. And his leopard recognized our mating even if Raju hadn’t accepted it yet.

I nodded and knelt next to him. We’d do this together. “Close your eyes, Raju.”

“Wait.” The single word came out in a whisper.

“Yeah?” I rubbed his shoulder. The call of bare skin was impossible to resist.

“You spoke to my leopard.”

I sucked in a breath. When we all shifted, we used mindspeak to communicate. But if one of us returned to human, we no longer had the ability to talk back and forth... except with our mate.

Was Raju ready to admit what I already knew?

“I did.”

“If what you said was true about being my mate then why didn’t he answer back?”

Confusion sounded loud and clear in his question. I released the breath I held. Raju didn’t realize his leopard had spoken to me, called to me, acknowledged himself as mine. But I didn’t know how to tell him the truth. He wasn’t ready. That much I could see now.

“It takes time to develop the connection. You’ll see.” I ruffled his hair. “Let’s do this. Close your eyes and picture your leopard. Let him out to play.”

I followed my own instructions. A minute later I took off through the trees without looking back. Raju would follow.

Chapter Five

Raju

The third shift turned out to be even easier. My muscles rearranged themselves faster. The pain of the change lessened. The rush of the moment remained. Enhanced senses as a human were great, but seeing things through my leopard... indescribable.

Sujan barely gave me time to recover before running off. I growled and went after him.

Just as the sensory changes left me speechless, so did the urge to run, to chase. I lifted my nose to the sky, seeking Sujan's scent: spicy, woodsy, unique to Sujan in a way I couldn't explain.

His scent became stronger. I was closer, but I didn't see him. Stopping, I looked around. No sign of Sujan.

"Where did you go?"

"Ahh, the kitten lost me already. Use your senses. You smell me, but you can't see me. What do you hear?"

I crouched low to the ground, blending in with the snow, and listened. Birds chirped. Small animals rustled the grass somewhere off to my left. I made a mental note to seek them out later.

"Focus, kitten."

The air was calm; only a soft breeze broke through the trees. Above me, a branch creaked. Certainly the breeze wasn't strong enough to make the trees sway. I'd forgotten to look up in my search for Sujan.

I lifted my eyes to the treetops. There. He jumped over me—from one limb to another with incredible grace.

"Teach me how to do that, Sujan."

"Your leopard already knows how. Let him take the lead."

"I tried yesterday. I couldn't do it."

I sat on my haunches next to the trunk. If I couldn't climb a tree, how could I be assigned a watch duty?

"You didn't give over control, kitten. Let go of your human limitations. You're a leopard. Accept that."

What was it about his voice that soothed my nerves? Gave me the confidence to let go?

"I'm your mate."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"We are mates. We know everything about each other. I'm not reading your mind."

Before I had a chance to register what my body was doing, I was halfway to the top of the tree, leaping from one limb to the next.

"Good. I'm proud of you, kitten."

If I could've smiled, I would have. I mewled my appreciation of his praise.

"Keep coming. Catch me if you can." His laughter rang through my thoughts.

"Run, run as fast as you can," I taunted.

No sooner did I think I'd caught him than he sprang down to the ground. I growled, having missed him again.

"Want to play a game of cat and mouse, kitten?"

No, I didn't want to play because I would no doubt be the mouse. While I didn't want to, my leopard had different plans, because he purred his agreement, the traitor.

"Sure. I doubt my leopard would let me turn you down, no matter how much I don't want to be humiliated."

Sujan jumped from behind a tree. He butted his head into my side, pushing me away. Then he licked my face.

"Seriously?"

I shoved my muzzle in the snow to wipe off his touch, hoping he'd think I didn't want his affection—a lie, of course. In truth, I wanted more. I was ready to roll over and give him my throat, submit completely, both as leopard and human. All thanks to one show of attention.

No, more than that. Sujan was helping me more than I would have ever expected. And he did it because he wanted to. Wait. Could it have been a way

to make me accept his belief that we were mates? My leopard seemed to agree, but I wasn't so sure. Or I hadn't been until that moment, when it took every ounce of my control not to roll over.

"Admit you want me to do it again." He nipped my front leg.

I nipped back then took off toward his house. If I beat him there, I could shift back and head home before the temptation to do so much more overpowered me.

"Now who's got to catch who?" I laughed and felt my lips pull away from my teeth. Not in anger or fear, but in happiness.

Cutting through the wind, breaking the snow with each step, I felt freer than ever before. It was no wonder the guys found every reason possible to shift.

I darted around trees and almost got sidetracked by a hare desperately trying to avoid me. At the edge of the forest, near Sujan's home, I found a spot to hide. Since camouflage and pouncing was new to me, I let my leopard take over.

Buried in the snow, I waited for Sujan. And waited. *"What's taking so long?"* Sujan didn't respond and panic settled in. What if he'd been caught up in a trap? They weren't all that common, but every once in a while a foreigner passed through with the idea they could trap us and take us home for a trophy.

Just as I started to get up, a heavy weight landed on my back. Teeth clamped around my neck, leaving me two options: fight or submit. I fought. Twisting to the side in an attempt to knock off my attacker didn't work. I tried to lift up onto all fours and shake him off, but I was unsuccessful again.

"Let your leopard take over, kitten. If you fight me, you will lose, every time. You have to let him in. Not just when you feel like it, but from the moment you shift to the moment you return to your human form."

I relaxed, hearing Sujan's voice in my head. I tried once more to fight him off, but my strength was nearly depleted. With too much ease, he flipped me over and caged me in. Sujan won. I closed my eyes and shifted back to human, a complete failure.

He bit my bare shoulder when I refused to look him in the eye. I'd given him my neck; looking him in the eyes was too much. Right then all I wanted to do was get my clothes on and go home.

Sujan tried again to get my attention, but I refused. He quickly shifted back.

“Get off of me, Sujan. I’m going home. This was a mistake.” I set my hands on his chest, ready to push him off, but I couldn’t find the power. Tears burned my eyes. How had this turned so bad?

He’d helped me. For a while I began to think maybe I could be his mate. Then... humiliation was the only word that came to mind. I’d never win against the older, stronger men of the Leap in three months, which meant I wouldn’t have the chance to protect my people—the one thing I wanted most.

“Hold on, Raju. I think we should talk about this before you run away.”

This time I did shove him away. “I’m not running away. Christ, you just took me down without a fight. I’m so fucking weak. I need to go.”

Sujan didn’t fight me. I stood and began moving toward the house where I’d stripped down and left my clothes. Training was done. I needed sleep and to start fresh tomorrow. Halfway to my destination, arms wrapped me in warmth. I couldn’t move, trapped once more.

“Kitten, stop beating yourself up. I’m older. I’ve got more experience. And as son of the alpha, my powers are stronger than anyone in this Leap other than my father. You’re not weak. I didn’t mean to hurt you or embarrass you. Please don’t leave. We were having fun, were we not?”

I dropped my chin to my chest. It felt good to be close to Sujan. My back pressed against his chest, his warm hands on my stomach. My cock twitched. How could I argue with him?

“Yeah, I was. But don’t you see... if you bested me, others will too. How am I supposed to earn my spot as a protector if I can’t do that? And if I am your mate, which I’m not saying I am, how am I supposed to protect you?”

Sujan didn’t respond. He turned me around, and before I had a chance to ask what the hell he was doing, his lips were on mine. The kiss was so much more than the last time. Desperation, desire, passion, and anger all rolled into one toe-curling, spine-tingling fusion of our mouths.

I grabbed at his hair, pulling on the longer locks. A need to have him closer, so much closer, overwhelmed me. My mind shut down. All that filtered through was how good it felt to have Sujan take what he wanted, no questions and no decisions to make. I had to kiss him. He made it impossible not to.

A rumble bubbled up from his chest. Without thinking, I wrapped one leg around his waist, searching for more of... something, anything. Sujan slid his

hand down my back, over my hip, and under my leg. When he put pressure on my thigh to lift me higher, I obeyed his silent command.

His other hand slid around my waist and squeezed. I lifted on my toes, and he shifted his hand between my legs, his fingers digging into my inner thigh. He was just as hard as I was. Our cocks pressed against our stomachs. I froze, afraid to move. If I did I'd lose it. I'd come all over him like it was my first time.

The man did things to me I had no idea how to process. Every concern of protection and failure fled, replaced by a flame of ecstasy.

Sujan pulled away first. I lifted my fingers to my swollen lips. "Umm."

"Not my mate. I wish you'd forget that idea and accept that you are. Only my mate would turn me on as quickly as you do, especially when you've already pissed me off." He didn't relax his grip on either of my thighs. "Come inside with me, kitten. Let me show you how good it can be between us."

Kitten. He'd called me that more than once. The previous evening he'd declared me his kitten. But a kitten was weak. I refused to be weak despite his proof moments ago. I shook my head and forced myself to move from the safety of his hold.

"I can't. I need to help out around the house before Mom and Dad get home. Then tomorrow I'll have to find someone to help me spar and fight with. You showed me today Prem won't be of much help. He's no more experienced than I am. Maybe Mark can help. He's bigger, worked in the fields." I turned and walked back to Sujan's house.

"Raju, wait..."

But I kept walking. It was the best course of action. I had to believe that. He was a distraction I didn't need.

My mate. Maybe so, but that didn't mean I would roll over and take whatever was handed to me. I had to earn my place in this Leap. Today had been fun, but it was time to go. Kittens played. I was no kitten.

Chapter Six

Raju

The next few weeks I did everything I could to avoid Sujan. More than once he came to the training area, putting a kink in my plans. Prem and Mark were right at my side—trying to convince me to give him another shot.

I told them both about our day. Prem smacked me around for leaving the way I did. Even with their reprimands, I didn't regret leaving. I had to. If I lost myself in Sujan, I'd regret anything we might have. And I still wasn't convinced he was my mate. All my life I'd been told when I found my mate I would know. I'd look in his eyes and see the bond between us.

There was only one window in my bedroom, on the side of the house that faced Sujan's. Standing at that window, staring out, I tried to remember if I'd seen anything when I looked at Sujan. No matter how hard I tried, nothing came to mind. But then why was I pulled to him? Staying away had been no small amount of torture. When I ran the other way, it took all my willpower.

"Raj, if you don't get your head out of your ass, the training won't matter much." Prem leaned against the doorjamb.

I looked at him. "Tell me something I don't already know."

"What's got you messed up in the head now?"

"Mates. That's what he keeps saying. And I feel drawn to him, Prem. But other than that, the signs aren't there. I can't communicate with him when I'm in leopard form and he's human. I don't see any mysterious, unexplainable bonds between us when I look in his eyes." I sat on the bed. "You've seen his eyes. They are the most gorgeous blue I've ever seen. There should be something... anything, right? That's what our parents say time and time again."

Prem pushed off the doorjamb and came to sit by me. He rubbed his hand down his face. More than anyone else, I'd bugged Prem about my conflicting thoughts. The strength of our friendship kept him from beating me to a pulp—I was certain of that. Because if anyone annoyed me the way I had him, we'd have severed ties quickly.

"I'll say the same thing I've been saying for two weeks. The same thing Mark told you. You're not paying attention. For whatever reason, you're so far

in your head you can't see what Sujan is showing you. Tell me, in the last month, how often has he been on the hill watching? Protecting? Has anyone given us shit about our training? We're not exactly the biggest, fastest, or most experienced. Everyone else under the age of twenty would have been subjected to the antics of the older members, but not us."

Was that true? Sure, we hadn't been given a hard time, but was it because Sujan was there? Did everyone but me know about our mating?

"Skip training today, Raj. Go talk to him. But when you do, go with an open mind. If you miss out on your mate because you were too stupid to open your eyes—that's a regret you don't want to have. I saw it happen with my sister."

"I can't miss training. The competition is in less than two months. If I want to protect our people, I have to do this." Prem opened his mouth to start again, and I held up a hand to stop him. "I'll go see him after. I don't know if you're right or not, but I owe it to Sujan and me to find out. And I promise, I'll go with my eyes open."

He sighed. "Good enough, I guess. Come on. Mark's waiting."

After training, Mark and Prem went with me to Sujan's house. Not because I needed an escort but because they wanted to make sure I followed through on my promise to see him. Admittedly, I considered going back on my word, so I couldn't be upset with them for their meddling.

Sujan met us outside. "What's wrong? What's going on?"

He stood with his hands on his hips, a concerned look on his face, but in control, ready to act if necessary—an alpha through and through. He was softer than his father, but not by much.

"Nothing's wrong. I-I'm..." My heart pounded in my chest. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my pants. "I came by to talk to you."

Mark and Prem each squeezed a shoulder, and Mark leaned in. "See ya, Raj. Call us later if you need to talk."

I nodded without looking back at them. If I broke eye contact with Sujan, there was a good chance my nervousness would win out, and I'd chase after my best friends.

A slow grin pulled at Sujan's mouth. "You came to talk. To finally admit you're my mate? Tell me you've pulled out of the race."

I widened my stance and crossed my arms over my chest. "Even if I do accept you as my mate, which I'm not doing yet, I will still compete."

Sujan walked toward me, coming to a stop just out of arms reach. Enough distance I didn't turn tail and run away. "And if I order you?"

His grumbled words sent a shiver down my spine. "Sujan, if you want anything to do with me, if we are really mates, then you will respect my needs. You won't give me a command like that."

"Spoken like a true mate. You are ready to admit you're mine, aren't you, kitten?" His next step put him in my space. He ran his fingers from my forehead down my cheek and over to my lips. He stopped with two fingers on my mouth. "No words, Raju. Look at me. Really look. Tell me you don't see it as well."

Prem gave me the same advice. Look. Open my eyes and really look. So I did. This time I shut down my thoughts, my doubts, and I stared into Sujan's sky-blue eyes. When I started to break our connection, he held me in place with his hands on my shoulders.

"Stop doubting yourself, kitten. You are mine. Your leopard knows it. I know it. Your friends know it. Other members of the Leap recognize our connection. You are the one who refuses to accept us."

He didn't speak out loud, but his words were clear as day in my mind. I tried to answer to him.

"Then why don't I see the bond when I look into your soul? I know you said you see it in me, but I can't."

"You can. You choose not to. Your mind is in the way. If you shifted right now, your leopard would show you."

There it was. We communicated mentally. My leopard purred at Sujan's words, an acknowledgement in itself.

"How can we make any type of mating work, Sujan? I want to protect our people. No one, especially you, will allow me to do that if I am your mate."

"There are ways to protect our people that do not include fighting. You will see this in time, Raju. I would prefer to do that myself, at your side. If you choose not to, then I can't force you. However, if there is a way to convince you that we are best together then please tell me. I'll do what needs to be done."

His words rang true. I looked into his eyes once more. No longer did I see sky blue. Deep inside, I saw his soul. I saw the connection between us. My soul

intertwined with his. A memory from my first shift played in my thoughts. On the moon were two blue spots. They were Sujan's eyes. I should have known then he was my mate, but I missed the sign.

"I'm yours. But are you mine?" I asked.

"Yes, Raju, I am yours." He pressed his lips to mine in a quick kiss. "Now come inside with me, and let's make it official."

"Your parents."

Sujan laughed. "Ahh, kitten. I have the downstairs to myself. It is my place, just as it will be my second's when my parents move out and I take over the Leap. They will not bother us."

I nodded. "Okay."

Sujan took my hand in his and led me inside. He was my mate. I wasn't sure what that meant or how we would figure things out. But for the first time, I chose not to worry. Sujan promised we'd both be happy.

Chapter Seven

Sujan

So many emotions passed through my mind—joy, desire, relief, frustration. Raju caused every single one of them. I wanted to pick him up and swing him around. I wanted to shift with him and run all night through the trees. I wanted to strip him bare in the drive and take him right then. Actually, that one I almost did.

He saw our connection, accepted our mating. Raju was mine.

With our hands intertwined I guided him through the garage, down the stairs to my apartment, and barely made it through the door before I picked him up and tossed him on the bed. Raj's eyes went wide. He gripped the blanket covering my bed.

"What are you...?"

I smiled. "I'm making you mine so there's no question within the Leap."

"I'm still going to compete, Sujan. This doesn't mean I'm not going to earn my spot with our people."

"Strip for me, kitten." I stood back from the bed, knowing if I made a move toward him I wouldn't take this slow, like Raj needed, like I needed. This was a moment to savor. I'd found my mate, and no matter how much I ached for him, I wasn't going to make this a race to the finish.

Instead of doing as I instructed, Raj propped himself up on his elbows. "Not until you promise me not to fight about whether or not I compete. I'm doing it whether you give me permission or not."

"Raj, strip now. We'll talk about the other later."

When he jumped off the bed and stalked past me, not even a glance over his shoulders, I knew I'd screwed up once more. *Will I ever get it right with him?*

"A true mate would take the time to listen, no matter who's the more dominant of the two. I may not be as strong as you, but that doesn't equal disrespect. Goodbye, Sujan."

His words dealt a crushing blow. My need for control vanished. "Fuck. Stop, Raju. Shit. I'm horrible at this. Don't you get it?"

The door didn't click closed, so I turned, hoping he'd stayed. My heart and soul wanted to make Raju mine more than my cock. If we didn't move beyond the damn survival test, I was going to lose him. I took a deep breath, gathering courage before I looked up.

"Don't I get what?" Raju asked. He stood with his back against the door, his arms crossed over his chest.

I looked at his eyes, needing to know where we stood. Had I made him shut down once more? Would he continue to forgive me and come back? What I saw made my knees weak—desire, pain, happiness. We shared the same feelings, yet I kept pushing him away.

"I'm an idiot when it comes to this whole mating thing. The way Dad tells the story, he saw Mom and knew immediately she was his. He walked up to her, said as much, and they lived happily ever after." I sat on the bed. "So I did the same with you, and you didn't believe me. You asked me to give you time, and I couldn't stay away. Please don't deny the connection between us. While I continue to screw this up, you continue to come back. I don't deserve you, but damn if I can't stay away."

With my head buried in my hands, I didn't see Raju move from the door. Not until he knelt between my legs and pried my hands from my face did I know he'd come to me, again. What had I done to find a mate as wonderful as him?

"I won't deny the connection, but I won't be treated like a child."

"But—"

He shook his head. "I'm a kitten. I get it. My first shift was a month and a half ago. You're older, but not by much. Neither of us knows how mating works. My dad had to chase my mom for a year before she admitted the inevitable. I guess it's different for everyone."

"How does it work for us?" I was lost for answers.

This was not something I could talk to Mom or Dad about. Dad would tell me to man up and take what was mine. While Raju was a kitten, he was *my* kitten. It hadn't taken long to figure out he had some fight in him. He wouldn't be "taken" as Dad would suggest.

Raju leaned into me and rested his head on my chest. He wrapped his arms around my waist. "We figure it out along the way I guess. But I'm serious

about earning my spot, Sujan. I don't want to take the easy way out just because we're meant to be together. No one will respect that. If I compete and fail, well, at least I'll know where I stand. At least I will have tried."

I knew what he meant about trying. Dad never handed me anything. And I could have gotten what I wanted simply by being his son. But as he'd earned the respect of our Leap, so did I. Listening to Raju, Dad's way of doing things made sense. He didn't want life to be easy for me. If I were going to take over the Leap one day then I needed to know how to work, how to earn my place. Just like Raju wanted. Except...

"The run is dangerous, Raj. What if you are hurt? Or killed? It's happened you know."

He chuckled. The vibration of his laugh made my dick go from semi-hard to steel in a second. Any hope he hadn't noticed disappeared when his thin fingers slid from my back around my waist and dipped below the band of my shorts. He wrapped his hand around my cock and began a slow, torturous stroke.

"I do know. You also know that doesn't happen very often. It's the reason for the competition, Sujan. Your father started this. And I have no doubt you will continue the tradition. Help me train. Make me ready."

He punctuated the last word with a squeeze at the base of my shaft. I leaned back on my arms, giving him more access. Raju released me long enough to slip my shorts over my hips.

"I thought I told you to strip. Why am I the one getting naked?"

Raju smiled. "I'm going to take care of you, Sujan. Let me give you this."

I was about to ask what he wanted to give me when he took me in his hot, wet mouth. I groaned as his head bobbed up and down.

"Want to last, kitten." He took my balls in hand and massaged them at the same time he flattened his tongue against the underside of my cock and licked me all the way to the head. "Not going to last like this. I need you. Want you."

"Mmm. Shouldn't I be the one begging?" He smirked.

The playful kitten pushed too far. I gripped him under the arms and pulled him away from between my legs. Raju's gasp brought a smile to my lips. "Now you've done it. I gave you a chance. No more."

Once more his eyes went wide. Only this time I didn't stay away. My leopard was tired of waiting. I gave him a piece of control. A growl began deep

and rumbled from my throat. Raju scooted back to the wall, a mixture of anticipation and fear on his face.

I placed one knee on the futon and inched forward. Raju sucked in a breath when our gazes met. He saw my leopard, and his responded with a purr.

“Mine. All mine.”

He nodded.

“Your clothes are still on.” I raised an eyebrow at him.

With effort, I held back a chuckle as Raju scrambled out of his clothes, shirt, shorts, and boxers strewn around my room.

“Much better.”

I pulled his feet out, so he lay flat on his back, and straddled his thighs. His soft skin and hard muscles were a mix of sensations like everything else about Raju—small yet fierce, hard yet soft. And we belonged to each other. His eyes clouded with want, and he bucked his hips.

“Time to slow down,” I whispered.

I pinned his wrists above his head. So close to his pouty lips, I kissed him, tasting him. Carefully at first when he opened for me, our tongues touched, and the spark he ignited burst into flames. Raju arched into me, rubbing himself against me.

Simmering desire turned to blazing need as our bodies got to know each other. I released his wrists, and our hands tangled with each other, learning each other's curves and angles. Raju eased his hand between us, and wrapped his fingers around both of our cocks.

“Ah, yes,” I grunted as his grip tightened. A few more twists and pumps was all it would take to send me racing over the edge.

Raju's jaw clenched. Sweat broke out on his upper lip. He was holding out for me. My heart swelled. Just because we were mates didn't mean insta-love, but with Raju, I was falling fast.

“Come for me, kitten. Take us both there. Give it to me.”

He lifted his hips, twisted his fist around our cocks, and bit his upper lip. That was all it took. We both stilled, our muscles tightened, and we came at the same time, screaming each other's name.

I fell over to Raju's side, and he curled into me. His arm draped over my chest, head on my shoulder.

"Thank you, Sujan."

"Mm." I ran my fingers through his hair. Thank you wasn't enough. Being with him felt like coming home.

"You never said yes to me participating in the games next month."

Damn. He hadn't missed that. "I don't want you to."

"This is new for both of us. I'd hate to start something only to finish it so soon. But I will, Sujan. What we just did. What we're doing now. I'd love to have more of it."

"Me too. You're not going to give in on this, are you?"

He kissed my chest, knowing I would cave. "Nope."

"Promise me you'll let me help with your training?"

Another kiss. "Yeah, babe, you can help."

"If you get hurt, you'll pull out?"

Another kiss, this one on my neck, Raju followed with a nip of his teeth. "Sure."

"Keep it up and I'll have you screaming my name again."

"That's a bad thing?" Raju asked as he crawled on top of me this time.

No, no it wasn't. I grinned. "Not in the least."

A while later he screamed my name... twice.

Chapter Eight

Raju

Morning sun filled Sujan's apartment. I'd fallen asleep in his arms and woken feeling better than I'd ever felt. It was a case of not knowing what you were missing until you had it. Everyone told stories of finding home when they found their mate. They said it would feel right. But they never had words to truly explain.

Waking up with Sujan, I understood. There weren't words to describe the pleasure, rightness, sense of belonging.

He stretched next to me. "Good morning, kitten."

Damn if I didn't purr for him when he rubbed his hand over my chest. With Sujan, I was a kitten. There was no point in fighting the truth. I would kneel for him, loved the feel of his fingers in my hair, and snuggled against him as much as I could, all of it without shame.

"I need to get to the hill. Prem and Mark will be waiting for me."

Sujan rolled on top of me, his arms to either side of my head. "Will they ask questions?"

"Probably." I lifted my head just enough to press my lips to his before lying back down. "I won't tell them anything though. It's none of their business."

"Everyone will know the minute you show up on the back of my bike."

"According to my friends, and you, the Leap already knows about us. I was the only one who didn't."

"You did. You just chose not to face facts. But I'm so glad you've changed your mind."

He leaned down and kissed me a second time. Sujan's kiss was so much more demanding, forceful. Any fuzziness from waking up disappeared as my body reacted to him. The way his hands drifted up and down my sides when he pushed up on his knees, our lips never parting. I rose with Sujan, wrapped my arms around his neck and opened for him.

I broke the kiss to catch my breath. "Need to get ready, babe."

Sujan rolled to the side and fanned his arm out toward the bathroom. "All yours."

When I stood from the bed, he smacked my ass hard enough to make me jump. I massaged the flare of pain and noticed the heat radiating from my skin.

“Fuck.”

“Thought you’d like that. Now get moving. I’ll do the same once you’re done. If I go in there with you, we’ll never make it up the hill.”

That stopped me cold. “You said...”

“I said I’d train you. That means I’m going with you. Don’t even try to argue with me. It’s compromise, Raju. Get used to it.”

Get used to it. Sure. It was that easy. I huffed. We had agreed. There was no going back now. Acceptance or not, that didn’t stop me from adding a little extra muscle when I shut the door.

Later that afternoon I stood next to Prem. He stood taller than me, and bulkier, though not as big as Mark. Prem had been working with me on the climbing, and we’d just finished our last ascension.

Sujan and Mark were off working on hand-to-hand combat. I wanted to do some shifting, but Sujan assured me that was better done at his place. He promised we’d get to it later.

“You’re falling for him,” Prem said.

I didn’t have to look at him or ask who he was talking about anymore. “Yeah, I am. I’ve been an idiot, Prem.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” He squeezed my shoulder. “We’re all new to this. It’s not like we shift and then expect to find our mate that night. You didn’t do anything the rest of us wouldn’t have done.”

“You think so?” I stared up the mountain.

“Okay, so we may not have ignored our mate for nearly a month when he was around pretty much as often as possible, but yeah, I’d have pushed like you did.”

“Do you think I should compete? Sujan still wants me to skip it. As his mate, I have my spot in the Leap.”

Until the question was out, I hadn’t realized how much Sujan’s desires weighed me down. For the first time since I could remember, I wasn’t certain running the annual event was a good idea. What if something really did happen? What if I was injured? Or worse...

I turned to face Prem, and his hand dropped from my shoulder. Our gazes locked, and he remained quiet long enough to make me worry.

“What do you want to do, Raj?”

“Honestly, I don’t know anymore. He keeps asking me not to, and I keep telling him I’m going to. But this morning... being with him felt... well, it was good.”

“And now you’re rethinking this whole ‘prove your worth’ stuff.”

“Not intentionally. But yeah, I guess I am. If I can be with him and protect him, does anything else matter? I mean, I want to protect our people. But maybe I’m not strong enough for that. If I don’t earn my spot during the run then all this will have been for nothing. And let’s face it. I’m nowhere close to the ability or size of you or Mark. And you two are small compared to many of our soldiers and rescuers.”

This conversation had taken a turn I wasn’t sure I was prepared for. Thankfully, Sujan was nowhere around to hear my concerns. He’d probably support whatever I wanted, but silently he’d be ecstatic if I decided to take my place at his side and quit worrying about everything else.

I dropped my rigging and moved to sit against the mountain face we’d just scaled six times. Had things changed so much in twenty-four hours that I was actually considering letting go of the run?

Prem sat next to me. “You know you can protect us at his side? With you taking care of him, you take care of us.”

Was he right? Could I do both? Would protecting Sujan and being there for him be enough when he took over the Leap?

“What would you do if the roles were reversed, Raj? Would you want him to participate? Would you ask him to do what he’s asked of you?”

“Good question. I don’t know. Probably. Have people actually died when running the course?”

A long silence passed between us. I hugged my knees and laid my head on my arms, my gaze on Prem. He lowered his chin and whispered, “Yes.”

So it was true. I could die. I could lose the man I was falling for, hard. But that could happen no matter what. It didn’t have to be during the endurance test. Did it make sense to put myself in the position though, just for pride?

I didn’t know.

“Talk to him, Raj. It’s the best advice I can give you. Only you can come to the best decision for yourself. Don’t make it without checking out all the angles. We only think we know what Sujan will say. He may see how much this means to you, and encourage you rather than ask you step away once more.”

“He’s already done that. We agreed that I could continue training as long as he was by my side. That’s why I’m more confused than ever. Why am I now second-guessing everything? This morning when we left his place, I wanted to be here. But now... I just...”

My thoughts trailed off with my words. I stared into the distance, not looking at anything specific, remembering the warmth of Sujan’s arms around me throughout the night, the way he looked that morning—relaxed, worry-free.

Memories of the last month flooded my thoughts—Sujan standing on the edge of the practice field, keeping an eye out for me, meeting me at least once a week for lunch or dinner, showing up at home more than once just to talk. My parents loved him. He took care of our Leap. He knew the trials each family faced and celebrated their successes. Sujan was young, but already he showed how strong he’d be as alpha.

And I could stand next to him, without continuing to bring friction to our new relationship.

Chapter Nine

Sujan

During the day, a shift happened within Raju. I don't think he meant for me to see it, but I did. When we left in the morning he'd been fine, but as the day wore on, he distanced himself from training, spent more time contemplating a turn of some sort. As much as I wanted to call him on his lack of focus, I didn't.

Once we made it back to my place, that changed. On the ride home he'd not only distanced himself from training, but from me as well. He didn't hold me the same way he had that morning. We hadn't spent much time together over the last month and a half while he trained and came to terms with our mating, but when we did he was enthusiastic, eager. Tonight there was none of that.

"What's going on?" I asked as he climbed off the bike.

"Nothing." Raju didn't look at me. He started off toward the house.

"I thought you wanted to work on shifting some more."

That caught his attention. *Good*. In his leopard form I could get him to open up. At least I had before. Maybe this time would be different.

"About that, I think tonight it'll be better if I just head home."

"Okay. Why?"

And if he wanted to head home then why hadn't he asked me when we left the mountain? Not that I wanted him to leave. In fact, I wanted to ask him to stay with me forever. Move in. Make my place his. But fear kept me from saying the words.

"You keep asking me to pull my name from the test. Do you really want that? Or is it some kind of control play?"

This again. I should have known he wouldn't let it go so quickly.

"Raju, I've been chasing you for over a year. You didn't see me that first year because you didn't want to. When you turned eighteen and shifted, I saw then we were mates. I didn't want to wait any longer, so I made my intentions known. You rejected me. It's been over a month since then, and I finally got you into my bed."

He crossed his arms over his chest. His tongue darted out and licked his lower lip. A rush of ecstasy hit me. I wanted to nibble on that lip, suck on his

tongue. Once more he denied me. To think I had thought last night was a turning point. For someone so eager, young, he sure made this whole thing difficult.

I shook my head. Maybe if we laid everything out, we could finally move past this. I sat on the seat of my bike.

"To lose you now, even the minimal risk... I'm not happy about letting you put yourself in that position. The night you shifted and I kissed you for the first time, you said a kiss was just a kiss. With you that's not true. I'm addicted. I can't get enough. I only wish it was the same for you."

Hurt clouded his eyes. He shifted back and forth on his feet. A sliver of hope that maybe he felt the same intensity made my heart quicken. I went on.

"What I said this morning remains true. I won't go back on my word. If you want to compete, I won't stop you. But I will help with your preparation. I will not watch you fail because you weren't ready."

"And if I said I would withdraw, then what?"

"I didn't think you wanted that."

"Me neither. But when I woke up with you this morning, something happened. Working out with Prem and Mark wasn't the same. For the first time, I didn't feel a burn in my gut to make it to the top of the Leap. I'd look over at you and wish we were back in bed, or running together again."

He paused, and I kept as still as possible. *Is he really considering not competing?*

"Prem told me to talk to you before I made any decisions. As mates it's only fair. If I do this it means I take my position in the Leap without earning it."

His voice wavered on the last few words. I cautiously walked to him. "What's the real reason you keep pushing all of this about your position, Raj?"

"You wouldn't understand." Raju turned away from me, but not before I caught the glint of tears in his eyes. Whatever was going on in his head was a big deal.

"Come on. Let's run."

"I'm tired. I'd rather not."

I grasped his waist and pulled him into me. "Not for training, kitten. I want to run for enjoyment—just you and me, no agendas, just freedom from everything."

“Sounds perfect. Race ya.”

Raju's face lit up with a smile. The sadness in his eyes morphed into pure joy. My kitten had come out to play. He yanked his shirt over his head and kicked off his shoes, socks, pants. Before I had my shirt over my head, he'd shifted and taken off for the woods behind the house.

I followed his scent and paw prints until they disappeared. His scent grew stronger and I looked to the trees, but he'd managed to hide himself well.

“Where are you, kitten?”

His answer came in the form of a laugh.

“Ahh, we're playing that way, are we? You've learned a lot over the last few weeks. I'm proud of you. But I will find you.”

“Give it your best go.”

I gave control over to my leopard. He didn't waste time searching out his mate. We flew through the underbrush, not slowing until Raju's scent was impossible to miss. I sat back on my haunches, my nose to the air, and inhaled deeply.

“Found you.”

Leaves rustled ahead of me. A flash of white against the trees caught my attention. Raju took off back toward the house, but he had to cross my path to do so. I waited until he was within reach and pounced. We rolled a few times. He tried to pin me, and I let him get close before using all my strength to flip him over onto his back.

His tongue fell out of the side of his mouth in a smile of sorts.

“Gotcha.”

Raju planted his front paws squarely on my chest before shoving me off. He'd caught me and my leopard off guard, and we fell to the side. *“No you didn't. Come on, Sujan. You taught me better than that. You haven't won until you've got your teeth around your opponent's neck. I haven't surrendered yet.”*

“Feisty kitten.” He took off after throwing my own lesson back in my face. I growled and ran after him. I was faster and caught up with him before he had a chance to make it to the trees. Raju had become much more adept at leaping through the branches and limbs above.

There was no messing around the second time I caught him. My leopard wanted to claim him, mark him as ours. And I let him. Raju was on his back in seconds, his throat exposed for me.

"I let you catch me."

"Ahh, kitten, you keep telling yourself that. You're mine, forever."

"Just as you're mine. I think I'm falling in love with you, Sujan."

Thank goodness for that. I was long past gone for Raju. I nipped his nose before letting him up. We lay beneath a tree, and Raju curled against me.

"Talk to me, kitten. Why are you so worried about your place in the Leap?"

He didn't give me anything for the longest time. I searched for some kind of hint, but all I found were images of he and I together. Enough to make me want to shift back to human form and carry him home.

"My dad chose not to complete the endurance run. When I asked him why, the only thing he said was he wasn't prepared. I never found out what that meant. He won't say it, but I've seen his frustration in not being allowed to do more for our people. He told me once he'd always planned on becoming a soldier when he turned eighteen and shifted. I don't want to regret anything, Sujan. I'm eighteen. In our world, that really is a kitten. We've got so long to live... so long to regret."

Raju didn't give himself enough credit. He was wiser than most of the men in our Leap. I couldn't fault his reasoning. In fact, because of that, I felt the need to encourage him to do what he wanted. If that meant I stood by his side while he participated in the run, then that's what I'd do.

"And now? You're not sure. Why?" I asked.

"I told you, this morning something changed. Or maybe last night. I guess it could be part of the mating. I don't know. But when we were out there sparring and climbing, none of it seemed as important as spending time with you, getting to know you. I thought I wanted time to explore, to get to know my leopard self. And I do. With you."

Without thinking, I rested my head on top of his. He pushed back into my side. We were as close as we could be in our leopard forms, yet not close enough.

"Shift back, kitten. I want to take you home."

He didn't reply. Instead, he stood on all fours and moved a few steps away before lying back down and shifting. More than ever, I needed to touch Raju, to feel his warmth against my bare skin. I sensed he needed the connection as well. Whatever crest we'd reached, we had to go over it together if we were going to move forward.

I tucked an arm behind his knees and one at his back and cradled him in my arms. Raju wrapped his arms around my neck and buried his head in my shoulder as we made our way to my apartment.

Chapter Ten

Raju

My time was up. I'd laid it all out for Sujan, and he'd carried me home. The decision had to be made: take a hit to my pride and skip the run, or go through with it anyway. By the time Sujan dropped me onto the futon, my decision was an easy one.

"I'm going to withdraw," I said.

"Are you sure?" Sujan scooted me over and crawled into bed next to me.

"Yeah, I am. I'll help Prem and Mark get ready, but you're who I want. You matter more than a ranking in the Leap."

"You would have done well."

"I don't think so. I think I would have finished near the bottom."

"You're smarter than many of the bigger men. It's not always the biggest, strongest person who can make a difference. That's why Dad has different challenges. I've seen you shift. You're a natural, and you're quick to think of ways to evade potential problems."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Sujan cupped my cheek and pulled me to him. Our mouths met, and he didn't wait for me to invite him in. Sujan took control, his tongue taking over mine without hesitation. He was right; a kiss wasn't just a kiss. This moment would forever be seared into my memories. The best kiss I'd ever received—so much love, from both of us. I wasn't ready to say the words, but I knew he would feel how much he meant to me.

There was more I could do for him. I nudged his shoulder until he lay on his back.

"That's an evil look you've got going on, kitten." He smirked.

"Mm, yeah. Will you let me take care of you, Sujan?"

I didn't wait for him to answer. With one hand on each thigh, I spread his legs and settled between them. His cock jutted up, straining for my touch. My mouth watered for his musky taste, a little salty and a whole lot of man.

I licked my lips then took him deep. Sujan arched off the mattress. His fingers dug into my hair and pulled. Heat pulsed through my dick as it hardened. Neither of us was going to last long, but I needed him to come first. I sucked him deep while I reached between my legs and gripped my shaft, squeezing to hold off for a few more seconds.

As I eased my way up Sujan's cock, I hummed against his silky skin. Sujan groaned and thrust his hips upward, shoving himself down my throat. I let go, gave control to him as he began fucking my mouth. Uncontrollably, I humped the mattress.

I stopped long enough to speak. "Shit. Going to come, Sujan. Don't want to finish before you."

"I'm right there, kitten. Give it to me. Give me what's mine."

"You've got me. All of me." I did as he asked. I let go again. His name rolled off my tongue between heaving breaths. Each jerk of my hips brought another spurt of my juices.

Sujan yanked me to his chest. Our mouths collided in a mash of tongues and teeth. Between our sweaty bodies his seed spilled from his cock. Finally, we both stilled, not worried about cleaning up. I was too exhausted to move, and if Sujan's panting was anything to go by, so was he.

I wasn't sure how much time passed before Sujan broke the silence. "Move in here with me, Raju. I want to wake up with you beside me every morning. I want to fall asleep with your head on my chest every night. I know we've got a long life together, longer than normal because of our leopards, but I don't want to waste a second of it. You said you don't want to regret anything. Neither do I."

There was only a split second of hesitation before I answered, "Yes."

Sujan chuckled.

"What?"

"I had to practically beg you to accept me as your mate. But when I ask you to move in with me in less than a day, you agree without hesitation."

He had a point. I laughed with him. "What can I say? I was an idiot to delay what was meant to be. But, Sujan, I still want to be the one who protects you. I know when you take over the Leap you'll have a second. He won't be me. But that doesn't mean I won't be the one to have your back."

“If you didn’t, I would be disappointed. Our mates are chosen for us by the spirits for a reason. I don’t know what that reason is, and we may never know. But I wouldn’t have it any other way. You’re strong in ways you don’t realize.”

Even though I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that, I didn’t argue. Everyone in the Leap was raised understanding our mates were chosen for us. Whether we ever knew the true reason didn’t matter, just like Sujana said. I smiled. What we had... this was the way things were supposed to be. It was time I stopped fighting and pushed my pride to the side, at least for a little while.

“Who knew a kiss could be so...” I didn’t know how to describe what his kisses or his touch did to me.

“Yeah, I know. You’re amazing.”

“You too. I love you, Sujana.”

“Love you too, kitten.”

The End

Glossary

aamaa – mother

chora – son

mamu – mom

Author Bio

Born and raised in Texas, Jennah is a transplant to Missouri long enough ago she should probably consider that her hometown. But she will forever be a Texan. She loves to write any story that will make a reader smile, laugh, and maybe even cry (although you won't ever hear her admit that she cries). Whether the next story she writes is contemporary, urban fantasy, LGBT, or whatever other crazy idea she comes up with, there will always be love and romance in the midst of trials and turmoil.

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THE NOVICE DOM

By Clancy Nacht

Photo Description

Back of man on his knees holding his ankles

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is Reuben but most people call him Ruby. He's my first real sub. I've been a sexually dominant guy my whole life (I'm only 26) but a friend introduced me to the leather/BDSM scene just a couple months ago and it was like coming home. I've had the privilege of training with a respected and experienced Dom I met at one of the local munches and he set me up with Ruby as soon as he thought I was ready to fly solo. Tonight is our first scene together. Ruby is a relatively new sub, but he's still more experienced than I am. I've been standing here entirely too long just admiring how damn beautiful he is. My hands are shaking and my breathing is too fast. I can't let him see any of that because no one trust a nervous Dom. Everyone has to start somewhere and I'm starting right now.

Please—no humiliation, no extreme BDSM (ie blood, urine, scat, etc.) and must have a happy ending.

Thanks,

JM

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, sex swing, rimming, HFN, flogging, new Dom

Word Count: 2,785

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THE NOVICE DOM

By Clancy Nacht

Kneeling before me in the middle of my playroom is Reuben, Ruby as I'm told to call him.

I take in his medium-length brown hair, the milky whiteness of his skin. I flex my fingers, eager to touch, but I want to soak in this delicious moment. There will never be another first. I will never again feel this apprehension in the same way.

Though he is the one naked, on his knees in cuffs, he has an advantage over me. He has done this before. Me, I have done none of this. Not in this way, anyway. I've watched; I've been told. It's all there in my head.

But even before I met a Dom at a munch, I always felt the need to be in charge sexually. That part comes naturally. To make it official, to take it to a fantasy level, that's what I want to do, and I'm afraid—what if I don't have it in me?

Anyone can just walk into a room and beat on a guy until his dick is hard enough to stick it in. For me, I want an experience. For him, I want Ruby to feel the fantasy, to elevate it; I want him to know how treasured he is. I want to take him completely; I want to own him, at least for this time that we have together now.

The pressure is getting to me. I take a steady sip of wine. The deep red slides around in my mouth as I work up my nerve to do what I want to him, what he wants me to. Another sip. It's enough to take the edge off my daily identity, the person too afraid to put himself on the line, to be vulnerable in the way that I need to be.

I circle my finger around his soft, pink nipple like I wanted to from the first moment I laid eyes on him. Justin was the main Dom that I spoke to. He had several submissives. He told me that I was lucky, that the entire area was full of submissives. This is the one he brought to me when he felt I was ready.

With the wine drained and glass cast aside, I pinch that soft bud. He trembles, head up, lips together, eyes closed. I move behind him; his shoulders

press against my thigh. The back of his head brushes against my naked cock, hairs tickling it.

I bend over, tracing down his chest. My fingers stop at his nipples again since he is so sensitive. A good squeeze gets him to jump. Rolling makes him moan. Then I pinch again, and he arches his back. He is so responsive, like a sports car.

He turns his head to the side like he wants to feel his prize. I rub my cock against his lips. He tongues it, presses kisses to the side, and whispers that it's beautiful. The compliment pleases me, and I grab him by his hair to turn him so he can suck me.

Ruby has to shuffle around on his knees so that he can face me. His arms move restlessly like he wants to hold my cock, but he does not have my approval for that, so he bobs his mouth over it, sucking and slurping. Those luscious lips part to allow me in, stretch around me, so beautiful. His cheeks hollow as I draw back, hair still in my hand, forcing him to take what I give him, but he is in heaven. His eyes flutter closed, and he relaxes his throat.

He is such a good boy, loves being used this way.

In fact, he is such a good boy, I have more that I want to do with him.

Deeper into the room I have a swing. It's blue, with silver chains that attach to a bland beige ceiling. I tried to make up for the industrial look with sumptuous silks and pillows that cover the hardwood floor. His eyes light up like it pleases him, and though my pulse is racing, I feel steadier knowing that this is what he wants.

Ruby crawls to the pillows and blankets and then lays in the swing. I strap him in with Velcro, easy to get him out of should he need a break. When I am more at ease, I want to try hemp rope or different types of fastenings, but the Velcro suits me for now. The set-up is a semi-suspension, and I hope that it is as much his fantasy as it is mine. If it isn't, I will have to find a way to make it enjoyable for him.

The way that he pulls against his bindings, lightly, more like he wants to make sure that they won't give, than trying to escape, I don't think I'll have to try very hard.

Once he is settled, I take a dull flogger from my rack of toys. I hit him lightly, starting on his legs, long, soft booms with a flogger that is more fabric than stick. A couple of thuds to the thighs, then I drag the trails of silk over his

body. He moans, but at times he looks like he is suppressing a giggle, leading me to believe that the touches are too light and just tickling.

I switch to my lightweight cat tool.

Ruby's body is amazing: all sinew and long, lean muscle. Alabaster skin with just a bit of freckling. What I noticed as I inventoried his body earlier is that he is free of marks. While he claims to love a hard beating, his skin is soft and unmarred. What he asked me for ran contrary to what he must have had in the past. Or maybe my idea of a hard beating is misaligned with his.

I hesitate.

Then I roll the tails in a circular pattern like a fan. The ragged edges redden his skin, some scraping, some slapping. I am careful to make his whole body flush, not just the fairly simple and safe places around his shoulders that I was keeping to. I get him in a few sensitive areas, like his sides and between his legs.

Like this, he is vulnerable: on his back, legs open, arms up, ass out at the edge of the swing, everything exposed and mine for the taking.

Time for the long, leather-tipped crop. I trace the edges up and down his inner thigh. I tease his balls with the soft loop and then slide it up his torso. There I have more fun, spanking his nipples, listening to his moans and the sound of the swing's chains as he writhes.

God, he is so beautiful.

While he enjoys being the center of attention, he is waiting on me. He is hoping, praying for me to take what I need from him. But I am happy watching him enjoy what I do to him.

Ruby handles the swats on his nipples with gasps and moans, so I increase the flick of my wrist to make crisscrosses over his chest. Satisfying pink stripes grow from the shock of the white as he squirms, tantalized by the sensations.

Dragging the crop down his abs and lower, I pat his balls very lightly then slide the stick along his shaft. Then I move outward to less sensitive parts. Snapping my wrist, I leave a welt on his inner thigh that should sting for a while, an incentive for him to keep his legs open for me.

Sliding the crop along his inner thigh, I soothe the area with the leather tip.

I set the crop aside and then settle between his legs. By now, his skin is flushed, his cock hard. Drops of precum ooze to his abs.

Tempting. But first, I need to eat his ass.

Ruby is a cute play on Reuben, I suppose, but now I think of this tiny ruby star fruit, clenched, and then opening as he feels my breath on it. I don't even have to tell him to open for me, which means that he's ready.

With one hand, I hold up his balls so that I can get in to his ass, so I can taste it. There's no hair, just a beautiful fresh bud, warmth, human, soap. He's prepared and that's good.

I dip my tongue inside of him. His opening closes around me as he moans. My finger slides in with my tongue as my thumb rubs his perineum, pressing, milking him. This close, I feel his cock rocking as I touch him deep inside. A second finger invades him while I flick my tongue around the opening.

He's squirming, begging for more. "Maddox. Maddox, please. I need more. More."

I kiss under his balls, keeping them out of the way, and both of my hands go after his hole. He wants to be stretched, wants to feel himself opening. Then I know he'll want it filled, and I want to fill it for him.

Two fingers on each side of his hole massage him, then pull, stretching him, not very wide, at first. The wrinkled skin gives to my touches until it goes white, then red. I massage the bottom of his hole with my thumbs, letting the skin flush, fill, to repair itself, to allow for that stretch that makes Ruby moan. His toes curl and flex in the swing. His heels try to gain purchase. He wants to pull his legs together, to wrap them around me, but he is restricted.

I roll my tongue inside the hole that my fingers have opened. I kiss the stretched skin, feel how hot it is. I gather lubricant, smear it over my fingers, and slide it all over the skin, around and inside. I can get six fingers in him and all he begs for is more.

He gazes down at me, eyes almost closed, but he shifts his hips as I sit up. He wants my cock so much that I think, if he wasn't restrained, he would jump on me. His stomach's a sticky mess from the milking.

His face is red, sweaty. He begs. "Maddox. Please."

I want him here in this low sling. I grab a condom and unroll it over my cock. Sure, we've been tested, but I promised myself that I'd always be safe. Plus, the condoms seem to make me last longer, and, as hot as Ruby is, I am going to need all the help I can get.

Removing the Velcro restraints from his legs, I let him wrap them around me. It creates an odd situation for him, because I am on my knees and he is still hanging by his arms. He is forced to come to me if he wants it as much as I think he does. I am barely out of reach, holding my cock up, waiting.

Ruby whimpers and it's a beautiful thing. It will cause some stress on his arms, but I am not going to make him do this long.

Wrapping his long legs around my strong torso, he is just close enough to get the tip of me inside of him without dislocating a shoulder.

I remain where I am, letting him stress and strain, getting fucked shallowly. Ruby's face is a portrait of frustration as he tries, to no avail, to force me to take him deeper. Oh if only there was someone to hear the whimpers and cries of desperation for my dick.

But I have to worry about the damage he might do to his joints, so I relent and move a few inches closer. Sure, he still has to strain to get to me, but fucking is easier now. I grab his hips, shift mine until I can hear him gasp and groan as I feed it to him.

By now, he is full of energy and need. He bounces hard, grinding. I let him drive, busying my hands instead with wrapping his cock. It is so purple and swollen, needy. My thighs pump, driving into him. He stares down at my hand around his cock then gazes into my eyes, like he knows that, right now, I have him. He is mine, completely. We kiss, just once.

His euphoria is contagious. His flushed face glitters in the low light as he throws his head back. Sweat dribbles down his pale chest, marked with red welts from the crop. They will be gone by morning, but what we are sharing is something we'll never forget.

His mouth opens wide as he shudders in perfect release. His cum is hot between us. The first few splatters land on my chest, but the rest dribbles onto Ruby's.

I grab Ruby by the back of the neck for another kiss. I move closer, relieving his arms. Holding his hips, I pump fiercely into him, gazing deeply into his eyes. This is us; this is special. I am not just some guy who likes to torture people, and he isn't just some guy who likes to be abused. We are this together. This is what we both need. We are weird puzzle pieces that never fit anyone, but this, us, right now. This fits.

The tension in my body comes from everywhere and nowhere at once, building up through my legs, down my arms, finding its center in my cock. It is deep, balls drawing up, body tense, and then the inevitable explosion of release.

It always feels like I black out for a while. I don't know where I am for that full, solid half-minute after I start to come and before I realize that my body has released its all.

Then I'm left a sweaty mess on top of Ruby in the swing, fuzzy about what I need to do next.

There aren't arms around me.

I look up, and Ruby looks similarly content but is pulling at his arm restraints because he wants to hold me.

All I can do is laugh as I pull away the Velcro.

The sling isn't built for two, so we sit on the floor on the silks and pillows. I don't want to say anything about myself. I would blurt out that he was my first, if he didn't already know. The last thing I can handle in this moment is a critique.

Ruby settles on the pillows and reaches for me. "Can we do this again? Soon?"

I smile as I wrap around him, feeling possessive in a way I never have before. I massage his shoulder, checking that he isn't sore. "Tomorrow good for you?"

Ruby closes his eyes, content at being cared for. "It's perfect."

The End

Author Bio

Award-winning, bestselling m/m author Clancy Nacht squeezes in writing amongst her web development day job, her husband, and her three feral rescue cats. Living in Austin, she indulges her love of indie music, photography, and constant influx of new faces a college town provides.

With a major in Journalism, she has written for newspapers and magazines but did not delve into professional writing until 2009. Since then she has been published by Loose Id and Dreamspinner Press.

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AN OLD-FASHIONED LOVE SONG

Book One in the Woodshed Series

By Michelle K Grant

Photo Description

In an austere white bedroom, two men are locked in a passionate embrace. The dark haired man, on the bottom, has one arm draped over the hips of the blond man, on top. His other hand tightly grasps his lover's neck. At the same time, he places a tender kiss on his lover's neck. His lover, instead of fighting to free himself, grips his shoulder, encouraging him to tighten his grip.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am so in love with this man, but I'm afraid to say anything because I'm pretty sure he only wants to play and I don't want to scare him off. He thinks I'm too young to commit to someone, but I'm not. He takes such good care of me, but he doesn't realize I can take care of him, too. He needs to take control during sex, and I love it when he does. He knows exactly how to get me going, and I don't want to lose that.

Sincerely,

Sunny

P.S. *BDSM, please, but nothing too hard core, and no humiliation play. I like it sweet and tender, but also firm and rough ;)

*Also, no cheating, long separations or big misunderstandings.

*Bonus points for including this scene in the story, and adding some nipple pinching.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, twink, blue collar, age gap, shibari

Content Warnings: breathplay, single-tail

Word Count: 31,159

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Acknowledgements

I would like to add a quick word of thanks to my Beta Reader; Stacey Jo Asher and my DH Robbie and my SO Lynn, who both gave this a read through even though neither one of them are fans of the genre. I would also like to thank my editor, Raevyn, who caught errors that we all missed. The Woodshed is a real club in Orlando, Florida. It is used here with the express permission of the club's owners. All characters in this story are fictional.

AN OLD-FASHIONED LOVE SONG

Book One in the Woodshed Series

By Michelle K Grant

Chapter One

Seth glared at himself in the mirror. Raising his hand, he pointed a finger in the face of his reflection. "This time, it's on. No hiding in the background for you." He ran a hand across his face, turning side to side and inspecting his pale skin. He slapped both cheeks and then pinched his lips to plump and redden them. After fluffing his soft, fine, blond hair to the perfect level of messy, he used his thumb to smooth his eyebrows down.

He put a finger under the black leather collar wrapped around his neck. The heart-shaped padlock fell perfectly in the hollow of his throat. He pulled his black leather shorts down just a little bit lower so his hip bone peaked out above the waistband. He fussed with the straps of the black leather harness crisscrossing his chest until he finally decided they lay just right.

"That's it. You're ready," he addressed the mirror.

With a deep breath, he opened the door.

The music of Depeche Mode assaulted his ears as soon as he walked into the playroom. Eighties night at the Woodshed again.

Despite his bold words in the mirror, Seth crept back to the spot against the wall he had occupied all night. Actually, it was the spot he occupied most nights. It gave him the perfect view of his favorite regular.

And there he stood. No man should look so good in a blue-plaid flannel shirt, black wife beater and rust colored corduroys. His brown hair was rumpled, as if he had just run his hands through it. He was wearing green Chuck Taylor's. In a fetish club! While Seth watched, the man smoothed his beard and glanced in Seth's direction. Seth quickly looked down at his perfectly shined black boots.

Seth only looked the part. Mr. X was the genuine article.

He proved it the first night Seth worked up enough courage to walk in the front door of the only S&M Club in Orlando.

How strange it had felt that first night. Seth was a bundle of nervous energy bursting at the seams while everyone was so calm. So normal. Most people were smiling. They stood in small groups, laughing and talking. It wasn't at all the dark gothic atmosphere Seth thought a leather club would be. It was an open warehouse with furniture strewn here and there. There were tables and

strange benches. Medieval looking racks were propped against the wall. The room was painted a neutral color and the lighting was dim and warm. The floor was bare concrete. Seth noticed in several places there were drains in the floor. Chains and ropes dangled from overhead rafters.

It was early when he arrived and not many people were “playing” yet. In the corner of the room, an older Asian woman in a blue spaghetti-strapped semi-formal dress had a large, naked, heavyset Caucasian man on a spanking bench. She had a paddle in her hand and was laughing as she spanked him with it. She would hit him repeatedly, stop and inspect her handiwork, laugh like it was the funniest thing in the world and then paddle him again. It was surreal and it went on for hours. Seth had gravitated to what became his favorite spot on the wall and grew roots.

That night was a kaleidoscope of the erotic and the bizarre. He witnessed a self-proclaimed trans-pan man in a full tuxedo suspend his girl from the ceiling using intricate rope bondage while she screamed insults and obscenities at him. Later, they were locked in the most romantic and erotic slow kiss Seth had ever witnessed. Subs and slaves and baby girls and Masters and Mistresses and Daddies and straights and gays and bisexuals all danced before his eyes in a world-changing, life-shifting, door-opening endless parade.

And into the middle of the madness strode Mr. X.

Seth didn't notice him at first. The circus of fetish acts surrounding him was absorbing. Mr. X was average height, with average build, and average brown hair, wearing a black T-shirt and a pair of jeans. He could have easily been ignored in normal circumstances, let alone in the middle of a fetish club.

Mr. X had walked to the middle of the room and held up his right hand. The gesture was controlled, purposeful, but without enthusiasm. Like the smart kid in math class who knew no one else would have the answer, Mr. X stood there, calm, cool, and collected.

To Seth's utter amazement, four people came from different parts of the room and knelt at his feet with eyes downcast and hands held behind their backs. Except for their posture, the individuals had nothing in common with each other. A white-haired bear dressed almost exactly as Seth, an older woman with salt and pepper hair wearing nothing but a collar and a lacy thong, a young redhead in her twenties who was almost morbidly obese, and a beautiful muscle-bound black man, who Seth guessed was about thirty.

Mr. X smiled. Petting each one as he exchanged words, and sometimes kisses, of greeting. He patted the older woman on the shoulder and assisted her

to her feet. The others scrambled away as Mr. X led her to what Seth later learned was called a St. Andrew's cross.

A man of similar age as the woman, with similar salt and pepper hair, dressed in leather pants and a leather vest, joined Mr. X as he strapped the woman to the cross. The man helped as best he could. Seth noticed the man's right arm and right leg were both artificial. The man smiled and laughed with Mr. X as they worked. The woman said nothing. As Mr. X finished securing her, the man slid between the cross and the wall so he faced the woman. His one hand wrapped around to caress her back.

Mr. X stepped back and grabbed something off of his belt.

It was then Seth noticed the coil secured there. Like a lasso, it lay against Mr. X's hip. When Mr. X released it, it unwound like a snake. Mr. X cracked the whip several times in the air. With a nod to the man behind the cross, he began.

What followed seemed more like a dance to Seth than a beating. Mr. X was precise and rhythmic. His strikes landing with the beat of the music playing overhead. Red welts bloomed on the skin of the woman, spreading equally about her back, legs, and shoulders. It looked like Mr. X never hit the same spot twice. The woman writhed against the cross and the man behind her grinned.

At some point, Mr. X paused to strip his shirt off. Seth nearly swooned to see his chest glisten with the sweat of his exertion. His chest was covered in a fine coating of hair the same color brown as his head. His skin nearly glowed in the overhead lights. For a brief eternity, Seth was mesmerized by the roll and twist of Mr. X's muscles as he thoroughly worked over that poor, lucky woman. At last, Mr. X asked a question of the man behind the cross. The man held up his hand, five fingers splayed. Mr. X nodded and with intense focus, landed a vicious strike on the woman's back. She cried out loud enough Seth heard her from across the loud music-filled dungeon. The man lowered one finger and Mr. X placed an identically cruel lash in the exact same spot. The man lowered another finger. Five times, Mr. X flung his whip to bite into the woman's back. Finally, the man held his closed fist in the air.

Mr. X coiled his whip and fastened it to the clip on his belt. He then assisted the man in releasing the woman from the cross. The woman sagged to her knees. When she turned to place a kiss on Mr. X's Converse, Seth could see she was smiling with a blissful expression in her eyes. The man who was standing beside her very carefully got to his knees before Mr. X. He leaned forward and

placed a kiss on what Seth could only guess was Mr. X's erection straining through his corduroys. Mr. X grabbed the man by the back of the head and ground his face into his groin. Mr. X pulled the man's face back and said something with a gesture of his head toward the door. The man grinned at what Seth would have considered the offer of a lifetime. The woman hopped up to help the man to his feet and the three of them left the club together.

That night, Seth masturbated himself to near blindness.

It took three weeks until he was brave enough to go back to the Woodshed. A year had passed and he'd never missed a Saturday since.

And every Saturday since, he occupied this spot on this wall for the entire night.

And here he was again.

Seth looked over again at Mr. X. He wasn't wearing the whip tonight so Seth knew he wouldn't have the chance to offer himself up; wouldn't have to beat himself up when he was too chicken to run out and get on his knees; wouldn't be suffering the ecstasy and agony of watching someone else dance under Mr. X's careful ministrations.

Mr. X had repeated the ritual several times over the past year. It wasn't always the same people who knelt at his feet. He didn't always choose the same beneficiaries for his torture and he didn't always leave with those he played with. He did always take his shirt off half way through.

For all of these things, Seth was infinitely grateful.

One day, it would be Seth who knelt at Mr. X's feet. It would be Seth who Mr. X tapped on his shoulder and assisted to his feet. It would be Seth who was bound to the cross and it would be Seth who knelt again after with his face pressed blissfully against Mr. X's hip. It would be Seth who left the club with Mr. X and it would be Seth who gave Mr. X the best blow job of his life.

It would be Seth who Mr. X would keep. And they would live happily ever after. The End.

But it wouldn't be tonight.

Seth darted his eyes away when Mr. X caught him staring again.

"Not cool, Seth. Really not cool." Seth shook his head as he castigated himself. "It's rude to stare." Seth did his best not to look at him again. But of course that was ludicrous wasn't it? Seth was going to look. It was just a matter of when.

This time when Seth looked, Mr. X was staring at him. Seth blushed and looked down, grinning and covering his eyes in embarrassment.

When he pulled his hand away, he looked up to see Mr. X standing right in front of him.

“Who is your owner?” Mr. X’s gravelly voice rolled across Seth’s skin. Seth’s knees felt a little weak and he leaned farther back into the wall for support.

“I’m sorry?” Seth squeaked. He cleared his throat. “What did you say?”

“Your owner?” Mr. X pointed to the collar Seth was wearing. “Your Dom or Mistress or Top? You know... the one who gave you your collar?”

Seth’s hand flew up to the heart-shaped lock lying against his skin. He nervously patted it. “Oh this? Um, no one gave this to me. I, um, bought this myself.” Seth giggled. Giggled for Pete’s sake!

Mr. X looked perplexed for a moment but then understanding flowed over his features.

“I see. I’m sorry. I won’t bother you again.” He turned to walk away.

“Wait!” Seth’s voice was much too loud in his panic. “Don’t go. Please.” Mr. X turned around looking perplexed again.

“I mean, please don’t go, Sir.” Seth was glad the wall behind him was so determined to remain standing. His legs were not so committed to the idea.

“Okay,” Mr. X answered slowly.

“My name is Seth. Seth Barnum.” Seth stuck his hand out. Mr. X looked at it for a moment before clasping it in his own.

“I’m Malachi.” Seth didn’t let go of his hand. Malachi’s skin was rough and calloused. Seth rubbed his palm against Malachi’s wondering how the raspy skin would feel running over him.

Seth imagined Malachi’s hand scraping up across his chest and gently wrapping around his neck before smoothly threading his fingers through Seth’s hair. Malachi’s firm grip would pull Seth into the position Seth’s knees had been threatening to assume since the man first spoke.

“Seth?” Malachi’s voice ripped Seth from his daydream. A hot almost painful want gripped Seth low in the groin. From just a hand shake, Seth was almost rock hard. “Seth, are you okay?” Malachi’s voice was full of amused concern.

Seth's libido wasn't going to risk this opportunity. Drunk with desire, Seth used his grasped hand to pull Malachi in close. Like a dog in heat, he ground his hips against Malachi while his lips sought out Malachi's ear. The warm masculine scent of Malachi assaulted him and he spiraled out of control.

"Please Sir, please," he whispered in Malachi's ear. "I've wanted you so long. Please let me taste you. Please let me suck your cock." The sheer desperation that overtook Seth was frightening to him. It was as if the world depended on getting his skin as close to Malachi's skin as humanly possible.

"Jesus kid!" Malachi abruptly pushed Seth away and held him at arm's length. Seth actually whimpered at the separation. He felt himself leaning against Malachi's hand.

"Well," Malachi chuckled. "I've heard the phrase 'gagging for it', but I don't think I have ever seen it before."

"I have no shame, Sir," Seth replied. "I want you and I am willing to do whatever it takes to have you."

A gleam shone in Malachi's eyes.

"Whatever it takes?" he asked.

"Whatever it takes," Seth replied.

"We'll see about that," Malachi replied with a smile. "Let's go."

Seth couldn't have stopped the exclamation of joy that escaped his lips if his life depended on it.

"Did you drive or ride with someone?" Malachi asked as they exited the club.

"Cab," Seth replied.

"In that get up?" Malachi asked, pointing at Seth's leather outfit.

"I changed." Seth held up the small bag he had grabbed on the way out.

"Then you have two choices. You can ride on the back of my bike, or you can take a cab again," Malachi indicated a Harley near the door with his thumb. A shiver danced up Seth's spine. *Yeah, I know. Easy choice.*

"I'll ride please, Sir," Seth whispered.

"You'll wear a helmet too," Malachi said grabbing a black helmet out of the side bag. He slid the helmet on, placing a mike in front of Seth's mouth.

Malachi paused and ran his thumb across Seth's lips. Seth opened his mouth, hoping Malachi would slip his thumb inside. Malachi teasingly refused, tracing the circuit of Seth's mouth as he moaned in desperation.

Chuckling again, Malachi closed the face piece and moved a switch on the side of the helmet. Seth tried not to drool as Malachi straddled the Harley Softail, started the bike and put on his own helmet. Seth jumped when he heard Malachi's gravelly voice in his ear.

"Are you going to get on?"

"Yes, Sir!" Seth straddled the bike behind Malachi, uncertain where to put his hands.

"Come on, get closer." Malachi chuckled, pulling Seth's arms around to his front. "You weren't so shy a moment ago."

Seth blushed at his earlier performance even as he ground his now returning erection against Malachi's back.

"Good. That's the way." Seth glowed at Malachi's approval and ground harder against him. "Seth, if you come before we even get there then that is all you get. So restrain yourself just a bit."

"Yes, Sir." Seth blushed again in the isolation of his helmet. "I promise."

As they pulled off, Seth struggled to prevent the vibration of the bike from making a liar out of him. Seth closed his eyes as the city sped by him.

"So, how old are you Seth?" Malachi's voice was clear over the muffled rumble of the bike.

"Twenty-five."

"That old? That is a relief at least." Seth could hear Malachi's sigh of relief.

"How old did you think I was?"

"Well," Malachi chuckled. "They let you in the club so I knew you were at least eighteen." Seth slapped Malachi playfully on the shoulder. "I really didn't know."

"You approached me thinking I might be only eighteen? Are you disappointed?"

"I approached you to find out who your dominant was," Malachi reminded him.

"Oh," Seth thought a minute, "why did you think I was 'owned'?"

“Your collar has a padlock. When you told me you didn’t have a dominant, I assumed you were using the lock as a prop to keep dominants away. Like wearing a wedding ring to stop people from hitting on you.”

Seth’s laughter drowned out the motorcycle. He couldn’t stop. He almost couldn’t breathe. Malachi brought the bike to a stop in a parking lot of the gas station on the side of the road. He took off his helmet, turned in his seat and patiently waited for Seth to get himself under control.

Seth stripped off his own helmet and wiped the tears from his eyes.

“You okay?” Malachi asked.

“Yeah,” Seth snorted and ran a hand through his hair.

“So,” Malachi paused, “are you going to let me in on the joke?”

“I’ve been coming here for a year. Waiting, and watching, and hoping to make a connection with someone.” Seth laughed again. “I’ve been wearing this get up.” He gestured to the harness and shorts. “Trying my damndest to look approachable and the whole time I was wearing a big damn sign saying ‘Hands off! Don’t talk to me!’” Seth erupted again.

When he quieted, he realized Malachi wasn’t laughing. Malachi was quietly studying him. In the light of the overhead street lamp, Seth could tell Malachi’s eyes were bluer than the green he had first thought.

“Not been involved in the lifestyle long?” Malachi asked softly.

“If watching from the sidelines and dressing like a kinkster counts as being involved in the lifestyle, then I have a year’s experience.” Seth let a little bitterness creep into his voice. “Otherwise, no, not so much.”

Malachi just kept looking at him.

“Is this where you let me down gently and tell me you wanted someone with more experience?” Seth asked quietly.

“Are you a virgin?” Malachi’s voice was gentle.

“No.” Seth turned away from Malachi’s searching gaze. “I’ve had more than a few lovers.” He looked back into Malachi’s eyes. “I just never could find what I needed.”

Malachi turned back to face forward on the bike. Seth’s shoulders slumped as he stared at Malachi’s back. He reached up and placed a hand on Malachi’s shoulder. “I can learn, Malachi. I can learn to do anything you want me to.” Malachi sat still for a moment before turning back to face Seth.

“Okay, change of plan, where do you live?” Seth rattled off his address and Malachi punched it into a GPS app on his phone. He tapped Seth’s helmet and put his own back on. With a disappointed sigh, Seth did as he was told.

Seth wrapped his arms around Malachi as the motorcycle took off again, this time in the direction of Seth’s condo. Seth held Malachi as tight as he possibly could since his disappointment had had a distressing effect on the state of his erection.

“Don’t worry. I’m not ditching you, Seth. But tonight is not going to go as I had originally planned,” Malachi’s disembodied voice sounded in his ear.

“Yes, Sir.” Seth tried unsuccessfully to keep the disappointment out of his voice. Despite Malachi’s assurance to the contrary, Seth could see the Big Brush-off looming in his future. Seth did his best to just enjoy the feel of Malachi in his arms while he could.

The motorcycle roared loudly in the confines of the Uptown Place parking garage. Malachi rolled into an empty spot and shut the bike off. Seth was surprised when Malachi dismounted after he did. Malachi took both helmets and stowed them in a bag on the side of the bike. He looked Seth up and down before taking off his flannel shirt and dressing Seth in it.

“Lead the way.” Malachi gestured toward the elevator, a smile on his face at Seth’s confusion.

“God you look hot in just a wife beater,” Seth nearly panted. Malachi chuckled, threaded his arm through Seth’s like an old country gentleman and led him to the elevator.

“You never asked how old I am,” Malachi said.

“I don’t care how old you are,” Seth quickly responded.

“I’m thirty-five,” Malachi replied. Seth grinned wickedly.

“Then you’re old enough for what I want to do to you.”

Seth pressed the button for his floor and the elevator doors closed. Malachi leaned against the wall across from the door. The sight of him made Seth’s mouth go dry. Malachi crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

“What *you* want to do to *me*?” Malachi’s voice dripped with gentle menace.

“Well, um...” Seth stammered as the doors opened behind him. “This way...” He recovered by leading Malachi to his apartment.

Fussing with the lock and turning on the lights gave Seth something to do to cover up his embarrassment. He finally had the star of his most recent sexual fantasies standing in his living room.

"Nice place," Malachi said.

"Not really," Seth said. "My sister loves stark modern and the place has absolutely no personality." He babbled on as Malachi stalked toward him. "I really wish I could do some color but I sublet it from her and I just—"

"Where is the bedroom?" Malachi interrupted.

"That way." Seth pointed. Malachi smiled and left him standing in the living room, finding his own way down the hall.

Seth stood there blinking for a moment before he followed. When he arrived in the bedroom, Malachi was taking off his shirt. He dropped the black wife beater on the sand-colored carpet and stood back. "There. Now there's color." Malachi turned to face Seth. Malachi's hands went to his belt. While Seth stared on wide-eyed and open-mouthed, Malachi grabbed his belt by the buckle and slowly slid it free from the belt loops. The low hiss of leather against corduroy seemed to fill the air. The loose end fell to the carpet in a way that reminded Seth of Malachi's deliciously evil whip. Seth's knees finally did what they had been threatening to do all night and Seth collapsed onto them in front of Malachi.

"Please Master, please. Let me taste you." he rubbed his face against Malachi's zipper.

"Oh Seth, I do love the way you beg." Malachi smiled. "And you will, eventually. You will be so full of my cock you will barely be able to breathe." Seth whimpered. "But not just yet. First, let's get you undressed. Stand back up." Malachi reached out to help him as Seth complied. "And don't call me 'Master'."

Malachi turned Seth around so his back was pressed against Malachi's front. Seth groaned to feel Malachi's erection pressing into his ass. Malachi's hands reached up and slowly began to unbutton the flannel shirt he had dressed Seth in a few minutes ago.

"You said you couldn't find what you needed, Seth. Tell me... what do you need?" Malachi paused at the fourth button. Seth thought a moment. How to explain it?

“This, I need this.” Malachi continued the slow progression of buttons and slid his shirt off of Seth. Two quick buckles and the leather harness lay on the ground next to it. Malachi pulled Seth’s back against his chest. Malachi bent down and kissed Seth’s shoulder and began a slow trail of kisses toward his neck. Seth reveled in the coarseness of Malachi’s chest hair against his back and beard against his skin.

“You’re panting Seth, so I can tell you need this.” Malachi’s rough hands slid up Seth’s abdomen to his smooth chest. Two fingers traced circles around his nipples. “What about this do you need, Seth?”

“You, I need you.” Seth moaned when the gently tracing fingers pinched both nipples simultaneously. It hurt. Oh, it hurt. But it hurt beautifully. It hurt in a way that made his stomach clinch and his dick jump and his knees buckle.

“God, please. Yes. Yes. Take me and use me. Hurt me. Control me. Do whatever you want to me,” Seth pleaded. “That’s what I need.” Malachi’s fingers tightened and his teeth bit into Seth’s neck.

“Hoch!” Seth cried out. Malachi’s rough palms soothed the hurt from his nipples for a moment before the pinching fingers returned. Seth ground his ass back against Malachi. Malachi’s left hand slid down and unsnapped Seth’s leather shorts. Seth’s cock, thick and uncut, dropped from where it was pinned against his body and precum dribbled on the floor. Seth groaned when Malachi wrapped his rough hand around it and gently stroked him. When Malachi pinched Seth’s nipple with his other hand, Seth nearly came undone.

“Please, Sir! I can’t last like this.” Seth shuddered closer and closer to the edge. “Oh no,” he cried, powerless to stop it as the orgasm drew near. He was simultaneously relieved and nearly burst into tears when Malachi released his throbbing dick. Malachi spun him around. Malachi’s hands buried in Seth’s hair and jerked him into a savage kiss. Malachi ate hungrily at Seth’s mouth, teeth nibbling at his lips, tongue driving between them. All the while, Malachi’s hands fisted in Seth’s hair, turning him this way and that, steering Seth’s mouth to where Malachi had the most access. Malachi growled and the sound echoed down Seth’s throat. Seth rested his hands on Malachi’s biceps, desperate to run his hands along Malachi’s skin but terrified to do anything that might upset Malachi and end the most excruciatingly wonderful torture Seth had ever received. Malachi used Seth’s hair to steer him down Malachi’s chest. Malachi held his mouth over each nipple and Seth used his tongue and mouth without being ordered to. When Seth suckled his nipple, Malachi’s groan of pleasure surged warmth down Seth’s spine. Malachi forced Seth to his knees. With one

hand, he held Seth back far enough to get a good view. With the other, he unfastened the button holding his pants together and slowly lowered the zipper. At last, Malachi reached in and pulled out his cock.

And it was beautiful! Cut and smooth with a purple head. Malachi's cock was almost but not as quite as thick as Seth's. It was long, good Lord it was long. Seth couldn't wait to get the beautiful length of it in his mouth. He strained against the hand in his hair.

"In good time, Seth," Malachi chuckled. "Or, in my time, more like it. Open your mouth and stick out your tongue."

Seth did as he was told and was rewarded with Malachi rubbing the head of his gorgeous cock against Seth's tongue. The taste of Malachi's precum filled his senses and Seth's cock jerked in response. Seth reached to stroke himself.

"Hands on your thighs," Malachi ordered. Seth begrudgingly complied.

"Keep your mouth open," Malachi instructed and slid himself into Seth's mouth. The urge to suck was almost overwhelming. Seth struggled to keep his mouth soft and relaxed.

"Good! Very good!" Malachi praised him. "Keep your throat relaxed." Malachi pressed farther into his mouth. Seth could feel the head of Malachi's cock stretching his throat. For a moment, Seth couldn't breathe. He resisted the urge to struggle and forced himself to relax. Malachi pulled back a bit and Seth inhaled around him.

"Excellent, Seth. I think you could do this. Are you ready to try?" Seth nodded minutely, not really sure, and not caring, what *this* is. He felt Malachi's dick jump in his mouth.

"This is what you're going to do. You are going to inhale, exhale and then swallow. After you swallow, you are going to hold your breath until I pull back. Then you are going to repeat it. Understand?" Seth nodded again. Malachi pulled Seth's head down lower and changed the angle of his thrust.

"Inhale... exhale... swallow." As soon as Seth started to swallow, Malachi pushed his cock as far back into Seth's throat as he could. Seth's eyes watered at the strange discomfort, but his dick didn't seem to mind at all. When Malachi pulled back, Seth gasped around him.

"Very good Seth. I got at least an inch in your throat. We are going to do that again. Inhale... exhale... swallow." This time, Seth was more prepared for the onslaught and did his best to force his throat muscles to relax. Malachi

pushed in deep. Malachi pulled back again and surged forward as soon as Seth exhaled. Seth had to hurry to swallow to keep from gagging. It took several tries until Malachi was able to establish a rhythm Seth could follow. Each time, Malachi penetrated Seth's throat a little deeper and held himself in Seth's throat a little longer. Seth's head began to feel a little swimmy from the lack of oxygen.

Malachi grunted and groaned as he forced himself into Seth's throat. He wrapped one hand around the front of Seth's neck.

"God, Seth!" Malachi panted. "I can feel myself sliding in and out of you." Seth whimpered. "Touch yourself, Seth. I'm going to come this way."

Seth wrapped both hands around his cock. He slowly jacked himself a couple of times. He wouldn't last long and he didn't want to come before Malachi. He looked up at Malachi, struggling so beautifully to make Seth's body take him. Sweat dripped down his chest. Seth realized Malachi was now burying his cock all the way to the base in Seth's throat. Seth's cock wept precum.

"This is it Seth. Take it. Take it all." And Malachi roared as he buried himself to the hilt. Seth felt Malachi's cock twitch and jerk in his throat. As the most powerful orgasm Seth had ever experienced in his life rushed through his body, Seth slowly lost consciousness.

He awoke to Malachi gently tapping him on the face.

"Whoa kiddo. I guess I got carried away." Malachi's face was full of concern. "Are you okay?"

At first, Seth was confused. He didn't even remember his name, let alone where he was. Then it all came rushing back to him.

"What happened?" Seth said, his throat burning.

"You blacked out. I stayed balls deep in your sweet throat just a little too long," Malachi shook his head. "Are you okay?"

"That depends," Seth sat up, "is this heaven?"

Malachi chuckled. "Let's get you some water." Malachi left Seth sitting on the floor with his back resting against the bed. Seth heard him opening cabinets in the kitchen and then he heard the faucet running. Malachi returned carrying a coffee cup.

"First thing I found," he explained, handing it to Seth. "Drink it." Seth mistakenly took a large painful swallow. Despite feeling like he was

swallowing knives, Seth could tell the cold water was soothing to his throat. As Seth sipped the water, Malachi knelt to remove Seth's boots and socks. Seth helped him slide the leather shorts off of his legs. Malachi stood and helped Seth to his feet. Malachi pushed Seth toward the bathroom. "Go brush your teeth. Oh and what's your favorite classic?"

"You mean book? Or movie?" Seth's head spun with the bizarre topic change.

"Book."

"*The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde."

"Good, I've never read that one." Malachi gestured toward the bathroom. "Go on."

Seth did as he was told. He returned to find Malachi turning down his bed. Malachi patted the bed. "In you go." Seth climbed in and Malachi tucked the covers around him. Malachi sat beside him on top of the blanket and stretched one arm behind Seth's shoulders. Malachi used his other hand to raise his phone in front of him.

"Oh! It's a play! This'll be different." Seth squinted at the small screen in front of Malachi's face.

"Persons in the Play..." Malachi's gravelly voice began. Seth scooted down into the covers and pulled the sheet up to his nose. He hadn't been read to in bed for at least two decades and he was not going to let this opportunity pass.

"**Jack.** Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country." Malachi's voice had taken on a British flavor. Seth was delighted Malachi used different voices for each speaker as he read. A warm comfortable wave overtook Seth and he blinked his eyes furiously. There was no way he was going to sleep. He was dying to hear the voice Malachi used for Lady Bracknell. He would fight sleep tooth and...

Chapter Two

“Un-ca Sef! Un-ca Sef! Un-ca Sef! Un-ca Sef!” Seth was awoken by a forty pound screaming ball of enthusiasm bouncing on his kidneys.

“Unhff.” He grunted into the pillow. “Good morning, Geordi.” Blearily, he raised his head. “Ask your mother to make me coffee.”

“I’m already on it, little brother.” Tasha strode into the room, radiating sunshine. Seth peeked at her through his one open eye. Tall for a woman, Seth’s twin sister looked freshly pressed in her khaki shorts and powder blue scooped neck tee. Her long blonde hair was flipped up in a twist that fell down in curls on her neck. She held a steaming cup of coffee in each hand.

“You are entirely too chipper for this hour.” Seth turned over and sat up in bed. The motion flipped Geordi off of his back and onto the bed, giggling hysterically. Seth took the proffered cup from his sister and cradled it in front of his nose. The first sip burned his throat so intensely he couldn’t stop himself from wincing. He opened his eyes to his sister’s smirking face.

“Good morning, Uncle Seth!” A bronze elfin female face peaked out over the edge of the bed, brown ringlets framing large liquid brown eyes.

“Good morning, Princess.” Seth cleared his throat. His voice sounded a little scratchy this morning.

“Deanna, why don’t you take your brother in the other room and put on the Cartoon Network.” Tasha helped Geordi off the bed.

“No!” Geordi yelled. “Swim! Unca Sef swim!” His startling blue eyes pleaded with his mother.

“Yes.” Tasha assured him. “We will swim in a little while. Go watch cartoons while we drink our coffee.”

“Come on, Geordi.” Deanna took her brother’s hand. “I think Fairly Odd Parents is on.”

“Odd rents! Odd rents!” Geordi chanted as they exited the bedroom.

Seth cleared his throat again. “Good morning, Sis.”

“Good morning. You certainly sound a little rough this morning. Are you coming down with something?” Tasha was smirking again.

“No. Um. I’m fine. It’s nothing. Can you hand me my bathrobe?” Tasha turned around as Seth got out of bed and covered himself. “You know, you really should call before you show up here. I could have company.”

“Oh, yes.” Tasha was obviously very pleased with herself. “I realized the error of my ways this morning. And are you sure your throat is nothing? Malachi seemed pretty concerned about it.”

“What?” Seth stared at her from across the bed.

“Malachi.” Tasha said, as if it explained everything. “He seemed really concerned about your throat.”

“He said that?” Seth squeaked.

“Well, he did in this note I found by the coffee pot.” Tasha pulled a folded piece of paper out of her shorts pocket and opened it with a flick of her wrist. “Good morning Seth. I have to say this evening was one—”

“Give me that!” Seth screeched and climbed over the bed to get to her.

“—of the most surprising and amazing—” Tasha continued, darting out of his reach and running around the foot of the bed. “—nights I have had in— Aaahhh!” Tasha squealed when Seth tackled her to the floor and began tickling her ribs. When she jerked her arms down to protect herself, Seth snatched the note from her hands, ran to the bathroom and locked the door behind him.

Good morning, Seth.

I have to say this evening has been one of the more surprising and amazing nights I have had in a long time. I hope you enjoyed our time together as much as I did.

Malachi

P.S.—Take care of your throat today. Gargle repeatedly with warm salt water. Also, drink hot tea with honey and lemon.

Seth leaned against the door as disappointment hit him in the gut. He carefully folded the letter and slipped it into the pocket of his bathrobe.

“Oh bon-bon!” His sister said when he exited the bathroom. “Why so sad? It was a nice note.”

“Yes,” Seth agreed. “Very nice. Just absent a phone number.”

“That must be why he left his business card next to the coffee pot.”

“He *did*?”

“Yes and I will give it to *you* once you give *me* all of the gory details!”

“Tasha!”

“I insist,” Tasha continued. “This is the closest I’ve been to sex in about six months and you won’t deny me this.”

“Okay, okay,” Seth said. “Let me get some breakfast and I’ll tell you by the pool.”

“Deal.”

“Wow!” Tasha sighed, reclining on the white chaise lounge next to the kiddie pool. “I mean just... wow!”

“I know! I know!” Seth agreed. “Now will you give me the card?”

“Not yet.” Tasha waived her hand in the air. “You actually passed out?”

“Apparently so.”

“Jesus, bro. This guy sounds dangerous. Are you sure you want to call him?”

“Is it wrong that thinking he is dangerous makes him seem even hotter?” Seth chortled when Tasha slapped his arm. “Seriously though. I’m not really worried about him hurting me. I’m worried about how your children are going to survive in this life with a father in the army and a mother in the cemetery. If you don’t give me the card, I will end you. I hope you realize that.”

“All right already!” Tasha dug the card out of her swim suit top. “I knew it was safe from you in tittie city.”

“Gross!” Seth snatched the card from between her outstretched fingers.

“You can’t call him until two anyway,” she said as she sat up. “It says so on the back.”

“Fuck! It’s one thirty now!” Seth jumped from his lounge.

“Swim Momma!” Geordi called from the kiddie pool. “Swim!”

“I’m coming!” Tasha called to her son. “Say hi to Malachi for me,” she taunted as she stepped into the splash pool.

Seth nearly ran in his hurry to get back to his condo. His cell phone was still in the bag that held yesterday’s clothes. Of course it was dead. And of course he couldn’t find the charger! When it was finally located underneath his bed

and his phone charged enough to make a phone call, it was a quarter till two. Seth looked at the card again: Dorin Landscapers, Inc. Malachi Dorin, President.

Thank you for calling Dorin Landscapers. This is Malachi Dorin. I regret I am unable to answer the phone right now...

Seth hung up before the recording finished. He tried again and the phone went directly to voicemail. He looked at the clock: 1:55. He waited until the exact moment the time changed to two and called again. Malachi answered on the first ring.

"You called early." His gravelly voice was even. Seth couldn't tell if Malachi was aggravated or amused.

"Yes, Sir." Seth cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

"Don't call me 'Sir'." Malachi's even tone continued. "We need to talk. Are you available this evening?"

"Yes si—Um... Yes I am." Seth tried not to grin. "Would you like to come over?"

"No. We will meet in a neutral place. Somewhere we have to be on our best behavior." Malachi was silent a minute. "No suggestions? Then meet me at the Melting Pot on West Sand Lake Road. I will make reservations in my name. Is this your cell phone?"

"Yeah it is."

"I will text you with the time to meet me." Malachi paused. "Seth, have you done a salt water gargle or had the hot tea like I instructed you?"

"I, um. My sister... I... haven't."

"Good afternoon, Seth." Malachi said calmly. "I'll see you tonight."

And with a click, he was gone. He didn't even wait for Seth to say good-bye.

Tasha's eyes were full of compassion when Seth plodded back down to the pool.

"Bad news little brother?"

"You know, being born five minutes before me doesn't really give you the right to call me little brother. I've got two inches on you at least."

“Don’t change the subject.” Tasha guided Seth back to the loungers. Seth sat down quietly when he saw Deanna and Geordi sleeping peacefully in the shade of the cabana. “Now tell your big sister what the matter is.” Seth rolled his eyes.

“I can’t get a read on him,” Seth began. “Last night he just about rapes my throat. And I have to tell you it was one of the hottest moments of my life. And then he tucks me in bed and reads to me until I fall asleep.”

“He read to you?” Tasha raised her eyebrows. “Holy shit, dude. What did he read?”

“The Importance of Being Earnest. I told him it was my favorite book.” Seth nodded at Tasha’s astonishment. “Yes. I know. It was awesome,” he continued. “And just now, he purposely didn’t answer the phone until two on the dot. And I can’t tell if he even likes me.”

“What do you mean?”

“When he finally answered the phone, his voice was really neutral. He didn’t want to talk much. He was upset I didn’t do the throat gargle or tea. And he didn’t want to come over here tonight.”

“Oh bon-bon! I am so sorry.”

“He does want to see me again. He wants to meet in a public place where we will have to ‘be on our best behavior’. I just don’t understand why he was so cold on the phone when he was so passionate in person.”

Tasha placed an arm across Seth’s shoulders.

“Let me get this straight, no pun intended.” Tasha smiled as she pushed him gently. “You met this guy at an S&M club. You have fantastic freaky sex with him. You call him repeatedly before he told you to call. You disregard instructions he leaves for you to do. And you can’t understand why he might be a little peeved? Don’t these guys like, get off on giving orders and having them followed?”

Seth slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“You are right. God! I am such a moron.”

“That’s the baby brother I know and love.” Tasha ruffled his hair. Seth’s phone gave a R2D2 whistle. Seth chuckled as he read the text.

“I think you are right, little sister. *Our reservation is at six thirty. Arrive at least fifteen minutes early and dress casually. Button up shirt or polo and jeans.*

Text me when you are seated. And if you don't gargle with salt water at least twice, don't come."

"Can you say 'Control Freak'?" Tasha grinned.

Seth sent back.

If I follow your orders can I call you 'Sir'?

The reply came:

Yes. And don't be a SAM

"What's a SAM?" Seth asked his sister.

"Fuck if I know. You've got your iPhone. Ask the all-powerful Google."

Seth found a BDSM slang website and laughed out loud. "It's a smart-assed masochist. He told me not to be one."

"You should text back that you are sorry, but it is too late for you," his sister teased.

"Fuck that!" Seth exclaimed. Instead he texted back:

"Yes Sir!"

Putting his phone down on the table next to them, Seth put both arms around his sister's waist. Giving her a long, firm hug, he kissed her cheek. "I would be lost without you."

"I know it," Tasha said. "I would be too."

"Now that we have spent the morning obsessing over my sex life. Let's talk about yours for a while." Seth let go of his sister and looked over at the sleeping kids. From the telltale fidgeting they were both doing, he could tell nap time would be very short-lived. "Have you been able to talk to Alex lately?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I got to Face Time with him this morning before we came over. Kids did too."

"How is he doing? Any idea of when he will be coming home?"

"No. No idea." Tasha looked sad. "I think he is going to be stuck in Afghanistan for a long time." She shook her head and chuckled. "He looks really good. He's already as dark as he gets here in the middle of summer."

"Black is beautiful," Seth chimed in.

“*Alex* is beautiful,” Tasha added.

“You know Tasha, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.” Tasha raised one eyebrow and waited. “I have to tell you. I’m afraid your husband isn’t really black.”

“What?” Tasha blinked at him perplexed.

“I mean, seriously,” Seth continued. “I have never met a black man as fixated on Star Trek as *Alex*. I mean, the man is completely obsessed. That level of nerdish behavior is usually reserved for crazy white people. I think you’re going to have to consider the fact he might not have been completely honest with you about his racial heritage.”

Tasha punched Seth in the shoulder. “You’re such an asshole.”

“I’m just looking out for you here. And speaking of looking out for people. I am pretty sure when he does return you guys are going to get back to the baby-making business. If you have another boy, will you promise me you won’t let him name the baby Jean-Luc?” Seth jumped up to avoid the swing Tasha took at his head. “Seriously, the kid will hate you if you do.” Tasha chased Seth around the pool threatening his life.

Deanna stood up in the cabana. “Get him Momma!” Both kids cheered when their mother wrapped her arms around Seth and dragged him kicking and screaming into the pool with her.

Chapter Three

Seth looked about nervously as he entered the restaurant. No sign of Malachi. He smoothed down his lavender Oxford and checked his cell-phone. Ten minutes after six and no texts from Malachi. A smartly dressed hostess in a white blouse and black pencil skirt caught his attention.

“Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?” Her smiling green eyes shone out from underneath a mass of curly red hair.

“In the name of Malachi for six thirty.” Seth coughed into his fist. “I’m a little early.”

“No, sir. The reservation was for six. Your dining companion is waiting for you.”

“Wha...” Seth pulled his phone out and doubled checked his text from earlier.

“If you’ll step this way...” Seth followed her clickety high heels across the hardwood floor. She stopped next to a booth and turned sideways. Malachi slid into view.

He wore his usual uniform of a flannel shirt and matching T-shirt. Tonight’s flannel was a rust and brown plaid. His brown hair was his typical tousled mess and his hazel eyes were sparkling with mirth. “You’re early.” He smiled as he closed his laptop and slid it to the side.

“As you requested.” Seth eased into the booth across from him.

The hostess laid two menus on the table and disappeared.

“How is your throat?”

Seth cleared the object in question. “Fine. I gargled three times this afternoon. And had a cup of tea.”

Malachi directed a tight smile over Seth’s shoulder.

“Good evening. My name is Patricia and I’ll be your server. Have you had a chance to look over the menu?”

“Do you have any dietary restrictions?” Malachi asked Seth.

“No,” Seth replied looking down at his menu.

“We’ll have the four-course with the vegetarian option. Caesar salads for both please.”

Seth listened with a slight smile on his face while Malachi ordered for both of them, not looking up from his menu until the server took it away. He directed his gaze to Malachi. The older man’s face was partially obscured by steepled hands, the paired index fingers tapping gently against his lips. Malachi’s piercing hazel eyes were fixing him with a stare that was both neutral and intense.

Seth smiled nervously and decided his own hands were a much safer subject of study.

“I don’t normally ‘hook-up’ with strangers from the club,” Malachi began. “I don’t normally play with people I don’t know very well. Your so very honest and intriguing offer took me off guard and caused me to move outside my comfortable little box.”

“I am glad you did,” Seth said, raising his eyes to meet that startling gaze.

“I am too... sort of... but now I find myself in a predicament.” Malachi laid his hands on the table. “Seth, I am not the dom for you.”

“What...” Seth’s question was interrupted by the arrival of the food. He took the opportunity to clear his throat and get his nerves under control. “What do you mean?” he finished calmly after the server departed.

Malachi took a bite of raw broccoli and chewed it thoroughly before answering. Seth started picking at his salad.

“Seth, I don’t date. The people I play with... they all have doms already. Or slaves... Or whatever.” He chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “They are already in established relationships that meet their emotional needs.” He took another bite. “I approached you, thinking you already had a dominant. I was thinking maybe I could meet your dominant and discuss the possibly of adding you to the list. I wasn’t thinking I wanted to be your Master.”

Seth took a sip of water and did his best to hide his disappointment.

“Don’t get me wrong. I like you.” Malachi’s gaze turned hot. “I like you a lot. I noticed you a long time ago and I’ve been patiently waiting for your dom to show up. I finally got tired of waiting.” Malachi closed his eyes. “The way you took my cock down your throat—” Seth shivered to hear the lust in Malachi’s voice. Malachi opened his eyes. “So extremely hot. That was an experience I would love to repeat.”

"I would climb under this table this very second if you let me." Seth was shocked at his own brazenness. Shocked, but not embarrassed, not regretful. He meant every word that fell out of his mouth.

Malachi closed his eyes again and raised his hand as if stopping traffic. "But... I am not going to."

"Then let's go back to my—" Seth was interrupted by the server refilling their drinks.

"Seth, listen," Malachi began. "I am not the dom for you. I don't have the time or energy it takes to care for a slave, especially a newbie. I like you, I do, but you are young and inexperienced. You need someone to care for you and train you in the lifestyle and give you the emotional support you need through all of it." Malachi sighed. "I am not that guy. I don't have the time to be that guy." Malachi took a deep breath. "But I might be able to help you find that guy."

Seth focused on his dinner to have some time to think. He had no idea what he was actually eating, but he forced more food in his mouth. The words "young and inexperienced" echoed through his head. Maybe he could turn his liability into an asset.

"You're right in some ways," Seth began. "I am inexperienced. Not sexually of course, but with the 'lifestyle' stuff. I have trolled FetLife and I can't even complete a profile because half of that stuff I haven't done and the other half I haven't even heard of. And I am young. Hell, I'm just out of college."

Malachi nodded knowingly, steepling his fingers in front of his lips again.

Time to close the deal. Seth thought. "But you're wrong about one thing. I don't need a dom." Seth let relief show on his face. "I'm not ready for one. I *am* young. I am too young to commit myself to someone like that. I just want to have fun. I want to get some experience. I want to find out if those things that sound hot *are* hot." Seth's expression turned serious. "And I want to do it with someone safe and knowledgeable, who won't demand more commitment than I am willing to give." Seth tried not to hold his breath.

Malachi thought a minute. The time stretched painfully to Seth. Finally he smiled. "Maybe I *am* the dom for you." Malachi chuckled as Seth's grin. "And you definitely need one!"

"What do you mean?"

“You don’t exactly make safe choices, Seth. You barely know me, and yet you allowed me into your home. I would bet cash you didn’t have a safe call set up.” Malachi looked irritated. “You let me deprive you of air until you passed out without once trying to get me to stop or using a safe word. Hot? Yes. Smart? Not even a little.”

Seth decided to see what his cuticles were up to.

“Listen, Seth.” Malachi reached over and wrapped his hand around the fingers Seth found so interesting. Seth looked up to meet his gaze. “If I get involved in your life on any level, there *is* a commitment I will require from you, for your safety and for my peace of mind.”

Seth raised an eyebrow.

“In the lifestyle, there is a relationship we describe as ‘in the protection of’. What this means to you is before you play with anyone else you have to call me and give me the vital statistics about the play date and give me an opportunity to voice my opinion on the matter.” Malachi’s face turned hard. “This will pertain to vanilla play as well and I won’t accept anything less. So don’t agree if you can’t do it.”

“You mean, I have to call you and say ‘I am about to have sex with another man. How do you like it?’ That seems terrible.”

“Not like that.” Malachi chuckled. “It will be more like. ‘I am about to play with or have sex with John Doe. We will be at my apartment or at this address. I will contact you again at approximately X time.’”

“That wouldn’t piss you off?” Seth was shocked.

“On the contrary, it would please me immensely to know you are being safe. If I know the guy (and if you meet him at the club the chances are high I do), I would feel even better about it.”

“Seems strange to me,” Seth sighed. “But it shouldn’t be a problem.” He looked down at their hands. Malachi’s fingers were still wrapped around his. “You should know, I’ve not been very sexually active lately. You might not be getting a call as often as you think.”

“You seemed to have a lot of practice last night.”

“Oh yes, I have had a lot of practice, just not always with... ahem... animate objects.” Seth blushed.

“You practice with a dildo? Just to improve your technique? Or because it gets you off?”

“Both,” Seth almost whispered.

“What else gets you off, Seth?” Malachi’s voice turned rough and gravelly. Seth shivered.

“Your voice for one thing. Also, getting fucked. I am much more of a bottom than a top.”

“Sounds like I hit the twink jackpot.” Malachi got an uncomfortable look on his face. “There is something I should tell you I guess. I gather you’re homosexual. Well, I’m not.” He winced and tilted his head to the side. “Not exactly. I went through high school thinking I was straight. In college, I figured out I was definitely bi. But recently a friend pointed out I am more pansexual than anything else.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means among the people I have played with, you will find people of both gender identities, that don’t always match their gender of birth. I’m attracted to people of different races, body types, heights, hair coloring and personality. The one constant is I am only attracted to submissive people. Or at least people who behave submissively with me.” Malachi removed his hand and leaned back. “And so you know, I have been intimate with a good many, but I practice safe penetrative sex and I get tested every six months. I’ve never fluid bonded.”

“What does fluid bonded mean?” Seth rubbed his skin. It was still warm from Malachi’s touch.

“A fluid bond is where you agree to have unprotected sex with only the person or people you have bonded with. When was the last time you were tested?”

“It was a couple of years ago,” Seth said, chagrined.

“Do it as soon as possible. When was the last time you had sex?” Malachi smiled when Seth rolled his eyes. “Before last night?”

“Um, sometime in January,” Seth coughed into his hand, “of last year.”

“You haven’t had sex in eighteen months?” Malachi reached over to trace Seth’s palm with his thumb. A slow evil grin spread across his face. “Why don’t we go somewhere and correct that?”

Seth nearly groaned his agreement.

Chapter Four

Seth groaned again as Malachi's rough fingers slid inside his unbuttoned Oxford. Malachi stood behind him so closely that Seth could feel the hardness of Malachi's erection through those crazy corduroy pants. Malachi threaded the fingers of his other hand through Seth's hair before jerking Seth's head to the side. He bit into the side of Seth's neck, his beard chafing roughly against his skin.

Everything about Malachi was rough: his voice, his beard, the abrasive feel of his hands, the way he handled Seth, everything. Seth loved it. Seth couldn't wait to have Malachi's chest hair abrading the skin of his back while Malachi pounded him into oblivion. As if reading his mind, Malachi snatched Seth's shirt down so that it bound his arms to his side while leaving his back bare. Malachi's surprisingly naked chest pressed against Seth.

When did that happen? floated across Seth's mind before Malachi used both of his beautifully abrasive hands to press Seth back against him, abrading Seth's smooth skin with his chest hair.

Malachi pulled back to run open-mouthed nibbley kisses down Seth's spine to near the base of his shoulder blades. There he stopped and sucked hard, drawing the skin into his mouth, using his teeth to torment him further. The pain caused Seth to cry out and arch away, but Malachi used those wonderful hands to hold him in place, sliding the tips of his calloused fingers over Seth's nipples. Using his index and thumb, he slowly squeezed each nipple. Increasing the pressure until the pain of it nearly overrode the pain of what Malachi was doing with his mouth.

Seth groaned and felt tears springing to his eyes. "Please." He begged but he didn't try to extricate himself from the binding of the partially removed shirt. He arched his chest even farther, giving Malachi better access to his sweetly abused nipples.

Malachi released his painful kiss. "I like *this*, Seth," he whispered, punctuating the word with a pulse of intensified pressure. "I like causing pain. Did you realize this before you placed yourself so willingly in my grasp?" he whispered before gently kissing Seth's neck.

Seth shook his head to clear his eyes and sniffled, ashamed to feel a tear trail down his cheek. "Yes," he breathed and pushed his ass back against Malachi.

Malachi chuckled. The sound felt both sinister and warm so close to Seth's ear. "Do you like *this*, Seth?" he asked, emphasizing the word with sensation again. "Do you like receiving pain?"

"Evidently," Seth whispered, leaning his back against Malachi and grinding his hips in the empty air.

Malachi released him, sliding one hand up and across his chest to caress his face and the other slipping down across his trembling abdomen. "Then what is this?" With one finger, Malachi traced the path of another tear that had slipped out. "It doesn't seem to match this." With his other hand, Malachi roughly groped Seth's dick through the fabric of his pants. Seth groaned and ground against him.

"You are rock hard, Seth. So responsive! I've even found a wet spot. Your dick wants me so bad it's weeping." Malachi rubbed against him, using the leverage of his hand on Seth's crotch to pull him firmly back against his erection. "Is that why you're weeping, Seth? Because you want me so badly?"

The tears came steadily now. *Yes!* Seth thought. *That is exactly it!* Seth remembered how well Malachi responded to begging.

"Please, Malachi! Please fuck me! I need you inside of me so bad. I will do anything to have you inside me. Anything!" As Seth begged, Malachi continued to grind against him and massage Seth through his pants.

"I want to make it hurt, Seth," Malachi whispered against his throat. "I want to take you rough and force myself inside your body. I want to fuck you raw."

"Yes!" Seth nearly screamed. "Please!"

Malachi stripped Seth of his clothes in record time. Before Seth even had the time to miss the warmth of Malachi's body, it was pressed back against him, completely naked this time. Seth reached his now free hand behind him to caress the monster that had so violated his throat. Seth wanted him in his mouth again, wanted to feel his throat stretch.

Again, Malachi seemed to read his mind. "No throat fucking tonight, Seth. Not only do you need the recovery time, I want inside of that ass. Here, put this on me." With that he handed Seth a condom. Seth turned to do as instructed when Malachi clarified. "On your knees."

With a whimper, Seth complied, dropping on his knees in front of Malachi's beautiful dick. Seeing it from this familiar angle made not taking it in his mouth

almost torture. Seth licked his lips as he slid the condom on. From the smile on Malachi's face, Seth realized Malachi knew it was torture for him and was glad of it.

"Get up." Malachi grabbed the bottle of lube and sat on the bed. He pushed and pulled at Seth until he stood in front of the bed with his legs spread and slightly bent over. Seth shivered to feel Malachi's lubed finger trace his entrance before pushing gently inside. Seth grabbed the back of his thighs as his legs threatened to give. Malachi worked his finger back and forth before adding a second one.

"Next time, it won't be this way, Seth." Malachi's words floated in through the haze of lust clouding Seth's mind. "Next time I will push my cock inside your tight beautiful ass with no warm up. No gentle stretching to prepare you to take me. Just a little lube and pure force of will."

Seth groaned at the visual and his cock dribbled on to the floor. "Do it," Seth whispered, even as he ground back against Malachi's hand. Seth jerked when Malachi's fingers pressed against his prostate.

"No, Seth." Malachi's fingers worked Seth without mercy. "It's been too long a wait for you to be taken that way. For tonight, you get gentle." Malachi smiled. "Or at least as gentle as I am capable of."

Malachi's two fingers became three. "Also, I am so hot for you right now I might come before I managed to force myself all the way inside you." Malachi's tempo increased, his hand making a wet slapping sound as it pounded into him. Seth felt the burning roar of an orgasm threatening. With a groan, he struggled not to come.

"And that would be a travesty. And besides, I would have missed this beautiful sight." Malachi's hand stilled just as Seth was nearing the point of no return. His fingers pressed on Seth's prostate, hard. Seth's moan of pleasure turned into a whimper as Malachi slid his fingers from Seth's body.

"Don't you worry baby. You aren't going to be empty for long. Sit back on me. I want to watch your body swallow my cock." Seth did as he was instructed, letting Malachi guide him into position. His anus tightened when he felt the latex tip of Malachi's cock press against him. "Now don't you undo all my hard work. Relax and sit down." Seth lowered himself crying out when Malachi breeched his opening and slid inside. Malachi grabbed Seth's hips and pulled until Seth was fully seated in his lap. Malachi wrapped one hand around Seth's waist and with a lurch, dragged them both back further on to the bed,

still joined together. Malachi laid down and pulled Seth onto his chest. Then, holding Seth by the hips, he began slowly, steadily fucking Seth, pistoning up into his body over and over.

Tears poured from Seth's eyes. Whether it was joy or pain making him weep, he had no idea. With each powerful stroke, Malachi's cock pressed against that sweet spot. Because of Malachi's length, the pressure was intense, almost painful. And Malachi was relentless. For all his talk of not lasting long, Malachi slowly and repeatedly plowed into him, hitting his prostate with near-bruising force every time. Seth's cock dribbled a steady stream of precum all over his belly. The sensations were mind-blowing, pleasurable enough to carry him over the edge but painful enough to keep his orgasm looming just out of reach. His tender throat now ached from the loud cries Malachi seemed to push out of him with each stroke.

Seth reached to touch himself, to add just that last little bit of friction he needed to crest over the top of the pain. Malachi stopped him. Lacing his fingers with Seth's, he drew both of their arms across Seth's waist. His other hand slid up to wrap around Seth's neck. His fingers tightened around his throat as he pulled Seth's head to his ear.

"Oh no you don't." The pounding continued as Malachi whispered sweet evil to him. "You come when I say you do." Malachi increased the pressure on Seth's windpipe as he amazingly increased the intensity of his thrusts. Seth reached back and wrapped his hand around Malachi's shoulder. "Do you want to come, Seth? Beg for it."

"Please Sir!" Seth's voice sounded strange. It was hard to get the words out with the ever-increasing pressure on this throat. "Please let me come." The last word was almost a gasp. Without realizing he was doing it, Seth pulled Malachi's shoulder toward him, subtly encouraging him to increase his grip. Seth's head got swimmy again as Malachi tightened his grasp even more. Malachi kept steadily pounding away as spots began to blur Seth's vision.

"That'll do." Malachi released Seth's throat. Before Seth completed his first deep breath, Malachi rolled them both over so that Seth lay on his belly and Malachi lay on top of him. Malachi wrapped his arms underneath Seth's and grabbed his shoulders. Holding Seth down as he ground even deeper inside of him. In this position, Malachi's cock rubbed against and pushed past Seth's sweet spot, instead of pounding into it. The change from pleasurable torture to pure pleasure made Seth's breath come out in a long-winded moan.

Malachi's rhythm changed. He had been a machine before; steady and constant, never varying his speed. Now he was an animal, grinding into Seth's body with a fierceness that was surprising. Faster and faster he pushed, each stroke sliding his cock against Seth's prostate. "Come for me Seth," he whispered before burying his teeth in Seth's shoulder.

Like sweet fire, Seth's orgasm hit him and he shouted his release in the pillow. He heard the near deafening yell of Malachi's pleasure only somewhat muffled by the skin of his shoulder. Malachi paused as his orgasm overtook him with his cock shoved deep in Seth's ass and pressed firmly against Seth's battered prostate. This pressure, just microseconds after release caused Seth's orgasm to drag out painfully long. Seth's body, in response, clamped down hard on Malachi's cock, milking him and drawing his out as well. Their bodies locked together as the climax ripped them up and shattered them against the sky. Weightless, they hung before floating gently back to earth.

Malachi dropped all of his weight onto Seth and laid there embracing him.

"That was a beautiful thing." Malachi nuzzled Seth's neck. "You okay in there?" Seth nodded yes.

Seth felt Malachi reach between them to grab the condom and slip out of his body. Malachi kissed his shoulder before getting up.

"Looks like I gave you a hickey on your back," Malachi said as he walked toward the bathroom.

You can give me a hickey anywhere, Seth thought.

Moments later, he heard the toilet flush and Malachi in all his naked glory strode back into the room. He climbed on the bed and began inspecting Seth everywhere, even the crack of his ass. He rolled Seth over and gave his front the same perusal.

"Looks like a hickey on your back. Some fingerprint bruises on your hips. And maybe your neck as well, although those will be slight if they show up at all. How do you feel?"

"Gah..." Seth cleared his throat. "Good. I'm good... Very good." Malachi smiled.

"Glad to hear it." Malachi's face turned serious. "So that's it. That is what I have to offer. A lot of what I have to show you will be me causing you pain mixed with pleasure. Or making you do things just because I want you to, like kneeling or crawling. Or..."

“I’ve read some books. I have an idea of the things you might want to do to me.” Seth blushed. “If it is anything like tonight, or like last night, then I think I have hit the dom jackpot.”

Chapter Five

“And then what happened?” Tasha asked. Her bright blue eyes sparkling.

“And then he tucked me in and read aloud to me again until I fell asleep.” Seth sighed and rested his face in the palm of his open hand.

“No shit?” Tasha asked.

“No shit, dear sister.” Seth’s face dropped its dreamy expression and a more serious one took over. “I think I’ve got it bad.”

“No, you have just finally been fucked properly for once.”

“Tasha! Language.”

“Geordi can’t hear anything over that blasted Barney. I swear the only reason I don’t set fire to every one of his stuffed purple dinosaurs is: one, I’m not a psychopath; and two, that scary freak of nature has somehow managed to convince both of my kids that housecleaning is fun.”

Seth chuckled and glanced over at his beloved nephew. Tasha was right. Geordi was glued to the set. As Seth watched, Geordi threw his hands in the air and exclaimed, “Clean up! Clean up! Eh-ree body clean up!”

Not even the ringing of the phone distracted Geordi from his favorite TV show.

“Barnum Construction, this is Tasha Riker. How may I help you?”

Seth turned back to the payroll spread sheets. He just couldn’t focus today. *I should have called in “fucked silly.”* Seth smirked at the idea of telling his boss, who also happened to be his father, that he couldn’t come to work because he was in an emotional spin over finally making time with the guy he had been obsessing over for the past year. His father would probably have just patted him on the shoulder and said, “That’s nice son. No details please.”

Seth checked his phone for the millionth time this morning.

I had a great weekend. I have been thinking about you a lot today. Makes it hard to work. Pun intended.

“Oh my God! He texted!”

At that moment, Patrick Barnum opened the front door of the trailer that served as the company’s portable office. Seth’s father was taller than both of

his children. His face showed the passage of years and the wrinkles adorning his eyes said there had been far more smiles on that face than frowns.

"Seth got laid," Tasha chimed in, hanging up the phone.

"Tasha!" Seth cried out.

"O-K." Patrick drew the letters out slowly, emphasizing the awkwardness of the moment. "Well, I hope he is a nice man Seth 'cause you deserve nothing less. And Tasha, T.M.I."

Geordi, upon hearing the voice of his favorite person in the world, ditched Barney without a backwards glance and ran screaming across the office, "Grampa!" With wild abandon for safety and reason, he leapt in the air and launched himself into his grandfather's waiting arms.

Patrick caught the boy easily and swung him in a wide arc before bringing him in close for a hug. "Hey there, Geordi bear!" This was followed by an exchange of loud smacking kisses all over Geordi's face.

"Thank you, Dad." Seth looked pointedly over at Tasha who did not look apologetic in the least bit.

"And I gather the gentleman in question is the one who texted you?" Patrick's attempt to rejoin the adult conversation was thwarted by Geordi who placed a hand on either side of Patrick's face and forcibly turned his grandfather back towards him.

"Grampa, Barney clean up!" The last two words were sung along to the tune that surely saved Barney from evisceration from millions of parents.

"I know Geordi man. That dino is one tidy dude!" Turning back to Seth. "Will we be expecting him for dinner soon?"

"Hey Dad! Guess who's coming to dinner?" Tasha grinned like an idiot.

"Yeah, romantic controversy in the new generation." Patrick turned back to Geordi. Bouncing him in a sing song voice he continued. "Poor Tasha and Seth. Just can't shock their old father no matter how hard they try."

"Hey! We don't live our lives to shock you," Tasha exclaimed.

"I know that." Patrick turned to his daughter. "If I really thought you were trying to shock me, I would have let you. What kind of parent denies their child a basic need like that?" Still bouncing Geordi in his arms, he nodded at the clock. "Speaking of basic needs of a child, it's three. Don't you need to go pick Deanna up from school?"

“Not just yet, but I do need to leave soon. Today is ballet and I am doing a car pool swap with another mom.” Tasha stood up and grabbed her purse out of her desk drawer. “But you’re right, I do need to leave. I got so caught up with hearing the details of Seth’s sexual escapades that I put off running to the grocery store. Chicken enchiladas tonight!”

“Ooo! Yum!” Patrick grinned. “What’s for dessert?”

“No dessert Dad! I’m trying to keep my figure so my husband will still want me when he comes home.”

“De-ssert! De-ssert! De-ssert!”

“Now you’ve done it.” Tasha sighed, taking Geordi from Patrick. “I guess we *will* be having dessert. Boy will I be glad when this chanting stage has passed.”

Patrick handed off Geordi with a wink. “Good job, kiddo!”

“De-ssert! De-ssert!” With a wave, Tasha was out the door. Geordi’s chants continued off in the distance.

Seth looked down at his phone.

“So, *are* you going to invite him for dinner?” Patrick quietly asked, sitting at Tasha’s vacated desk.

“I don’t think so, Pop. I kinda told him that I wasn’t interested in anything serious. That I just wanted to play around.”

“Well, Son, gay or straight, you aren’t the first guy in the world to set the rules up like that. The young man should respect that you are honest with him right from the start.”

“That’s just it, Dad. I wasn’t honest with him. I’ve been crushing on this guy for a long time and I already feel half in love with him after just two, um... dates.”

“Oh dear.” Patrick took a deep breath. “Let me guess. You told him you weren’t interested in anything serious right after he said something along the same lines.”

“Yup,” Seth whispered, still looking at his phone. “Saw right through that didn’t you.”

“In that case, I wouldn’t invite him to dinner yet.” Patrick raised his eyebrows. “Actually, I wouldn’t introduce him to your sister at all.”

Seth laughed at that. Then he had the disturbing visual of Malachi flirting with his sister. "No," he agreed. "I think you are right about that."

"I also wouldn't get all worked up over that if I were you. Did you know that your mother told me something very like that right before I asked her out on our first date?"

Seth looked his dad in the eyes. His father rarely talked about his mom. None of them did. "Really?"

"Yes, really." Patrick nodded his head. "I had just said something asinine about how I was young and raring to sow my wild oats. Her mom and my mom went to the same church and were trying to set us up. She was really pretty, but I wanted her to know right away that I wasn't ready to settle down with some sweet little church girl. She giggled in that delicate little girl way she never outgrew and said, 'Did you think I wanted to marry you? I was just planning on fucking you.' Then with a smile and a flounce she skipped out of the room."

Seth face-palmed himself. "T.M.I. Dad! T.M.I.!"

"I am only telling you this to make a point. At the beginning of any relationship, no one really knows what they want from it. If saying 'it's only for fun' takes the pressure off, then so be it. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. Only time will tell."

Patrick walked over to Seth's desk and gently ruffled his hair. "Besides," he said, kissing the top of Seth's head, "maybe you're not the only one fibbing." With that he strode out the door. "I'm off for my mani-pedi. Lock up when you leave."

"Mani-pedi?"

"Yessirree! I've got a date!" Patrick let the door close behind him.

Seth shook his head and looked back down at his text.

I had a great time too. The best! When do you want to get together again?

He took a deep breath to brace himself. He may not have been completely honest when stating his intentions, but he would be completely honest when showing his feelings. He added *I've been thinking about you a lot too* and hit send.

A deep yawning sensation rolled through his stomach. He slid his phone into his pocket, determined not to sit there waiting for the reply. Before he let go, it buzzed in his hand.

Whatcha doin Friday night?

Chapter Six

Seth gave the table a quick once over. There was a fruit and cheese platter, some cucumber cups with avocado cilantro white bean dip made by himself last night at a very reasonable hour; a few sweet n' tangy lime seitan skewers assembled by his sister this afternoon in the office trailer's kitchen after she googled vegetarian hors d'oeuvres, quite a lot of savory pâte à choux with cream cheese and olive made last night by his father in the cooking class no one knew he was attending; some pita chips with sweet potato mash and smoked almonds made by himself this morning after a neurosis-induced three in the morning trip to the grocery store; and a big pile of stuffed mushrooms that were dropped off this afternoon at the office by a dark-haired, statuesque, older woman claiming to be his father's girlfriend.

When he had asked Malachi if he should make dinner for their "date" Malachi had replied, "Make some snacks, you know, finger food."

There was enough finger food here for a seven course meal.

This is obvious overkill. Oh my God! I forgot dessert! As Seth checked his watch to see if there was enough time to run to Publix for chocolate-covered strawberries, there was a knock at the door.

"Yikes!" Seth ran over to the mirror to check his teeth and wrestled with his hair. "Just breathe!" he told his reflection. He ran back over to the dining room table and sat in a chair in full view of the front door. His sister had insisted on a mad shopping trip this week in preparation of tonight and the white linen top and light grey linen pants looked good on him. Arranging himself as artfully as he could he called out, "Come in."

A moment passed before the knob turned and Malachi entered. He was wearing jeans for a change, dark stonewashed ones that were tight but not too tight. An unbuttoned dark green Oxford replaced the plaid flannel he usually wore and a dark blue tank stretched across his chest. He was wearing tan suede docksides instead of his usual Converse. He was carrying a black leather duffel bag.

He dressed up for me. Seth's stomach rolled at the thought.

When Seth's gaze traveled back up Malachi's body, he realized Malachi was still standing in the open door with one eyebrow raised. Seth jumped up,

knocking over his chair in the process. He ignored the chair and darted over to take Malachi's bag. "Please, come in."

Malachi crossed the threshold. "You don't lock your door?" Seth shook his head. "Hmmm," was Malachi's only response. Malachi closed the door behind him, and looking Seth in the eye, he turned the deadbolt. Seth gave him a nervous smile. He handed Seth his bag and walked slowly over toward the table looking about the apartment as he went. "You must really like the beach."

"I do," Seth replied. "But if you are referring to the décor, it's my sister's doing. She decorated this place and won't let me change it. I would prefer something a little more... gothic."

"Gothic?" Malachi turned to focus on Seth.

"I meant Gothic like Victorian, not like Goth," Seth clarified.

"I assumed that was what you meant," Malachi said slowly, watching Seth. He continued his slow, steady incursion into the condo. He stopped to peruse the offerings on the table. He didn't say anything and he didn't look away from the table. Seth placed his bag on the kitchen bar and went to stand next to him. Seth picked at his cuticles and tried to determine what Malachi was thinking. After a few moments of them both staring at the table in silence, Malachi calmly and Seth nervously, Malachi spoke again.

"Did you make all of this, Seth?" Malachi asked quietly.

"No." Seth shook his head, even though Malachi wasn't looking at him. "I made that." Seth pointed to the cucumber cups. "And that." He pointed at the pita chips.

"And the rest?" Malachi gestured across the table with a broad wave of his hand.

"Some of it was bought, some of it was made by my sister... and my dad... and his girlfriend."

"Are you nervous, Seth?" Malachi asked, still not looking away from the table.

"Yes, Sir," Seth whispered.

Malachi reached up and threaded his fingers through the hair at Seth's nape. Taking a handful in his grip, he pulled tightly and tugged on Seth's head. With a surprised gasp, Seth stopped fidgeting and dropped his hands to his side. By exerting a constant downward pull on his hair, Malachi guided Seth to his knees

on the cream colored Berber and then guided his cheek to rest against Malachi's hip.

"Better?" Malachi asked, his gravelly voice echoing through Seth's bones.

"Yes, Sir." Seth rubbed his face against Malachi's jeans, like a cat seeking a caress. Malachi chuckled. "Whenever you are nervous, or if you don't know what you should be doing. Do this Seth. Just like this. You will always be welcome on your knees beside me."

Seth's heart fluttered at the word "always" but he did his best to ignore it. "Yes, Sir."

"Hmm. I wish I didn't eat earlier. This looks delicious. Are you a vegetarian Seth?"

"No, Sir."

"You are now. At least when you are with me." Malachi picked up a cucumber cup and popped it into his mouth. "Mmmm! It's delicious. Here." Malachi held one in front of Seth's mouth. When Seth reached with his fingers to take it, Malachi pulled it out of his reach.

"Open," Malachi commanded.

Seth parted his lips and Malachi slipped the food inside, tracing the curve of Seth's lower lip as he pulled his hand away.

"Ever watched the movie *Nine and a Half Weeks*?" Malachi asked. Seth, still chewing, shook his head.

"Stay right there." Malachi walked over to the kitchen counter and grabbed his bag. "Let's get you out of those clothes."

Seth chuckled, wondering if Tasha would be pissed or thrilled by how quickly he was shedding the clothes she'd spent hours finding.

"Stand up." Malachi set the bag down on the floor and reached with his other hand to help Seth up from the floor. Seth struggled awkwardly to get to his feet, relying heavily on Malachi's hand for balance. Malachi smiled. "We will work on that soon."

Malachi gently lifted his shirt. Seth dutifully raised his arms over his head, feeling more childish than sexy. Malachi carefully folded the shirt and placed it on the table. He undid the drawstring of the new linen pants and let them drop to the floor. Seth stood there, self-consciously, while Malachi ran an appraising eye over him.

Malachi traced the sides of the gray silk-knit thong Tasha had spent twenty minutes talking him into. "You work out. Gym?"

"Yeah," Seth whispered. "And yoga."

"Alone?"

"With my sister."

Malachi slipped his fingers into the sides of the thong and slowly drew them down to nestle with his pants, still pooled around his feet on the floor. Seth's cock, which had been at half-mast the minute Malachi walked in the door, hardened completely before the thong made it halfway down his thighs. This had the disconcerting effect of putting Seth's erection inches from Malachi's face.

Seth pulled his hips back, moving his jutting cock out of Malachi's personal space. Malachi's hands lashed out with the speed of a viper strike and wrapped around Seth's hipbones. With fingers biting painfully tight, he pulled Seth's hips back.

"What are you doing?" Malachi looked up into Seth's eyes, still bent over with his mouth tantalizingly close to the head of Seth's cock. "I didn't tell you to move."

"I'm sorry!" Seth said. He was having a difficult time looking down at Malachi with his lips so close to Seth's now aching cock. He was having an even more difficult time looking away. Seth's submissive head might be having issues with the surprising visual of Malachi swallowing him down to the root, but his dick had no such problems. "I was just—" Seth stopped, not really sure what he wanted to say.

"You were just thinking. You were just second guessing. You were just afraid." To Seth's horror and surprise, Malachi dropped gracefully to his knees in front of Seth. "Uncomfortable, Seth?"

"Yes, Sir."

Malachi smiled at Seth. "Stand up straight and grasp your wrists behind your back." Seth complied. In this position, his chest nearly blocked his view of his dick pointing directly at Malachi's smiling lips.

"Well done." Malachi leaned towards him, his hands still holding Seth in place. Seth felt the warm moist tip of Malachi's tongue trace a line from the inside of his upper thigh, across the bend in his hip, toward but not quite

reaching the base of his cock. Seth shivered and unconsciously released his hands held behind his back and leaned over to see more clearly. Malachi's fingers tightened painfully again. "I didn't tell you to move, Seth!"

Seth snapped back into position. A wet kiss on his cleft of his hip was his reward.

"Much better." Malachi moved his face closer to Seth's cock and inhaled, deeply. He turned his head causing his rough beard to drag along Seth's tender skin. "Never forget I am in charge Seth. If I am on my knees, I am in charge. If I am on my back, I am in charge. If I have your beautiful," Malachi inhaled again, "intoxicating dick buried in my mouth, I am still in charge." As Malachi spoke, Seth felt his warm moist breath tease up one side of his cock and then back down the other. Seth closed his eyes and whispered, "Yes, Sir."

Seth nearly gasped when he felt the tantalizingly light tip of Malachi's tongue trace a gentle line towards the head of his cock. When Malachi reached the edge of the bulbous tip, he pulled his tongue away. Seth let loose a groan of disappointment. It quickly morphed into a moan of pleasure when Malachi repeated the move on the other side. Back and forth, Malachi teased with his tongue. After a few repetitions, he added a trace of the vein on the underside of Seth's cock to the pattern.

Seth tried to stay in the position Malachi put him, but his hips juttet out a little with each tickle of Malachi's tongue. Before Seth realized it, he was nearly bent over backward with his body's attempt to get his dick as close to Malachi's mouth as was humanly possible.

Malachi's fiendishly teasing tongue laved a firm fully-encompassing swirl around the head of Seth's aching cock. Seth cried out and his back arched precariously more. Only Malachi's firm grip on his hips stopped him from completing a full backbend.

Malachi held him there, nearly suspended, while he continued the torturously slow teases with his tongue. Now he added the head encompassing swirls with increasing frequency, until Seth thought he might lose his mind. Finally, Malachi slowly slid Seth's cock in his mouth.

Seth nearly came undone.

Malachi worked Seth's dick deep into his throat, swallowing around him. Seth's hips began to tremble under Malachi's grasp. Seth's cries grew louder and louder; his sack tightening with impending orgasm.

Malachi released Seth's cock and pulled back, giving the head one last swirling lick as he did.

Seth felt tears well in his eyes again. His orgasm receded as the cool air blew across his damp skin. Without any warning, Malachi swallowed his cock again and worked him just as fiercely. It took mere seconds before he was again ready to explode.

And again Malachi stopped. Before beginning again.

Seth lost track of how many times Malachi brought him nearly to orgasm only to deny him release. His back hurt from the prolonged awkward bend. Tears flowed freely down the sides of his face to the floor. He was even drooling. His throat hurt again from crying out with the now painful need to come. He barely recognized the pitiful sounding repeats of "Please!" as his own voice.

Malachi stopped and his gravelly voice filled the air. Seth's head was foggy. He had heard what Malachi said, but the words made no sense.

"I'm sorry," Seth said. "What?"

"Release your arms and put them out behind you. I am going to lower you to the ground."

This time Seth understood. It took force of will to make his fingers let go of their grip around his wrists. He reached over his head and behind him to complete the backbend Malachi was lowering him into. Once his hands were securely on the ground, Malachi released his hips and Seth lowered himself all the way to the ground. Through a fog, he felt Malachi remove his thong and pants from his feet. He was startled when Malachi grabbed his thighs and pulled him closer. The rough Berber carpet chafed his back.

Seth watched as Malachi undid his belt and lowered his pants. His long cock fell out and bounced in the air. Seth wondered if the poor thing was hurt by being so hard and trapped in those tight jeans.

Malachi materialized a condom and slid it down his shaft. Just as mysteriously, he produced a small packet of lube and spread it over his dick. Dropping down on all fours, he caged Seth with his arms. Seth felt the wet tip of his dick against his sack. Seth swallowed and looked up into Malachi's bright hazel eyes.

Malachi lowered his weight onto Seth, pinning his tormented cock between them. Seth felt the tip of Malachi's cock nudge against his anus. Malachi

pivoted his hips and the tip pushed against Seth's opening. Malachi closed his eyes and smiled.

"This may hurt a bit, Seth."

Opening his eyes, he lowered his mouth to Seth's and kissed him, wrapping his hands up under Seth's shoulders to hold his head in place. Malachi tensed and changed the position of his hips a little more. The tip breached Seth's opening. Seth gasped. Another slight change in position and then Malachi bore down, burying himself in Seth in one steady onslaught.

Seth screamed into Malachi's open mouth. The sudden penetration burned like fire in his body, but Seth wasn't sure it was pain. Malachi held himself buried deep for a moment before pulling back and thrusting in again. Seth screamed again. It felt like Malachi was swallowing his screams, taking them away and absorbing them. This time, Malachi had slid firmly against his prostate and his scream was of pleasure and joy. When Malachi pulled back and thrust again, Seth exploded.

Malachi pounded him furiously, scooting them both across the sand-colored carpet. With a final stuttering stroke, with the length of him buried deep in Seth's body, with his lips hungrily feasting at Seth's mouth, he gave back the scream he had taken.

And then, he erupted with laughter.

Seth joined him with a giggle, not sure exactly what the joke was.

"Hello Seth, you look nice tonight. How was your week?" Malachi chortled.

"That, right there, is hilarious," Seth said, his grin spitting his face in two.

"I intended to take things slowly tonight." Malachi smiled sheepishly. "I even brought some toys to introduce you to. I planned on some talking, a little flirting, and quite a bit of playtime before I took you like an animal."

Seth realized Malachi was apologizing. Seth stretched to reach Malachi's lips and shut him up with a gentle kiss. Malachi responded in kind, his lips a tender caress.

"The night is young..." Seth whispered when the kiss ended.

"Why, so it is," Malachi replied with a smile.

Chapter Seven

Seth screamed and leapt up like a cat, his eyes trying to make sense in the dark.

“Oww!” He recognized Malachi’s voice at the same time he recognized his own living room. He reached over and turned on a lamp. Malachi stood there looking at him and holding his mouth with both hands.

“What happened?” Seth asked, pointing at Malachi’s face.

“When you jumped up, your head busted my lip.”

Seth touched his head. His slow-waking brain was just now telling him it was tender. Pieces of the mystery began to clarify in his head. “You kicked me!”

“I didn’t know you were on the floor!” Malachi rebutted.

Finally, Seth’s sleep-deprived brain put the pieces from last night together. After the amazing sex, they had sat on the floor laughing and talking. Malachi hand fed him tidbits, snacking himself as he did.

After they had eaten their fill, Seth cleaned up the food and Malachi excused himself to the restroom. Malachi returned and sat on the soft oversize cream leather couch and Seth took the opportunity to freshen up.

Seth took a little extra time in the bathroom. If Malachi was going to put him ass up over his lap like he threatened, he was going to make sure said ass was tidy. A quick rinse in the shower did the trick.

He emerged to find Malachi had figured out how to access Netflix on his TV. And he was a sci-fi geek. And he was totally passed out. A light snore was just barely audible over the sound track of *Firefly* episode one.

“Sir?” Seth called out quietly. “Malachi?” There was no response. Seth looked at the clock. It was just now nine thirty. Seth smiled to himself and went to sit by Malachi on the couch. Malachi leaned against him and laid his head on Seth’s shoulder. Seth nuzzled him and reset the show to the beginning. If Malachi liked it, he would watch it. Even if it was cowboys in space.

Before the end of episode two, Malachi’s head was nestled in Seth’s lap.

By the end of episode four, Seth felt himself nodding off. Loathe to wake him, Seth executed a deft maneuver, exchanging his lap for a pillow without

waking Malachi. He stretched a snugly blanket up to Malachi's neck and turned off the TV.

Seth lasted about five minutes in his own bed. Dragging his pillow and comforter with him, he lay down on the floor in front of the couch and let Malachi's gentle snores lull him to sleep.

That was about midnight. Seth looked at the clock. It was four in the morning.

"It's four in the morning," he told Malachi, as if it explained everything.

"I have to go to work." Malachi sniffed and checked his hand. "I'm really surprised there's no blood."

Seth blinked his eyes twice, brain still not firing on all cylinders. "I'll make you breakfast."

"Don't worry about it. I normally just grab coffee and a bagel."

"Then that's what I'll make," Seth insisted on his way to the kitchen.

Malachi followed. He slid up behind Seth as he was putting grounds in the coffee maker and wrapped his arms around Seth's waist. "I'm sorry for crashing on you last night. I work long hours and it's physical work. I am wiped most of the time. It's the main reason I said I didn't have time for a relationship."

Seth pushed the start button on the coffee maker and dropped a bagel in the toaster. He turned about in Malachi's embrace. "I had a good time last night and I don't mind that you fell asleep. I just settled in and watched TV. It's what I most likely would have been doing anyway, only without having my brains fucked out first."

Malachi chuckled, "On a Friday night?"

"Yes, 'fraid so," he sighed. "My one exciting venture during the week is heading out to The Woodshed every Saturday night in hopes of seeing my favorite dom make his single-tail dance. One day I was going to get my courage up enough to volunteer."

"I would never have chosen you without talking to your dom first."

"I know that, *now*," Seth replied. "Rumor has it I am under the protection of a very competent and knowledgeable dom. You could see what he thinks."

"He thinks the first time you feel the kiss of my lash it won't be in front of an audience." Seth shivered at the quiet menace in Malachi's voice.

The coffee pot beeped and Seth turned around to pour it into a thermos he grabbed from the cabinet overhead.

“Did you really come to the club to see me?” Malachi asked from behind him, backing off from the embrace to give him room to work.

Not looking up from his task, Seth replied. “Yes, Sir. I’m afraid once I fixated on you, no one else could hold my attention. I would come and lean against the same wall and watch you from the shadows. It’s kinda creepy and stalkerish when you think about it.” Seth grabbed the bagel from the toaster with a napkin and, with breakfast in hand, he turned to hand them to Malachi.

He found Malachi leaning against the counter away from him, a calculating look in his eyes. Seth swallowed, pinned by Malachi’s searching gaze. Perhaps he had been just a little too honest. This was supposed to be “just for fun”. Stalking and fun didn’t go hand in hand. “I...” he began, almost too quietly to hear.

Which Malachi evidently didn’t. “I was thinking,” Malachi said. “If you only go to see me, we can skip that part of the evening and hang out here.” Malachi smiled. “Maybe I could get more done than just fucking you.”

Seth released the breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “I wouldn’t describe the way you fuck me as ‘just’.” He let a lazy seductive grin cross his face. “Sir.”

Malachi crossed over to him and wrapped an arm around his waist. Pulling Seth’s body against his, he took his lips in a passionate kiss, morning breath be damned. He ended it with a look of regret. “Shame I have to work today.” He shook his head. “Waste of a beautiful day.”

Seth looked over at the sliding glass door to the still dark sky outside. He turned back to Malachi, who still was holding him close. Malachi’s gaze never left his face. He smiled when he realized Malachi wasn’t talking about the weather.

“Yes, Sir,” he agreed. “It is.”

Malachi kissed him again, just a quick peck before releasing his waist and grabbing the coffee and bagel from his hands. He looked down at his clothes. He was still wearing the same outfit he had arrived in. “I’m heading home to change. I don’t work on Sundays, is there any reason I shouldn’t bring a change or two of clothes and stay the night again? On purpose this time.”

Seth thought of all the shenanigans they could get up to with an entire free day at their disposal.

“Please do, Sir,” he breathed.

Malachi nodded before walking out the door. “See you tonight.”

The door closed behind him, and Seth threw his arms in the air and let out a “whoop” of joy. To his embarrassment, Malachi opened the door in the middle of it. Seth froze on “whoo...” and Malachi grinned.

“Lock the door,” he commanded.

“Yes, Sir,” Seth squeaked, arms frozen in the air. Malachi smiled and closed the door again. Seth ran over and locked it behind him. He placed both palms over his eyes in chagrin but it didn’t stop his feet from dancing for joy.

Chapter Eight

Seth texted at nine, after he woke from his nap.

Should I cook?

Malachi replied at nine thirty.

There are plenty of leftovers.

Seth looked in the fridge. He didn't think there were plenty of leftovers. Maybe he should cook, or at least have some ingredients on hand in case he needed to cook.

Seth texted at ten from the grocery store.

Do you like chocolate?

Malachi replied at ten thirty. Seth sighed, disappointed he didn't get more chocolate.

Love it.

He texted back.

How about petits-fours?

Malachi replied an hour later.

I don't know what that is, but if it's vegetarian, I will eat it. I am going to be taking a nap from noon to two, I will have my phone off.

Napping on the job?

Seth teased.

Malachi texted back immediately.

Advantage of being the boss. I set the rules.

Seth put the groceries away and set about cleaning his apartment. Since the place was already clean it took him all of an hour. Seth looked at his watch to find it was only one in the afternoon. Malachi wouldn't be over for at least six hours.

Normally, Saturday was spent hanging out with Tasha and company, but Seth had warned her not to come over this morning in hopes Malachi would sleep over. Maybe she hadn't made other plans yet.

"Did he just leave?" Tasha answered the phone, her voice ringing with excitement.

"No, he left a while ago."

"And you're just *now* calling me?" Tasha shrieked.

"He left at like four thirty in the morning."

"Oh," she said, apparently appeased. "Oh! A late night or an early morning?"

"Early morning," Seth replied smiling. "Definitely early morning. Hey, are you doing anything?"

"Not really." Tasha sounded bored.

"Wanna hit the gym? We can gossip on the treadmill." Seth asked, fingers crossed.

"Meet you in twenty!" Tasha replied. "Never mind, make it fifteen!"

Twenty minutes later, Seth strolled in to the crowded gym to find his sister already on the treadmill. When he greeted her, she smiled and pulled off the "out-of-order" sign on the treadmill next to her. Seth ignored the angry glances of his gym mates as he jumped up and started the machine. Tasha handed him a cup of Starbucks.

"Next time give me a chance to mess around with it and pretend I fixed it at least!" Seth whispered loudly.

"Last time we did that, management busted us, dumb ass!" Tasha hissed back. "Besides..." Tasha pointed emphatically and not too discretely at the two young men on the stair machine in front of him. *God, I love my sister.* Seth thought.

"I see." Seth said aloud.

"So... Give me dish sweetheart!" Tasha entreated. Seth did, to the best of his ability. To the amusement and embarrassment of everyone around him, Tasha kept insisting on the gory details and wouldn't rest until she got a blow by blow account. To Seth's horror, someone behind him shouted, "Speak up! We can't hear you."

Seth turned around to see two crazily dressed women in their forties, walking on the treadmills behind them. The taller one, who had a shaved head, had a hand cocked around her ear to emphasize she couldn't hear. The shorter

one next to her, who had salt and pepper dreads swooped up in a knot on top of her head, had one hand covering her eyes in embarrassment at her friend's behavior. Seth started to say something rude when he noticed the two women were holding hands as they exercised together. Instead he smiled and directed the rest of his story in their direction as well. To his continued amusement, he noticed the taller lady kept repeating the story to the shorter one; the shorter one smiling and nodding the whole while. A young blond personal trainer appeared behind them and tapped the tall one on the shoulder. Off they went still smiling and holding hands on to the gym floor.

Seth finished his tale soon after.

A seventyish man got off the exercise bicycle next to his sister's treadmill and sashayed right up to Seth's. "I know I'm being rude, sweetie, but hang on to him! He sounds hot!" Turning, he addressed the young men who had captured his sister's attention. "Good-bye boys, thanks for the show!"

They both turned. "Good-bye Mr. Brenner." They chimed in unison and waved as he walked off. Seth was chagrined to realize they were barely out of high school. It made him feel like a pervert. Then he did the math and realized the age difference between Malachi and himself was not much better. *Something to remember*, he thought.

"Oh my God!" Seth tittered as Tasha snickered behind her hand.

"You know, I think Mr. Brenner has it right," she said.

"Don't I know it?" Seth asked.

"So what's the plan? Are you seeing him again?"

Seth grinned at her and raised his eyebrows. "Tonight!" he squealed.

"You dog! I hate you!" Tasha raised a clarifying finger. "No, I love you. I just hate that my sex supplier is half a world away with an unknown ETA."

"How do you think your husband would feel if he knew you were referring to him as your sex supplier? You may as well have been calling him a whore."

"No," Tasha shook her head, "I only call him that in bed."

"You're a pervert!" Seth punched her in the arm.

"After what I know you plan on letting that man do to you, you have some nerve calling me a pervert."

"Yeah, well they say it takes one to know one," Seth replied with a grin.

“Come on, let’s burn some calories.” Tasha sped up her treadmill to a running pace. Seth did the same. The next twenty minutes were spent by the siblings trying to one up each other on the speed setting.

Both were nearly hyperventilating when twenty minutes passed and they turned it down to a fast walk pace. When breath allowed, Tasha asked, “When are you going to let me meet him?”

“Right after we get married.” Seth replied.

“I’m serious!”

“I am too!” Seth said. “He likes girls too. He might decide he likes the girl version of me far better than the boy version. Easier to take into public too.”

“I am not the girl version of you! We are nothing alike!”

“We look *a lot* alike.”

“We act *nothing* alike,” Tasha countered. “Didn’t you say he likes submissive people?” When Seth nodded, Tasha continued. “Then you can be sure he will *not* be attracted to me. Besides, if the boy is fickle, you need to ditch him at the soonest possible opportunity.”

“I’m not saying he’s fickle, I just want a little more time to convince him he can’t live without me before I risk it.”

“Okay, little brother, I’ll leave you two alone for now. But soon enough I need to meet this guy to see if he’s worth all of the effort you are putting into him.”

“He is definitely worth it,” Seth replied.

“I’ll take your word for now,” she said. “Now let’s hit the shower, go get those kids of mine, and head to the movie. We have time to get some Maggie Moo’s first if we hurry!”

Chapter Nine

Six Months Later

Seth felt the drool he was unable to control seep down his chin. He knelt there on the cream-colored Berber, firmly secured by hemp rope intricately tied about his person.

Malachi had recently decided he wanted to learn Shibari ties that “emphasized the beauty of the male physique”. Malachi was an amateur practitioner of the Japanese art form, but only had experience with female rope bottoms. As a result, Seth had spent a good bit of their shared time these past few months with hemp rope tied and retied about him while Malachi flipped through books on rope bondage spread all over the floor. It was surprising how many books on rope bondage there were.

The line between “play session” and “practice session” was never clear. Some sessions were lighthearted. Malachi would laugh as he contorted Seth’s body into different positions and Seth would giggle like he had in junior high. These were usually just practice sessions. Malachi would experiment with one tie or another until he was done. And that would be it.

Sometimes, during these sessions, the look in Malachi’s eyes would change and his smile would turn just a little sinister. The books would be pushed out of the way and Seth would be treated to some of Malachi’s not so tender mercies.

Sometimes Malachi would begin the session with a dangerous and sexy look in his eye. The only giggling on those nights came from Seth and it was all the nervous type.

The open-mouthed gag Malachi had secured to his head wasn’t uncomfortable exactly, but it did cause him to salivate nonstop. Seth was always disturbed by this.

It was usually very easy for Seth to give up control when he was in Malachi’s hands. Each request, each command, each instruction felt like just another opportunity to prove himself to Malachi. Every one gave Seth the opportunity to prove his happiness, his acceptance, and even his love.

And Seth was totally in love with Malachi.

And Malachi was totally in love with this gag.

Seth realized what he found most disturbing about the gag, was not how it fit. It was the uncontrollable drool. He worried about the unattractiveness of it. Seth, while not vain, was very conscientious of his appearance around Malachi. How sexy could he be with drool running down his face?

"You look absolutely beautiful," Malachi's voice came from overhead. Seth wanted to look up, to see Malachi's face, to see if the expression matched his wondrous tone. Seth knew better. He kept his eyes obediently lowered to the floor. Without being consciously aware of it, he pushed out his chest and arched his back just a bit more, proudly displaying those parts of his body Malachi seemed to love putting his hands on most. It didn't escape Seth's notice that most of the bondage ties Malachi put him in prominently displayed his ass. Malachi seemed almost obsessed with Seth's ass. Seth didn't mind in the least.

Malachi ran a finger around Seth's lips wrapped around the gag. This had the embarrassing side effect of making Seth drool even more. "Oh God," Malachi whispered and disappeared.

When he returned, Seth glanced up to see he was holding a glass of orange juice. Malachi knelt in front of him before dipping his finger in the glass and sliding it into Seth's held open mouth. The shock of sour hit Seth's tongue and his saliva production tripled. Seth felt the pool of it welling in his mouth and briefly, very briefly, was nearly overcome with the desire to try to swallow it, to prevent it from running down his chin. He restrained himself and, knowing it was what Malachi wanted, gently coaxed the pool over his lip with his tongue.

He was rewarded by Malachi's moan. Malachi touched the side of Seth's face with an open hand, his thumb caressing Seth's eyebrow with an unusually gentle touch. Seth risked raising his gaze to meet Malachi's. He was surprised to find Malachi was panting through barely parted lips, his hazel eyes bright and searching. He was gazing at Seth with the most intimate and tender expression Seth had ever seen. Gazes locked, Malachi slid his juice-soaked finger again into Seth's mouth and allowed the drip to fall, perfectly placed on his exposed tongue.

Lost in the depths of Malachi's eyes, Seth forgot to be self-conscious. Now he willed the saliva to flow, pleased something so simple, so easy brought about an expression on Malachi's face Seth would gladly climb a mountain to get. When Seth's tears began, Malachi added a tender smile.

"That's my boy," he whispered, hands combing through Seth's hair. "That's my beautiful boy." Malachi's hands slid down Seth's shoulders to rub his arms

as they lay bound behind his back. "I think this is my favorite tie." Malachi's gaze swept over Seth's body. His fingers traveled along Seth's chest, stopping to torment his proudly displayed nipples and to tickle across his ribs. Malachi slid his hands along the outsides of Seth's bound and spread thighs pausing to slide his fingers under the bands of rope. Cresting the knees, he looked up to meet Seth's eyes. "Eyes down Seth."

Seth resisted the urge to say, "Yes, Sir" as he complied. Experience had taught him trying to speak with the open-mouthed gag only resulted in garbled nonsense.

Now Seth had an unblocked view of Malachi's hands as they traveled a long slow path up the insides of his thighs, his normally rough fingers touching so delicately it almost tickled.

At the apex of his thighs, Malachi wrapped both hands around Seth's painfully throbbing cock. The unexpectedly firm caress pulled the orgasm from Seth without warning. The fiery tide rolled through him, pushing him forward and nearly tipping his immobilized body over. The brace of Malachi's shoulder stopped him from falling.

Malachi wrapped one arm around Seth's shoulders, holding him against Malachi's bare chest as the orgasm ripped through him. With the other, he continued to stroke Seth's cock, milking him and dragging the climax out as long as possible.

When Seth's vision cleared, he was looking up into Malachi's devilishly smiling eyes. Seth groaned in frustration.

"Oh, yes, my lover, you might regret that." Seth let his head drop onto Malachi's shoulder and groaned again. But he really didn't regret it.

They played this game often enough for Seth to be very familiar with the rules. Nothing stopped because Seth climaxed. If his post-coital sensitivity made some sensations harder to tolerate, then so be it. He suffered through anyway.

This pleased Malachi endlessly. He put a great deal of effort into trying to make Seth climax early and Seth did his best to resist, to hold on as long as possible. The painful pleasure of having his prostrate pounded after an orgasm was so overwhelming it drove Seth nearly out of his mind.

But Seth still didn't regret it, for many reasons.

For one, Malachi would be so excited by Seth's discomfort the pounding wouldn't last very long. Knowing Malachi was that turned on by him, for

whatever reason, was satisfying in itself. For another, Seth actually liked doing things that were difficult. The more Malachi asked of him, the harder something was to do, or to tolerate, the more joy Seth felt at doing it. He supposed it was pride, but it was accompanied by such a rush of *gratitude*.

These things were both true, but the biggest reason Seth wouldn't regret his early orgasm was because it hadn't been Malachi's touch that had been his undoing. It had been the almost reverent expression on Malachi's face. And for that look, Seth was willing to deal with any consequence.

"You may get a reprieve tonight," Malachi breathed, the same treasured expression crossing his face again. "I think I need to bury myself in your throat tonight."

Seth shivered and closed his eyes. Malachi stood and Seth glanced up again, his eyes riveted to the slow tease of Malachi unzipping his faded blue jeans.

Patiently Seth awaited his prize, feeling more rewarded than punished. He wished Malachi would take the gag off of him and let him do the work, but he knew it wasn't what his lover wanted. He relaxed his throat as much as he could and waited.

Holding his dick in one hand, Malachi rubbed it along Seth's chin. Caressing himself in front of Seth's eyes, he was almost shiny with Seth's saliva. He rubbed the tip around the ring of Seth's lips before slipping it inside of the gag and pushing it into Seth's throat. He threaded both hands through Seth's hair and grabbed the back of his head for leverage.

Seth swallowed him down on the first stroke. He'd had much practice over the past six months. It was easy now to follow Malachi's rhythm, to time his breaths around him. He hadn't passed out since the first time. Malachi was more careful with him for a while after that and had insisted Seth learn better breath control.

Now Seth knew just how to breathe and just how to swallow when the head was pushing past his esophagus. He knew how to vibrate his voice box with a hum when his lover was buried as deeply as he could be. And he knew, even if his hands weren't bound, not to wipe the drool or tears from his face.

Seth looked up to see Malachi watching his dick slide in and out of Seth's mouth. Their eyes met and the same beautiful expression shone in Malachi's eyes. "Oh... my... Seth!" he whispered. Then, still staring into Seth's eyes, he came, so deeply buried Seth didn't need to swallow.

He held himself there for a moment, before pulling out and dropping to his knees in front of Seth. A quick release of a buckle and Seth's mouth was free of the previously dreaded gag. Now Seth thought, it might just be his favorite. As he stretched out his jaw, Malachi cleaned his face with a damp cloth. Taking Seth's face in his hands, Malachi gazed into his eyes again.

Malachi kissed him.

Gently, tenderly Malachi ate at Seth's mouth, his tongue slipping inside to caress Seth's. When he pulled back to look at Seth, his eyes still gleamed with fervent adoration.

Yup! Thought Seth. Definitely my new favorite gag.

"Are you okay?" Malachi asked. Seth cleared his throat.

"Yes, Sir." It wasn't even a little bit scratchy. Seth was becoming quite the pro.

Malachi was unusually quiet as he released Seth from the ropes. He looked more at what he was doing than at Seth himself. Seth let him be. Seth had learned Malachi sometimes needed to stew before he would be ready to say what was on his mind.

Malachi rubbed his hands over every one of Seth's rope marks, massaging the blood back in to the pinched flesh. As he worked, he pulled Seth off of his knees to sit on the floor. Malachi sat behind him with a bottle of lotion and began rubbing Seth's shoulders. Seth curled them forward as Malachi worked. Being bound with his arms behind his back had left his shoulders cramped and achy. Seth relaxed and leaned against his lover's kneading hands.

"Seth," Malachi began. "When we began this, you agreed you would let me know whenever you played with anyone else."

"Mmmmm..." Seth agreed.

"You haven't, though," Malachi said.

"No," Seth answered dreamily. "I haven't."

"You haven't played with anyone else? Or you haven't told me?" Malachi asked. Seth stiffened.

Oh, shit! Seth panicked. What should I say? Seth's mind raced. If he was only having fun, he should have been dating other people. Was Malachi going to call him out? Was Malachi going to tell him he's too attached? Oh, well. There's no hope for it if he is. I swore it would be the only lie I told him.

“I haven’t played with other people since we met.”

“What about sex? Have you had sex with other people?” Seth shook his head. Malachi continued the massage, bringing his hands up to work the back of Seth’s neck. Seth tried to relax, but his nerves had him strung tight.

“Me, neither,” Malachi breathed. Leaning forward he kissed Seth on the spine. Seth felt the tension flow from him and a warm glow take its place. He had tried not to think about whether or not Malachi had other lovers. He was always at Seth’s place every weekend so Seth had just assumed (hoped) he didn’t. He never dreamed of broaching the subject, so hearing Malachi had been faithful to him for the past six months was an unexpected gift.

“Do you have any prospects on the horizon?” Malachi continued. “Any plans to take on another lover?”

“No,” Seth chuckled. “I have all the lovers I can handle right now.” Malachi laughed and pulled Seth back against him.

“I’ve been thinking. We have been intimate with only each other for six months now, and I have never been fluid bonded with anyone.” Malachi turned Seth’s head to see his face clearly. “I think we should do it.”

“Do what?” Seth asked, confused.

“Let’s get tested! When we get our results, we can ditch the condoms.” Seth blinked at him a few moments. Was Malachi offering him a commitment? For a moment, it was difficult for Seth to breathe. “Listen,” Malachi continued. “I’m not proposing! If either one of us wants to take on another lover later, it’s a simple matter. We just go back to safe sex. But in the meantime, we can enjoy each other without a barrier. I’ve never had that before and I would love to know what all the fuss is about.”

Seth felt his chest deflate. Not proposing indeed! Malachi wasn’t offering a commitment at all! Seth fumed quietly for a minute before the significance of Malachi’s idea registered. Malachi was offering to be monogamous with him officially and to let him know if that condition was going to change. It was certainly more of a commitment than he had now. He would be a fool to say no.

Seth smiled at Malachi. “You’re right. We *should* do it.” Malachi grinned ear to ear and squeezed Seth in his arms.

“Thank you,” Malachi said. “Is there anything about our relationship you would like to change? Ask me now! I’m feeling generous anticipating my first bareback sex.” Seth was pleasantly stunned. Malachi was thanking *him* for

agreeing to be monogamous, had used the phrase “our relationship” without breaking out in hives, and had pointed out that he got to be a first for Malachi for a change! Seth sputtered for a moment.

“Um... well...” he stammered.

“Um, well, Sir,” Malachi corrected, still grinning.

“*Sir*, I was wondering if you were ever going to use the single tail on me.” The grin fell from Malachi’s face.

“I’m not saying you have to—”

“The problem with the single tail is logistics,” Malachi interrupted. “Your apartment doesn’t have enough clearing to swing it, and I don’t want your first experience with it to be at the club.”

“What about your place?” Seth asked.

“My place?” Malachi chuckled. “Yeah, my place has enough clearing. It’s just a disaster.”

“I don’t mind a mess. I could even do some cleaning for you. If you’ll let me.”

“Mess is an understatement. I bought the house as a fixer-upper. It was more than a mess when I moved in. Add the few improvements I have started and not finished and you have a house that’s just this side of condemnable.” Malachi cocked his head. “Actually if the right authority got inside the front door it might be condemnable.”

“Sir, I would love to see where you live.”

Malachi laughed outright. “You won’t be using the word love when you see it but that’s okay. We can go in the morning.”

Chapter Ten

Seth tried not to let his dismay register as he took in the grey peeling paint on the exterior of the craftsman style home in front of him.

“Home sweet home!” Malachi teased, taking him by the elbow and leading him up to the front door.

“Is that you Malachi?” A shrill female voice called out from the porch next door. The neighbor’s house was a near twin of Malachi’s, but the paint on her exterior was a soft yellow, bright and clean, obviously newly painted. It made the non-descript, who knows what color it was originally, gray of Malachi’s home all the dingier.

“Hi, Mrs. Oates.” Malachi raised the hand not dragging Seth forward in a wave. “How’re you?”

“Oh! Malachi!” A bent female frame stood up and waddled over to the railing. “Is he the young man you were telling me about?” Mrs. Oates patted her pockets in search of her glasses. “Let me get a look at him!”

“Not right now, Ma’am,” Malachi laughed. “I’ve got to give him the grand tour.”

“Grand tour!” Mrs. Oates snorted, finally locating her glasses on the top of her head. “Poor thing, watch where you step!” Mrs. Oates padded back over to her rocker. “Grand tour! Did you hear that Sparkles? Mr. Malachi made a funny!” Her voice took on the ridiculous tone people generally reserved for young babies and treasured pets. “Oh does Sparkles want his tummy rubbed?”

Seth was saved from the discovery of Sparkles’ opinion on the matter by a firm tug on his elbow. Malachi led him up the dilapidated porch steps and unlocked the door. Seth’s nose was instantly assaulted by the unlikely combination of fresh paint and mildew.

They walked inside to find a large, if totally unfurnished living room. Seth supposed one could count the mad pile of paint cans and supplies in one corner as furnishings, but he didn’t think they were intended to be. He did notice the drips drying on the outside of the cans were the exact same color as the exterior paint on Mrs. Oates house. He raised an eyebrow at Malachi who simply shrugged his shoulders in response.

"I'm getting rid of the carpet," Malachi said. Seth didn't let the sarcastic reply forming in his mind out of his lips. *Of course* he would be getting rid of the heinous green carpet, paint stains or not.

He followed Malachi into a large dining room that *was* furnished. A large, obviously picked up from the side of the road table dominated the space. It was accompanied by a single office chair that at least appeared to have been recently purchased. The table had worn, scuffed up ornately carved wooden legs. Seth couldn't tell what the top of the table looked like because it was covered in loose sheets of differently sized paper. A receipt spike filled past capacity lay on its side. Seth looked at Malachi with both eyebrows raised this time.

"That's my office for the business." Seth looked back and realized a laptop lay buried near the office chair. "Oh," he replied.

Malachi led him then to a kitchen that was good sized and clean, if seriously out of date. Malachi looked at Seth's face and laughed. "It's not that bad!"

Seth schooled his features into a more relaxed, less horrified state and smiled, "No, Sir, it isn't."

Downstairs was another large room. Seth decided it would make an excellent den or library. Malachi was currently using it as a small engine repair shop. Blowers and weed whackers in various stages of assembly lay strewn about. Seth just smiled and nodded.

There was a half bath at the foot of the stairs. At least Malachi said it was. He kept the door closed.

Upstairs was not much better. The horrible green carpet continued up the stairs and throughout the house. Malachi showed him two bedrooms furnished only with boxes, and a full bath as dated as the kitchen. Malachi paused in the hallway with his hand on the knob of the only door Seth had yet to enter.

"This is the best and worst room in the house," he said and dramatically opened the door.

Seth was completely surprised by a monstrous wrought iron and oak canopy bed. It was beautiful! He walked into the room almost in a daze. He ran one hand along the smooth wooden frame before he realized the room was much bigger than it should be. He turned and discovered Malachi had attempted to remove a wall and turn two rooms into one big one. Attempted as in started, but hadn't finished.

“Oh, my,” he said, staring at the crumbling plaster. It looked like the Kool-Aid Man had just been there, complete with debris on the floor.

“I wanted to make this room big enough to use the whip in,” Malachi explained. “After I got started, someone asked me if it was a load-bearing wall and I realized I had no idea, so I stopped. I wasn’t sure if I should fix it, finish tearing it down, or just pretty it up.” Malachi crossed his arms. “I don’t exactly have a lot of time for home improvement.”

Seth said nothing. He looked at Malachi, then back at the wall, then back at Malachi.

“It’s not that bad...” he began. He looked at the wall again. “It’s...” Laughter finally overtook him and he slapped his hand over his mouth. Malachi glared at him. This only made Seth laugh harder, tears rolling out of his eyes.

Malachi chuckled. “I guess it’s pretty bad,” he agreed. This made Seth snort and collapse to his knees. “That’s completely unnecessary!” Malachi exclaimed.

“I beg to differ!” Seth said.

Malachi joined him on the floor.

“Now you see why I never want to hang out at my place.”

“Yes, I can see why,” Seth agreed, getting his giggles under control. “It’s a great house though, despite all this.” He gestured vaguely with his hand. “These craftsman homes look fabulous when they’re fixed up.”

“Yeah,” Malachi agreed, “but the fixing up part turned out to be more time consuming than I planned.”

Seth sat there for a few minutes, calming himself. “Malachi, let me help you.”

“What do you mean?” Malachi ran a hand along the back of Seth’s shoulders, an absentminded and tender touch.

“You know I work for the family construction company. Did I tell you I am the accountant?”

Malachi shook his head, “I’m not surprised. You’re very smart.”

Seth smiled at the compliment. “One thing I would like to do is organize your ‘filing system’. Your table gives me the professional heebie-jeebies!”

Malachi chuckled. Raising a hand in surrender, he smiled, "Gladly! Knock yourself out."

Seth grinned. "Okay." He leaned against Malachi's rubbing hand.

"And the other thing?"

"Let me... redecorate for you."

Malachi snorted. "You mean, let you fix the mess I made with this house?" Seth nodded yes and Malachi turned silent. Seth simply bided his time and let Malachi stew.

"Okay," Malachi finally said, "but under one condition. I pay all the expenses, any materials and any hired labor."

"What about design decisions and color choices?!"

"Nah." Malachi reached into his pants and pulled out his keys. Removing a key from the ring he continued. "I come home every day for a nap from noon till two, sometimes three." Seth nodded, well familiar by now with Malachi's daily naps. "If you want to be here making noise while I am napping, let me know and I will find somewhere else to sleep. I work every evening till sometimes eight or nine o'clock, depending on the day." Seth's eyes widened. He knew Malachi worked long hours, he just hadn't realized *how* long until now. "I would like to keep that bed," Malachi pointed at the bed with the key he had just freed between his fingers, "I prefer darker colors, and I hate yellow." He offered the key to Seth. "Otherwise, use your own judgment."

Seth looked down at the key in front of him, and then back up at Malachi's face. Malachi swallowed nervously and pushed the key at him again. Seth reached up and gently took it from his fingers.

"Yes, Sir." Seth's voice cracked on "Sir."

The doorbell rang, breaking the tension of the moment. Seth winced. It was a pathetic sounding thing. "Feel free to replace the bell, too." Malachi smiled and kissed him delicately on the lips. "And that noise means Mrs. Oates has been as patient as she possibly can and now simply must satisfy her curiosity about you. But she will provide us lunch in the process so it's kind of a win."

"Oh? Is she a good cook?" Seth asked as Malachi helped him to his feet.

"Traditional old southern lady like her? Hell, yes!" Malachi pulled him into an embrace, holding Seth tightly against his chest and trapping his eyes in an intense stare. "Make sure you get this room done first, Seth. I want to watch you dance."

“Yes, Sir,” Seth whispered.

Chapter Eleven

Seth banged the door to the trailer office closed behind him. Perhaps he should have made two trips. The papers piled on Malachi's dining table took three document boxes to contain them and Seth was attempting to carry them all at once. Tasha hung up the phone and jumped up to help with the load.

"What the heck is all this? And you're late. What gives?"

"I called and left a message letting you know I was running late."

"And... So... That means nothing to me. You didn't say why you were late."

"You're not my boss, Tasha."

"Duh! I just want the skinny! Were you playing hide the salami with Malachi?"

"Freak."

"Prude!"

"If you only knew, Tasha!"

"Well freaking tell me!" Tasha sat the box down on Seth's desk. "And what is all this. Wait, is that a bandage on your arm?"

"Yes, it is. And I will tell all, just let me get settled and get some coffee."

"You get settled. I'll get you the coffee."

"Thanks, Sis." Seth smiled as he situated the boxes around him. A quick check of his agenda for the day revealed he had nothing more important than payroll and some billing to deal with today. He was just booting up his computer when Tasha returned with the coffee.

"Where's my darling nephew?" Seth asked, just now realizing Geordi wasn't camped in front of the TV.

"He was up with a stomach bug most of the night, so he is sacked out asleep on the couch in Dad's office."

"Poor thing! Is he okay?"

"I think so. I'm going to wake him up in a little while and see if I can get some Pedialyte in him." Tasha rolled her office chair over to Seth's desk and sat down. "Now quit avoiding my questions and spill!"

“Okay, Okay.” Seth looked over at her nervously. “Malachi and I got tested this morning.”

Tasha's face went stark white. She placed one hand on her stomach and then the other on Seth's hand where it rested on the desk. “Oh God, little brother. Are you okay?”

Seth blinked at her for almost a full minute until he realized what she must be thinking. “Holy cow, no! Tasha, I'm fine! We just got tested, I don't have AIDS!”

Tasha stared at him with pinched lips as her color slowly returned. To Seth's surprise, she reached up and slapped him upside the head. “The way you said it, of course I would think it's a big deal! Bastard! I love you. Don't fuck with me like that!”

“It is a big deal, Tosh! We got tested, not because Malachi thinks there's any real risk we have HIV, but because he wants to, you know... stop using condoms.”

A big, slow smile broke across Tasha's face. “Now that is a big deal little brother! Hang on.” Tasha picked up his desk phone and dialed a number. “Seth's going steady,” she said with a sing-song before hanging up.

“Who's that?” Seth asked.

The front door of the trailer burst open and his father strode into the office. “Really? You're going steady?”

“Sort of...” Seth said and then slowly explained the entire weekend, leaving out the kinky sex bits.

“Seth, that man's seriously into you.” Tasha tapped her fingers on his desk and sighed.

“You think so?”

“Let's see. In one weekend he suggested monogamy, gave you his key and told you to use it however you want, gave you carte blanche on decorating his house and handed over his financial records?” Tasha gave him a grin. “You'd better start shopping for a wedding dress.”

“Jerk!” Seth thumped the hand Tasha was resting on his desk.

“I have to say, son. I think your sister's right. Those are some pretty heavy duty levels of trust he's showing you.” Patrick rubbed his hands together. “Let's see what we can do to help?”

“What?” Seth looked completely bewildered.

“This project’s doing well and right on schedule. The foremen are starting to get aggravated with me poking my nose around anyway. I wanna have some fun and get my hands dirty! Take me to this boy’s house and let me see what I can do.”

“Ooo! I’m coming too.” Tasha darted down the hallway to grab Geordi before Seth could object.

Seth looked at his father. The man was practically bouncing with excitement. This was a colossally bad idea. He looked at his watch. If they left quickly, he would have just enough time to get them in and out of the house before Malachi came home for his afternoon siesta.

Seth looked at his watch again. It was eleven thirty and he had almost managed to get his family back out of the house. Of course, Geordi had to go to the bathroom just as they were about to exit the front door. Poor kid had been on the toilet now for about fifteen minutes. Seth looked at his watch again and slapped his forehead.

“What time is he due home?” Patrick asked. Before Seth could answer, he heard the door creak open behind him. He turned to see Malachi standing in the front doorway.

Seth was dumbfounded. He stared at Malachi, his eyes wide open, his eyebrows trying to climb into his hairline and his mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for water. Malachi looked at Seth, looked at Patrick, and then looked back at Seth. Patrick just stood there, smiling.

“Seth,” Malachi finally broke the silence. “Why is Dick Van Dyke in my living room?”

Seth looked at his father and broke out into hysterical laughter. Just then, he heard his sister coming up behind him talking to Geordi. “Poor baby! No more French onion dip for you!”

Another crazy burst of laughter slipped from Seth’s lips and he slapped both hands over his mouth to contain it. Patrick looked at his son, and then stepped forward, proffering his hand. “Hi, you must be Malachi. I’m Patrick Barnum, Seth’s father.” More muffled laughter came from Seth’s direction. “This is his twin sister, Tasha, and his nephew Geordi.” Malachi took Patrick’s hand and shook it firmly.

“Nice to meet you, Sir,” Malachi said. “Sorry for the dirty hands, I came here straight from the job.”

“Oh I don’t mind dirty hands, son. In fact, it’s why I pressured Seth into letting me come take a look at the place. I just love home improvement projects. For a while, we ran the occasional remodel job on the side, just to keep me happy.” Patrick shrugged his shoulders. “The problem with remodeling is nobody likes it when I have to put their house on hold to focus on a bigger job.” Patrick chuckled. “You’re not the first person to say I look like Dick Van Dyke. I’m just surprised you’re old enough to remember him.” Another outburst of nervous laughter escaped from Seth.

“I caught him on reruns. My mom was a big fan.” Malachi turned his attention to Tasha. “And you’re his sister? He never mentioned you were twins.” Seth dropped his hands and subtly slid in between Malachi and Tasha. Tasha pushed him out of the way and took Malachi’s hand.

“You’re just as good looking as my brother said you were,” Tasha said with a predatory smile.

Seth hissed and Malachi coughed into his fist. “You’re very kind ma’am. Who’s this fellow?”

“This is Geordi. He’s my youngest. I have a daughter just a few years older than him named Deanna.”

“Fans of Star Trek?” Malachi asked, grinning at her.

“Their father is.” Tasha’s face dropped. “He’s in the army, overseas.” Malachi nodded at this.

Malachi reached a hand out to Seth who responded like a drowning man being flung a rope.

“I hope you don’t mind me getting involved, Malachi. This house has real potential and I would love to help make her shine.” Patrick smiled at Malachi. Seth recognized the distant look in his father’s eyes. His father was already seeing the house the way it *would* be.

Malachi slid his arm around Seth’s waist and pulled him close. He smiled gently at Seth, looking him in the eyes as he replied to his father. “I don’t mind at all.” He turned to Patrick. “It would be an honor to have someone with your experience onboard.” Seth just about melted. Instead of being angry, Malachi was trying to charm his father. Seth felt tears spring to his eyes. He blinked them away before anyone else noticed.

“Well, we have to head back to the office. It’s a pleasure meeting you, Malachi. If you don’t mind, I’ll have some of the guys out to help me get this nasty carpet up. We’ll get started this afternoon.”

“I don’t mind, Mr. Barnum. Please bill me for your labor though.”

“Don’t you worry about it.” Patrick smiled. “We’ll call it a ‘testing day’ present and leave it at that.” Seth covered his face in horror and so missed the blush flood Malachi’s cheeks.

“Yes, Sir,” he said quietly, a small smile gracing his lips. “Thank you.”

Seth looked at Malachi with apologetic beseeching eyes. Malachi kissed him briefly on the lips and brought him in for a hug. “It’s fine,” he whispered. When Seth pulled back, Malachi’s eyes were bright with laughter. “Really,” he said. “It’s fine.”

Seth held him desperately close for a moment before leaving. He waved at Malachi standing in the doorway as he climbed into the back seat of his dad’s truck.

“That man’s way too scruffy for me, bro,” Tasha said.

“I like it,” Seth said quietly, watching out the window as they pulled away. Malachi stood in the door until they were out of sight.

The family drove on in silence for a while. “I think your sister’s right, Seth. I do believe that boy’s in love with you.” A hopeful flutter filled Seth’s chest before he took a deep breath and silenced it. Seth said nothing the entire ride back to work.

The rest of the week was spent sorting through Malachi’s receipts and invoices. Tasha helped. They went through the boxes, entering absolutely everything into an Excel spreadsheet. By detective work and frequent text messages to Malachi, Seth had every paper identified and coded properly in the worksheet. Malachi was really surprised to find out one of his big commercial clients hadn’t paid him in eight months. “That clears up my Saturday afternoons,” he told Seth on the phone after hearing the news. The disappointment in his voice angered Seth. After Malachi hung up the phone, Seth spent an hour creating a stationery for Dorin Landscapers just so he could type up a nasty letter. After reading it, he balled it up and pitched it in the can. Two more tries and he had a much more diplomatic letter stating “due to failure

of payment, services would be temporarily suspended". No sense burning Malachi's bridges for him.

Seth also discovered Malachi was still paying for advertisements. Seth knew Malachi turned down new clients all the time. He made a note to himself to talk to Malachi about either discontinuing the advertisements or hiring help and putting another truck on the street.

Seth's father was in hog heaven. He had been over to Malachi's house every day that week. The nasty, multilayered disaster of carpet had been pulled the first day to reveal totally undamaged original hardwood floors underneath complete with an inlaid frame border. Their beauty was apparent even through the thick layer of grime. Patrick texted endlessly about sanding them down and seeing what they looked like with a high shine. He was already eyeballing the wooden beams crisscrossing the ceilings. They had been painted white at some point in the seventies. Patrick was using phrases like "stripped to their bare bones" and "refinished to their original glory". Several of the foremen had popped into the office just to say how happy they were Patrick was having such a good time and could Seth keep him busy for the next decade or two.

It made Seth more than a little nervous. He worried Malachi would feel overwhelmed by his father's enthusiasm and regret his decision. He worried Malachi might realize his father's repeated use of the endearment "son" when talking to Malachi was a big fucking hint he thought their relationship was more permanent than it was. He worried Malachi might change his mind about the whole "fluid bonding" idea. He worried Malachi was pulling away.

They hadn't had sex all week.

That was normal really. Usually, Seth only saw Malachi on the weekends. He came over Saturday night and stayed all day Sunday. Sometimes he would come over on Friday. He went home every Sunday night and Seth normally didn't see him until the following Saturday. So it made sense they only had sex on the weekends. But with the mess his father was creating at his own place, Malachi had spent every night this week with Seth. This was especially distressing to Seth since they had both been tested on Monday morning and had waited in the office for the results. They had received a clean bill of health. Bare backing was a go!

But Malachi had done no more than cuddle him all week.

Seth pulled himself in check. Here he was complaining that *Malachi had cuddled with him every night this week!* He should be grateful for that. He *would* be grateful for that. He squared his shoulders and left work a little early. He wanted to stop by the Tub Connection and make sure *his* “testing day” gift would be delivered tomorrow.

Chapter Twelve

Seth stared at the claw footed tub monstrosity in front of him. It looked beautiful on the showroom floor. And it was still beautiful. The copper finish gleamed in the bright morning sun. It was just so big! The delivery guys couldn't even get it through the front door, let alone up the stairs! Patrick had sent a couple of the guys to the job site to get the crane. He thought it would be a cinch to pull out the triple window, frames and all, on the second floor and pass the tub through. It would get the tub right into the room it would finally reside in and it wasn't a bad idea. It just took more time. His chances of having the bedroom finished today were diminishing rapidly.

Seth looked at his watch. It was already ten o'clock. Since Malachi had lost a Saturday account, he planned to work through his nap and be done for the day around two this afternoon. He might get the tub installed before then. He most likely wouldn't get the windows replaced by then.

Seth was extremely pleased with his father's work. The wall Malachi had partially removed was not load bearing. His dad had ripped that down on Wednesday. Thursday, he'd had the plumbers out while he recreated the wood beam pattern on the ceiling downstairs across the entire bedroom. With a slight blush, Patrick had let him know the beams were attached "very securely" to joists in the ceiling and could hold a significant amount of weight. Seth had covered his eyes at that point. On Friday, his dad put up a partition wall to create a huge walk-in closet. "Plenty of room for two men," he said with a smile. Then his smile dropped. "Neither of you guys has a shoe thing do you? Cause this would not have been big enough for your mother."

It had been Tasha's idea to turn the tiny closet into a bathroom. Tasha, who at one point had studied interior design, had assaulted Seth with picture after picture of tiny toilets and corner sinks until he had finally relented. He left it up to her to make the final decisions. The room wouldn't match the rest of the house, of course. All the teeny toilets and sinks were of ultra-modern design. But nothing could be done about that. Seth suspected his sister would decorate it in a beach theme anyway. They would simply keep that door closed.

Seth had decided if they were going to be replumbing the house, he wanted a claw foot tub, right there in the master bedroom. The plumber had looked at him like he was nuts, but Seth was okay with that. Maybe he was.

Seth's head jerked up when he heard a shrill scream come from the house. A heart beat later, Tasha ran out of the front door carrying Geordi. Deanna ran shrieking behind her. Two heartbeats later and out runs his dad and the other workers. They looked panicked for second before breaking out in hysterical laughter.

It was right then when Malachi pulled up.

Everyone was still laughing when he walked up. "What's up?" he asked, glancing repeatedly at the tub sitting in the middle of his front yard. The cackling began again.

Seth looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. Malachi glanced at the tub and then back at Seth, raising both eyebrows. Seth shrugged again a little more sheepishly and looked at the ground. Malachi turned his attention back to the giggling crowd. "So, what's the deal?"

It was Deanna who answered, with a finger pointed at his open door she piped, "Mister, you've got a skunk in your house."

Malachi swore and walked inside. Seth could hear him in the kitchen, opening and closing drawers. "There you are!" They all stared in wonder as Malachi strode out carrying the largest skunk Seth had ever seen dangling in front of him. A rhinestone collar twinkled on his neck.

Malachi walked over to the neighbor's porch and called out, "Mrs. Oates?" Realizing his hands were full, Seth ran over and knocked on the door. Mrs. Oates emerged just a moment later.

"Sparkles!" she exclaimed. "Did you go wandering *again*? Bad girl!"

"She was in my silverware drawer." Malachi explained.

"Oh my!" Mrs. Oates chuckled. "Hello again, Seth. Are you guys having a party? Oh! Are those children? Sparkles loves kids." She took the skunk from Malachi's hands. Seth was impressed the little lady was able to carry the obviously obese creature. "But I bet she has had enough adventure for today. How about I put her in her crate and bring over some cake? I just made a hummingbird cake this morning."

Malachi grinned. "You know I love your hummingbird cake, Mrs. Oates."

"Seth," Mrs. Oates said. "Go in my garage and pull out the kiddie pool. You can set it up in your front yard. I bet the kids would love it. Ooo! Get the large umbrella too and my lawn chair. Oh and there is a little table I can use to set up

on, fetch that too would you.” Seth looked to Malachi for direction. Malachi just closed his eyes and subtly nodded yes. “Malachi, you follow me in here and get the cake while I whip up a pitcher of tea. I think I have some paper cups... Oh, maybe some Kool-Aid for the kids.” Mrs. Oates wandered back into the house, cradling the skunk. Malachi leaned over and gave Seth a quick peck on the lips. In his best imitation of Mrs. Oates accent he admonished Seth, “Now hurry up! We can’t have them poor kiddies overheating!” Seth chuckled and went to do Mrs. Oates bidding.

In short order, they had Mrs. Oates set up in the front yard. Surrounded by several folding tables, a lawn chair, a large pitcher of tea, a larger pitcher of grape Kool-Aid, a huge shade umbrella, a cake on its platter, another platter of assorted homemade cookies and her feet soaking in a kiddie pool, she looked like an eccentric southern matriarch set up to receive court. The kids absolutely loved her. They splashed in the pool with her and ate far more of her cookies than their mom would approve of. When Sparkles made an appearance in the afternoon, on a harness and leash this time, the kids absolutely loved her. Evidently skunks are very playful and loving if you raise them right. Mrs. Oates looked happier than a pig in mud, although she did look quite nervous when the crane reached over her to lift the tub into the house.

Malachi didn’t go back to work. He had pushed two of his accounts off until Sunday, telling Seth it just didn’t feel right not to be there when everyone else was. He dug right in and helped as much as he could. Seth was amused to find the man could not hammer a nail to save his life. He successfully managed to keep his amusement from Malachi. Around lunch time, Patrick’s girlfriend showed up with boxes and boxes of food from Sonny’s barbeque. Seth was initially excited until he realized he couldn’t eat any of it with Malachi there. He tried not to give the pulled pork longing looks. Mrs. Oates disappeared in her house only to emerge later carrying a platter covered in little sandwiches. When his dad realized some of Mrs. Oates sandwiches were watercress, he abandoned the barbeque to sample them. Then he got into an intense discussion with Mrs. Oates, who insisted he call her by her given name Beatrice, over recipes and baking techniques.

Seth was shocked to realize his dad was flirting with Mrs. Oates. Feeling sympathetic shame, he did his best to avoid looking at his dad’s girlfriend who was standing right there.

“Do you realize your dad’s girlfriend is flirting with Mrs. Oates?” Malachi whispered in his ear. Seth gasped.

“Dad’s flirting with Mrs. Oates!” Seth and Malachi watched the drama of their elders enfolding in front of them. When it became apparent they were *both* right, they erupted in laughter.

“Go Dad!” Malachi whispered. Seth’s heart warmed to hear Malachi refer to his father as Dad. Then his thoughts took a more melancholy turn.

“Do you miss women?” he asked quietly, turning to look Malachi in the eyes.

Malachi nodded knowingly and put his sandwich down. “I’ve been expecting this.”

“Expecting what?” Seth asked, surprised by Malachi’s reply.

“You’re going to ask me if I need to have a girlfriend. I’ll say no, but you won’t really believe me. You’ll worry for months if I am going to start missing women and it will eat at you.” Seth shook his head in denial, but in truth he already wondered. It already sometimes ate at him. “Eventually, you might even push for me to take on a girl, thinking if you pick out someone you trust then she would be willing to share me and not try to steal me from you.”

Seth gasped. This was not where he wanted the conversation to go. “Malachi I—”

“Seth, listen,” Malachi interrupted. “You will. Or worse, you will start thinking either I have found a girl on the side or I will find a girl on the side. No, listen,” he cautioned when Seth tried to speak again. “I want to explain this to you now in a way that will make sense.” Malachi took a deep breath. “Bodies don’t matter to me. I mean, don’t get me wrong. Bodies are nice. Cocks are nice. Pussies are nice. Breasts and chests are nice. But they’re not important. *People* matter to me. The person matters to me. *You* matter to me. You turn me on because *you* turn me on. The rest is just window dressing.”

Seth threaded his fingers through Malachi’s. “I don’t think I could share you.”

“I don’t think you could either,” Malachi replied. “And I don’t want you to try.” Seth looked up to find Malachi looking intently at him. The air grew thin and Seth felt dizzy. Malachi’s hazel eyes seemed to bore right through him.

“What about ‘just having fun’?” Seth whispered, his mouth suddenly dry.

“I am having fun. Are you having fun, Seth?” Malachi replied, his voice hoarse with emotion. Seth nodded and Malachi kissed him, deeply and passionately, right there in front of everyone.

"Oh, my!" Mrs. Oates exclaimed.

"Get a room!" Tasha yelled. Malachi broke off the kiss with a smile.

"Weren't we working on that?" he asked with a grin. Everybody except Deanna laughed.

The rest of the day was spent sweating and struggling. With everyone's help, the bathtub was installed, bathroom finished, and bed was back in place by four thirty. Seth happily finished cleaning the handprints off the copper sides of the tub and draped a plush towel over the edge. He looked around the room. He still needed to refinish the floors and replace the baseboards. And he wanted to get some blackout curtains for Malachi's siestas. He thought a ventless fireplace might be a nice touch, but he still hadn't made up his mind. But, it was good enough for now. It was actually wonderful.

He went downstairs to see what everyone was up to. Before he finished descending, he heard Deanna's clear piping voice, "Mr. Malachi, are you going to marry Uncle Seth?" Seth quietly palmed his face. *Damn it!* He had worried about his sister giving Malachi a hard time. It never occurred to him her progeny was just as stubborn as she was.

"No, Deanna." Malachi's voice was amused and a little condescending. "Uncle Seth is too young to get married."

"He's the same age as our momma! And she's been married my whole life!"

"You know, you're right." Malachi's voice sounded surprised. He had lost the condescending edge.

"If you don't want to marry him then why did you kiss him?" Deanna persevered. She sounded indignant on Seth's behalf. "Don't you love him?"

Seth heard creaking and assumed Malachi was sitting down on the wood floor. "I never said I didn't want to marry him. And yes, I do love him." Seth stifled his gasp with his fingers.

"I mean love him like *love* him. Like *in love* with him. Not like I love my little brother. You know. I love him, but he's a pain." Malachi chuckled.

"I think all little brothers are pains. But to answer your question, yes. I am in love with him."

"Then why don't you want to marry him?" Her sweet piping voice continued.

"I would like nothing better," Malachi replied, "but Uncle Seth is not ready yet. As a matter of fact, he's not ready to know I am in love with him yet, so let's keep that our little secret." Seth felt tears running down his cheeks. He heard Malachi shifting and the boards creaking as he stood up. "How about we both give Uncle Seth a year or two to figure out how he feels and then we can talk about getting married. Okay? And let's go see what your mother is up to."

"Okay." Deanna seemed mollified. "Can I call you Uncle Mal?"

"If you like."

"Will you pick me up?"

"Okay..." Seth fought back hysterical laughter at the obvious reluctance in Malachi's voice. Seth smiled through the "heave-ho" of Malachi lifting Deanna up and her joyful shrieking giggle. As quietly as he could, Seth snuck back up stairs.

He didn't make it even half way when he heard the front door bang open.

"Seth! Deanna! Daddy!" his sister's voice broke into a sob on the last word. Seth ran down as fast as his feet would take him. Dashing into the living room, he found his sister hugging Deanna close to her, tears streaming down her face, her cell phone clutched in one hand. Deanna was crying as well, sobbing into her mother's neck.

Seth stumbled and Malachi reached out to grab his hand. Seth squeezed it in gratitude.

"Tasha?" Patrick asked. "What's going on?"

"He's coming home!" Tasha smiled through tears. "Alex is coming home!"

Chapter Thirteen

Seth leaned back into the comfort of Malachi's arms.

Tasha had wanted to celebrate, but she couldn't stop crying. Patrick had declared they would celebrate another day and had driven her and the kids home. Seth had cried probably as much as she had. He wasn't able to stop until after she had left.

"Does it bother you I cry so much?" he asked Malachi.

"Not in the least." Malachi smiled. "When you do it during sex it turns me on."

"Really." Seth pulled to the side to better see Malachi's face. "Why is that?"

"Because I'm a sick fuck?" Malachi replied.

"I'm serious!" Seth slapped him playfully on the arm.

"Yeah, me too," Malachi replied.

"Well, you're my sick fuck, so that's okay." Seth laughed and Malachi got quiet. Seth laid his head back against Malachi's shoulder. "Sir, can I show you what I would like to do with the tub." Malachi chuckled his agreement and let Seth lead him up stairs.

"You truly have done an amazing job," Malachi said, looking around the room. Seth started the water running, testing the temp to get it just right. When he was satisfied, he plugged the tub and poured in the sandalwood scented bubble bath he had ordered online. He lit the pillar candles surrounding the tub and turned off the overhead lights.

"I'm not finished yet," Seth replied. He walked over and slowly undressed Malachi. The familiar heat brightened Malachi's eyes. When he was completely naked, Seth tried to lead him to the tub. Malachi resisted, pulling Seth back to face him.

"You next," he whispered.

Seth smiled and ripped off his shirt. He kicked off his shoes and dropped his shorts to the ground. Malachi chuckled at his exuberance.

Seth took his hand again and this time Malachi allowed himself to be led. Malachi stepped into the tub and slid down into the soapy water, groaning as the warm water enveloped him.

Seth grinned and slid a footstool over. He snatched up a cloth and knelt on the stool near where Malachi's back rested against the lip of the tub. Reaching in, he glided the cloth over Malachi's chest, squeezing it to make the water run in rivulets across his skin. Dipping it again, he repeated the process near Malachi's neck.

He lathered the cloth with the bubble bath and using small, gentle, deliberate circles, he scrubbed every inch of Malachi's skin. He started at his shoulders and moved down his chest. When he reached Malachi's waist, he stopped and moved the footstool down to the foot of the tub. Taking Malachi's foot in hand, he massaged each toe with the cloth before scrubbing the rest of the foot and then up the leg. He repeated with the other foot.

When he reached Malachi's hips the second time, Malachi grabbed his wrist. "Touch me Seth," he commanded as he guided Seth's hand to his erection. Seth gladly complied. Abandoning the cloth to float in the water, Seth wrapped his hand around Malachi's cock.

Malachi's hand enveloped Seth's hand, and he directed each stroke. With his other, he pulled Seth in for a kiss. Seth leaned in, mouth slightly parted. Malachi devoured his mouth, his tongue surging inside at the first touch of lips. Seth moaned into his mouth, and then squealed when Malachi pulled him into the tub.

Water splashed onto the floor and a flying droplet smothered one of the candles. Malachi ignored it. Settling Seth between his thighs, he grabbed the floating cloth. Quieting Seth's protest with a finger to his lips, he treated Seth to the same meticulous washing. Or at least as meticulous as he could be without getting out of the tub.

"Tell me about your plans for the rest of the house," Malachi said.

"I thought you didn't care."

"I don't. I just want to hear you talk," Malachi replied.

And so Seth did. While Malachi massaged him with the cloth, he went on about island kitchens, and creating a library. Breathlessly, he talked about creating an English garden in the backyard. He was rubbing his face against Malachi's shoulder and rambling on about not being able to grow lavender in Florida when Malachi wrapped the cloth around Seth's now throbbing cock.

Malachi's hardness was firmly wedged in the cleft of Seth's ass. When he stroked Seth, he ground back against Malachi. Malachi took the lobe of Seth's

ear between his teeth and bit gently down. "Pull the plug," he whispered in Seth's ear.

As Seth reached down and pulled the chain, Malachi reached up and grabbed the hand-painted olive oil dispenser from the candlelight washed shelf. The water drained quickly and made a loud sucking noise as the last dregs disappeared.

Malachi held the bottle of oil over Seth's chest and poured a steady trickle all over him. The familiar scent of Malachi's favorite organic olive oil, the only lube he would use anymore, made Seth shudder with anticipation. Using the other hand to spread the oil about, Malachi coated his body. Then Malachi poured the oil between them.

Malachi set the bottle back on the shelf and set both hands to the task of spreading oil over every reachable inch of Seth's skin. Using both hands to massage his cock, Malachi reached between Seth's legs, his fingers coating Seth's balls and questing lower. Seth arched his hips forward. The oil between his back and Malachi's chest caused him to slide and one of Malachi's fingers slid unexpectedly inside.

"Oh God, Seth!" Malachi whispered. "I can't wait to feel you." Seth groaned and pushed himself farther down on Malachi's finger. "That's it," Malachi hissed. Grabbing Seth by the hips, he lifted Seth in the air to reach between him.

Seth had to wedge his feet against the end of the tub to not slide out. Malachi spread the oil on his chest down to his cock. Holding himself up with one hand, he used the other to guide Seth's hips back down again.

Seth moaned when he felt Malachi press against him. The strange position made it difficult to relax and let Malachi in. Malachi pulled down on his hip and Seth obediently pressed down. The copious amounts of olive oil accomplished what Seth could not. With a sudden pop, Malachi slipped past the ring of muscle to slide halfway in Seth's body.

Seth cried out with pain at the sudden intrusion. He heard Malachi echo his cry in his ear. The wave of pain passed quickly as Seth's body adjusted to the familiar feeling. His head cleared enough and the noises Malachi was making registered.

"Oh, God! Don't move! Don't move!" Malachi sounded in pain. Seth panicked and tried to get up. "Seth!" Malachi yelled, his tone commanding. "Don't. Move!"

Seth froze, impaled less than halfway down on Malachi's cock. Malachi was panting behind him, repeating "Oh, God!" over and over again, and occasionally crying out. "Seth stop moving!"

Seth realized his hands were slipping on the tub. Coated in oil, he wasn't able to keep himself steady. "I'm trying, Sir!" he cried out.

"Oh, Oh, Oh!" Malachi hyperventilated a few breaths. "Fuck it!" he hissed. Wrapping one arm around Seth's hips and the other wrapping around Seth's chest to grab his shoulder, he yanked Seth down into his lap, burying himself to the hilt in Seth's body. Still holding Seth tight, he wailed, pushing deep and roaring his climax in Seth's ear. Seth relaxed, trying not to giggle when he realized all the panic was Malachi trying to hold back an orgasm.

Malachi dropped his head against Seth's back and Seth lost the fight with his giggles. He laughed while Malachi shook his head in shame.

"That didn't go at all like I pictured." Malachi snorted and smacked Seth gently on the head. "Control yourself, minion!" Seth's giggles quieted as Malachi pushed his hips forward and slid out of his body. "Let's see how giggly you are when you feel the bite of my whip." Malachi threatened as he turned the water on.

Seth's giggles died instantly. "Seriously?" he squeaked. "When?"

"Tonight," Malachi replied. "As soon as we get cleaned up and dried off." Malachi grabbed a bar of soap and began to wash the olive oil off of himself and Seth. "It's what you did all this for." Seth was quiet as Malachi cleaned up.

Finally, in a small voice, Seth replied. "I did all this for you."

Malachi grabbed his hair and turned Seth to face him. "I know lover. I was just teasing." Seth nodded, believing the sincerity in Malachi's eyes.

The clean-up took longer than Seth thought it should. Finally, they took turns standing in the tub and rinsing with the handheld shower nozzle. Seth would have enjoyed the experience a lot more if it weren't for the butterflies in his stomach.

Malachi patted him down with the plush towel. Lifting Seth's chin, he looked into his eyes. "You know you can trust me." Seth nodded. He did know he could trust Malachi. It wasn't what he was nervous about.

This was it. This was what Seth had dreamed about all of those nights leaning against his wall at the Woodshed. Malachi walked over to the bed

where he had stashed the whip in his pillow case. As he pulled it out of the case, Seth decided he wanted to do this the right way.

Seth walked over and got on his knees in front of Malachi. When Malachi caressed his head, Seth laid it against his hip. Malachi gently combed his hair back with his fingers. "Come," he whispered and assisted Seth to his feet.

"Let me show you why I love this bed." Malachi led Seth to the foot of the wrought iron bed. Clipped to the bed were fur lined leather cuffs. Malachi removed them and buckled one on each wrist, turning Seth to face the bed. Spreading Seth's arms one at a time, he connected the cuffs to chains hanging from the canopy frame Seth had not noticed before. He stepped back and disappeared from view.

Seth decided right then a very large mirror was going to be installed over the headboard of the bed.

The whip cracked behind him and Seth jumped. He had felt the breeze on his skin but nothing more. Suddenly, he felt the warmth of Malachi's body being pressed into him. Malachi walked his legs closer to the bed until his thighs pressed against the mattress. The slack in the chain left his arms dangling, so he wrapped them about his wrist until he could hold the chain in the palms of his hands.

Malachi threaded his fingers through Seth's hair and pulled until Seth cried out. Malachi's hands, empty now, slapped against the skin of his back, sharp and stinging. A continuous barrage, Malachi's hands drummed against his skin until his entire back buzzed with heat. "Tell me you want this."

Seth didn't hesitate. "Please Master, please! I want to feel the bite of your whip! I want you to mark me! I want to scream for you! Please Sir! I beg you!" Malachi silenced him with a kiss. When the kiss ended, Malachi looked intently in his eyes. "If it is too much, I want you to say stop. Do you understand Seth?"

"Yes, Sir!" Seth promised. "I will." Malachi disappeared behind him again.

This time when Seth heard the whip, it was more of a pop sound than a crack. And he definitely felt the breeze on his skin. Shivering he whispered, "Please, Master. Please Malachi."

The next pop Seth heard was lost in sea of fire consuming his back. He rode the wave of pain, pulling hard on the chains, his mouth locked open in a silent scream. As the pain dimmed, he felt Malachi's warm wet tongue caress his skin right where the whip had bit. Seth groaned as the fire spread from his back to

his cock and his erection surged back to full strength. Malachi chuckled. He disappeared again and again the quiet pop precluded a sea of fire. This time, the pain turned into lust without the assistance of Malachi's talented tongue.

Seth's head swam. "Breathe," Malachi whispered in a voice that carried over the roar in his head. Seth complied and the whip bit him again.

An unknown eternity, Seth stood there. He had no idea how long, or how many strikes of the whip he had received. Malachi's warm presence behind him didn't surprise him, but his removal of the cuffs did.

"Done?" he mumbled, nearly incoherently.

"Oh, yes my sweet. I think that's more than enough for your first time." Malachi chuckled. "You have the potential to be a real whip slut my lover."

Seth smiled sleepily. "Like it," he sighed. "How many?"

"Ten," Malachi whispered and then placed ten kisses on Seth's back. Seth hissed at the sting. "And I have never seen the lash taken so beautifully. Come, love." Malachi turned him around. Pushing Seth back on to the bed. "Scoot," Malachi commanded. Seth groaned when the motion caused his back to rub against the sheets. Malachi chuckled. "You certainly seem to like the pain." Seth was startled by the warm embrace of Malachi's mouth around his cock. Moaning he tried to sit up. He wanted to watch Malachi's mouth work. He was in no state to move. He flopped his head back on the bed and closed his eyes. He opened them to find Malachi's face in front of his. Malachi's hand lazily rubbed up and down his cock. It felt slick, unusually slick. Malachi straddled him. A little bit of fog cleared out of Seth's head when he felt the cleft of Malachi's ass rub against his dick.

"Malachi?"

"Shhh, Seth. Kiss me." Malachi leaned down and claimed his mouth. Still kissing, Seth felt Malachi reach between them and position Seth's cock. Malachi leaned back and Seth was treated to the amazingly beautiful sight of Malachi accepting Seth's cock inside his body. He took his time, easing his way. Seth stared on wide eyed. Finally, his ass rested on Seth's hips. "Another first, Seth," Malachi whispered. He ground his ass in a slow circle that ended in a gasp. "So that's what all the fuss is about." Malachi rolled his hips, rubbing Seth's cock against his prostate.

"Oh God!" Seth groaned when Malachi took his own cock in hand and began to pump it in time with his grinding circles.

“Oh God, is right,” Malachi said. “I’m going to come again! And soon!” And he ground down hard. Now it was Seth who was fighting for control. The feel of his lover’s channel gripping his cock was intense all on its own, but the sight of Malachi masturbating himself while riding him was overwhelming. Seth stared as Malachi’s expression of intense focus dissolved into one of rapture. Malachi drove Seth’s cock as deeply as it would go and held himself there, pumping his cock, once... twice more.

With a yell, his cum shot into the air. Seth watched, riveted as it curved through the air and landed on his chest. The warm splatter of Malachi’s release on his skin sent Seth suddenly cresting over the edge of his own orgasm, roaring his joy to the ceiling.

Malachi leaned over and kissed Seth, tenderly, on the lips. “That was a *lot* more fun than I thought it would be,” he said, smiling into Seth’s mouth. “Be still,” he whispered. *Like I could move*, thought Seth. Malachi slid off of Seth’s body and disappeared toward the tub. Seth was too exhausted to even lift his head and watch him go. Seth smiled when his ears let him know Malachi stumbled for the first few steps. He heard him cross to the tub and then turn on the water. Seth must have drifted off because the next thing he was aware of was a warm cloth cleaning first his chest and then his cock. He gave a sleepy smile. “I didn’t know you were a shooter.”

Malachi chuckled. “That’s because I usually come in you instead of on you.” Malachi left him again. Seth heard him blowing out the candles. He drifted again.

Malachi returned to the bed and rocked Seth by the hip. “Not yet sweetheart, let me see your back.” Seth protested as Malachi rolled him over. “Not bad at all.” Malachi sounded pleased. “It didn’t even break the skin.”

Seth found that hard to believe. It felt like the whip had ripped the skin from his bones. It was so painful, and yet Seth hadn’t wanted it to stop when it did.

“I’m a sick fuck,” he mumbled into the mattress.

“Well, you’re my sick fuck, so that’s okay.” Malachi echoed his words back to him from earlier in the evening.

“Hey!” Seth raised up on his arms. “I didn’t cry!” He looked over his shoulder at Malachi. “Are you disappointed?”

“Not in the least,” Malachi replied. Placing tender kisses along Seth’s back. Seth realized there must be marks because Malachi’s lips unerring found each whip bite.

“It’s just really weird. That hurt more than anything else and it didn’t make me cry.” Seth smiled. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad. I hate it that I cry so easily. It’s just weird.”

Malachi turned the bedding down and Seth slid under them. Spooning Seth from behind, he pulled the covers over them both. He wrapped his arms around Seth and pulled him close. “I don’t think pain makes you cry,” Malachi said, kissing his head. “I think emotion does. I think this hurt so much you didn’t have any room for emotion in your head.”

Seth felt a tear form and slide down to the pillow. This man understood him so much, in so many ways. If only he understood Seth’s heart.

“You know, Seth,” Malachi’s sleepy voice tickled his ear. “I’ve been thinking. You’re putting so much effort into fixing this place up and I know you don’t like the way your sister’s place is decorated. You want to move in here with me? You could redesign one of the bedrooms to just the way you like it. I’m sure your sis would understand.”

Seth’s eyes snapped open, suddenly awake. Malachi was asking him to move in? But in another bedroom? The man made no sense.

“Something to think about,” Malachi’s voice drifted off. Soft snores followed soon thereafter.

Seth rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. Malachi confused him. He acted like he was totally into Seth, but talked like he wasn’t serious. He told Deanna he wanted to marry him but told Seth nothing of the sort. He was acting like...

Seth smiled when he realized what Malachi was acting like. He was acting like someone trying to gentle a wild animal. Seth was being *handled*. Seth was being *tamed*. Malachi was slowly *conning* him into a relationship. Malachi was *lying* to him.

Seth tried to feel indignant. It didn’t work. He couldn’t stop grinning.

“Malachi,” Seth whispered. “I might have to stay in here until my room gets finished. Would that be okay?”

“Hmmm...” Malachi’s gravelly voice was thick with sleep. “Yeah, that’d be nice. You can stay as long as you like.”

Seth flipped back over and snuggled into Malachi, still grinning. It could take *forever* to get his room just right. Especially when *so much* needed to be

done on the rest of the house. Seth tried not to giggle. Two could play this game.

Seth began to fantasize about how Malachi might try to con him into marriage. Silly, romantic scenarios danced about his head. Each one seemed less plausible than the last.

One day they were going to have to be honest with each other. One day, one of them was going to have to take the first leap.

"I love you, Malachi," his voice echoed loudly in the dark room. Malachi shifted behind him and snuggled tighter against his body. Malachi stilled and Seth waited. He realized Malachi had only shifted in his sleep.

Seth lay there, bathed in the warmth of Malachi's body and stared out the window. He hoped he had the courage to tell Malachi tomorrow, to look into those bright hazel eyes and repeat those words.

"I love you too, Seth," Malachi's voice was clear. Seth rolled and looked at Malachi over his shoulder. He was startled to find those beloved bright eyes shone with trapped tears. While Seth watched, one slipped out and rolled down his Malachi's face, disappearing into his beard. Seth reached up and kissed him, offering his heart with the offer of his lips.

Malachi took them both and gave his own in return. It was the sweetest kiss Seth had experienced in his life.

The kiss ended and Malachi flipped Seth back on his side. He sniffed and settled against the pillow. "Now go to sleep," he admonished. Seth smiled.

"Goodnight, Malachi."

"Good night, Seth."

Cocooned in the warmth of his lover's arms, Seth drifted off, visions of weddings and renovations dancing in his head.

The End

Author Bio

Michelle K Grant is a knitting, hiking, kayaking, guitar-playing, song-writing, singing, tarot-card-reading, video-game-playing, book-reading, coffee-drinking, movie-watching, fire-dancing, drum-playing, nature-worshiping, firefighting, dungeons-and-dragons playing, paramedic medicine giving, incest-surviving, pet-hoarding, yarn-shopping, squirrel-raising, Bob-Ross-painting, grandkid-spoiling, snake-keeping, bad-spelling, constantly-forgetting, sexually-deviant, fiber freak. In between all of these hobbies, Michelle is working on her first novel which she hopes to complete this year.

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OMISSIONS

By Taylor Law

Photo Description

A naked man sitting with his knees pulled to his chest and his head hanging down. He is in the middle of an overgrown field, surrounded by woods. Another naked man is crouched at his back, holding his shoulders, and he has his face buried in the back of the seated man's neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My established couple has plans to finally tie the knot and take their relationship into happily-ever-after territory. Unfortunately, life... especially a life that is a completely fabricated lie... always has a way of sneaking up on you. One of my guys is living a lie, living a life that is completely fake and, he thought, his horrid past was buried forever. Just as he is ready to believe that there is a chance for him to move on and live the fairytale, the past comes knocking on his door. And now the bright future is looking really dim.

Would you, dearest author, please run my guys through the wringer, break them down and then help them build their new life together without the lies and the fear so that they can finally, finally be happy, forever.

Tags: Angst, abuse, graphic violence, dubious consent, tearjerker BUT with a HEA

Sincerely,

Susan65 :-)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, thriller

Tags: abuse, angst, criminal, law enforcement, non-con, tearjerker

Content Warnings: graphic violence; forced sexual favors; mentions of sexual assault, including underage

Word Count: 22,826

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Author's Note

Dear readers, *Omissions* was an enjoyable challenge for me to write. It is quite different from other things that I have written in the past. I'm thrilled with the way it turned out. It allowed me to expand and grow. I wanted to throw out a little warning for you. If you have any triggers, please be careful reading this story. It has some dark moments. People who read and enjoy dark books may not think so, but some others may not be able to handle them. I don't want anyone to be hurt.

Thank you, Susan, for the prompt. I hope you all enjoy the story as much as I did.

OMISSIONS

By Taylor Law

Chapter 1

THE DISTINCTIVE sound of skin slapping skin reverberated around the room two seconds before pain radiated up Caleb Stevens's jaw and through his right eye. He shook his head a few times to clear away the stars, and then winced when Mr. Psycho violently wrenched him upright again by his hair.

The same psycho that had kidnapped him and tied him to this damn chair.

The same one that was now holding a knife to his throat and adding just enough pressure to make Caleb freeze, but not enough to do any real damage. Even so, he could feel a warm trickle of blood run down the side of his neck as the cold metal bit his skin.

"Ah, ah, ah," the man said in a singsong voice. "Look at him. Isn't he beautiful?"

Caleb couldn't help but do as he was told and glared at the main attraction of his nightmare. Reflexively, he tugged at the bonds that held his wrists to the back of the wooden chair and flinched when the sharp steel at his neck dug deeper.

Directly in front of him was the love of his life, his fiancé, Jake Thomas. The one person he thought he would spend the rest of his life with, on his knees with another man's cock in his mouth.

"That's it, boy! Give it to him good."

And he was. Jake was giving that blowjob everything he had.

A sob tore up Caleb's throat and came out muffled by his clenched lips. The sound was loud enough that Jake heard it and glanced his way. When they locked eyes, the tears that Caleb had held back overflowed, trailing down his face to drench his torn and bloody T-shirt.

He didn't know how they got here. Everything was so perfect between them, but then maybe that should have been a clue. Nothing in life was perfect, or not for long at least. Fate, that crazy bitch, had a way of fucking it all up.

Two weeks ago, the future had looked so bright. Caleb had never been so content, so safe, in love... happy.

Two weeks ago, Caleb was still living in complete ignorance.

Now that everything was out in the open, that picturesque life Caleb had been living fell off the wall in a blistering crash, shattering into a million tiny pieces. Humpty-fucking-Dumpty.

Broken. Everything was broken: his relationship, his life, his very reality. He didn't know of anything that could put it back together again.

A low moan broke him from his momentary pity party, and he focused on the scene in front of him again. Jake had closed his eyes and had his head angled slightly back. He was rolling the guy's balls in his hand while the brute face-fucked him. As he watched, Jake gagged and jerked back. Once he'd caught his breath, though, he was back at it with a fierceness Caleb had never seen. Jake was a man on a mission.

"You like watching, don't you? Don't you?" Psycho man barked. Jonathan Harboro had spewed a running commentary for the past five minutes straight, like he wanted Caleb to involve himself in this little game. Or maybe he just liked the sound of his own voice. Either way, Caleb wasn't playing.

He ignored the bastard, which earned him punishment, of course.

"Answer me!" Jonathan screamed before releasing him, only to hit him in the temple with the handle of the knife. Agony consumed him, making it feel like his head was going to explode in a shower of gore. He blinked as the stars returned, this time followed by a lovely white fog.

Caleb knew he probably had a slight concussion from the treatment he'd suffered thus far. Another hit to the head and he would be out, and that wouldn't do. If he was going to die, Caleb wanted to face death head on, not on his back like some pussy.

He took several deep breaths, having to sniffle back some phlegm from the tears he'd shed. He'd be damned if he would give this fucker any more. Concentrating on his breathing, and what he was going to do to his captor as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he was able to fight off the blackness.

Once his head was clear, he glared at Jonathan, letting all of those murderous thoughts show dark and deadly in his eyes. The response he got was unexpected and not reassuring in the slightest.

Jonathan, psycho that he was, threw his head back and roared out a maniacal laugh that sent chills through Caleb's body.

After a few minutes, he calmed himself enough to talk again. "You've got some balls, don't you? You and me, we are going to have so much fun together." He petted Caleb's sweaty blond hair.

Caleb jerked his head and ducked, attempting to shake him off.

A loud groan caught their attention and they both looked over to see the brute finishing off down Jake's throat.

Jake.

Caleb was here because of Jake. He didn't even know Jake. Not at all, or not like he thought he did. Omission after omission, compounded by sidestepping and covering, all boiled down to one glaring thing: everything he knew was a lie.

Two weeks earlier

A car door shutting pulled Caleb's attention off the news, and he automatically looked at the door, like he could actually see through it or something. He glanced down at his watch to see it was nearing eleven at night, and only five minutes had passed since the last time he performed the same routine. This time was different, however, because Kira, their yellow lab, jumped up from her perch at his feet and ran to the window, moving the curtains out of the way with her nose to look outside. Her tail started swaying back and forth before she hopped and darted over to the door. She squatted, gave another little jump, and then her whole back end shook along with her tail. The sound she was making was not her typical bark for a stranger but more like she was trying to talk.

It was easy to know what that meant—Jake was finally home.

Actually, Caleb could understand Kira's reaction. Part of him wanted to do a full-body jig too. As it was, his heart picked up speed, thumping hard against his ribs.

Had it been just a week? Man, it seemed far longer. The bed was cold. Hell, the whole house was cold when Jake went on a business trip.

When he heard keys jingling, he realized he probably should have gone to open the door instead of sitting there, staring at it like a dunce. He stood and walked over, pushing Kira out of the way with his knee, but the doorknob turned before he could touch it. He backed up, pulling the dog with him by her collar. The door opened and there he was, Jake, the love of his life. Caleb's breath caught and his dick stiffened.

One would think that a year living with the same person would tamp down some of these feelings. That he wouldn't still have this reaction at just the sight of Jake, but he did. He probably always would.

"Hey, handsome. God, did I miss you!" Jake grinned, shut the door, put his duffle bag on the ground and opened his arms. Caleb let go of the dog collar to go to him.

Big mistake. Kira jumped up in Caleb's place, causing both men to laugh.

"You better say hello to your girl first. She missed you too."

Jake pushed the eighty-pound animal to the floor and followed, squatting to face her. He was still smiling, and Caleb knew his face was a mirror of that expression because his cheeks were starting to hurt. Kira must have thought kisses were in order, because she started licking Jake, bathing every part of him she could reach, until he made spitting and "bleck" sounds, and pushed her away.

"Ooo, you got tongue." Caleb snickered.

Jake stood while simultaneously wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yeah, definitely not the kind I want though. C'mere." He opened his arms again and wiggled his fingers.

"Nuh uh. No way I want to put my mouth there, after where it's been." Caleb shook his head and pointed down at the dog, who was now contorted in a circle with her leg lifted, licking herself.

Jake's shoulders shook in silent laughter, and his brown eyes sparkled. "Come here."

"No. No, thank you. I'm good. Really." Caleb started backing up toward the couch with Jake stalking him.

Jake lifted the neck of his navy polo shirt and swiped it over his mouth. "There, now come give me a kiss."

Caleb chuckled, shook his head, and kept backing up, his hands outstretched in a "keep away" position. He was only doing it now because the look on his lover's face was priceless. Jake was in full-on hunting mode, playful. It made Caleb's heart swell and warmth travel his body. It also made his dick hard. Well, harder.

Suddenly, Jake stopped walking, so Caleb did too. Then Jake smirked, and Caleb had a second to think "uh-oh" before he was tackled onto the couch. They landed half on the brown leather sofa and half on the floor, but Caleb was too busy laughing to care.

He tried to get away for about two seconds before he succumbed. There's nowhere he would rather be than in the arms of the man on top of him right now.

He looked up and studied Jake's face. Chocolate eyes that still held a hint of amusement in their depths. Wavy hair, so dark it was almost black. It was in

need of a cut, curling around his ears and neck. Lush, plump lips he couldn't wait to taste. Dark hair on his jaw where his five o'clock shadow had turned into scruff.

He was the most beautiful thing Caleb had ever seen. "Hi," he whispered.

Jake's eyes softened. "Hi, babe. God, when you look at me like that..." Jake crushed their lips together for a few seconds before backing off and gentling the kiss. It became sweet, succulent, an expression of the feelings that were coursing through Caleb's body.

Caleb lifted his hands against Jake's grip until he was free and could wrap his arms around Jake's broad shoulders. He pulled him in close and squeezed, hugging him tight. Jake groaned against his mouth and flexed his hips, grinding against Caleb's thigh for a moment and then breaking the kiss.

Jake leaned his forehead against Caleb's. "I need a shower. I feel gross, and I'm exhausted. I just missed you, so much."

Jake gave him one more sweet peck on the lips before standing and helping him to his feet. "Has Kira been out?"

"Yeah, I just let her out about fifteen minutes before you came home."

"Okay. Why don't you get in bed? It's late, and I know you stayed up to wait for me. I'll go grab a quick shower and meet you there."

"Okay. Hurry though."

"You got it." Jake smiled and popped him on the butt as he walked toward the bedroom.

Caleb started to strip as soon as he hit the hallway. He was exhausted, now that he thought about it. He'd been so anxious to have Jake home that sleep hadn't entered his mind, but now he was crashing. Dammit, he wanted to have more time with Jake, but he had a feeling that as soon as his head hit the pillow, he'd be out like a light.

He toed off his shoes and kicked them into the closet, dropped his jeans and underwear in one go and flung them toward the hamper. Hopefully they made it in, because he didn't care enough to look. Once naked, he pulled back the bedding and crawled in. The cool sheets felt wonderful, and he cuddled in deeper, though he tried to keep himself awake. He wanted at least one more kiss first. He heard the shower running, and the combination of the soothing noise, the knowledge that his Jake was home, and the comfort of the bed lulled him to sleep.

Chapter 2

CALEB WOKE slowly, the bright light of morning turning his closed eyelids red from the inside. He blinked a few times and reached over toward Jake's side of the bed, but it was empty and already cold. Disappointment washed over him. He could smell coffee brewing, so he knew Jake was in the kitchen, but he'd hoped for some fun.

He glanced down at the hard-on tenting the sheet. "Sorry, buddy. Looks like you're going to have to wait."

He swung his legs out of the bed, got up, grabbed some clean boxers and headed toward the bathroom for his daily routine. The triple "S"—shit, shower and shave. Once he felt somewhat human, he walked toward the kitchen to get a hit of caffeine. He was not a morning person, but Jake was up at the butt crack of o'thirty every day. The plus side to that was Caleb usually had coffee waiting for him when he finally dragged his sorry ass out of bed.

When he turned the corner, he came across a scene right out of his favorite wet dreams. Well, sort of. Jake was only in sleep pants, hung low on his hips. His long, lean back and broad shoulders were bare, the contours of his muscles flexing. He was bent in half, giving Caleb a glorious view of that luscious backside. Yeah, it was only so he could feed the dog, but semantics. It was still a sight for sore eyes.

Jake was stirring wet food into the dry. Why he didn't do that on the counter, like Caleb had suggested numerous times, was beyond him. But Caleb took full advantage of that now. He walked up, positioned himself behind Jake, got a good hold on his hips and ground his crotch into the crack of Jake's cheeks. His softening morning hard-on jumped back to life, and he groaned.

Jake started to fall over but slapped his hand on a cabinet door to stop himself. He looked over his shoulder and smirked. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah. Something is up, and I need you to take a look at it for me."

Jake rolled his eyes and straightened. "Oh, that was bad." He turned around and pulled Caleb to him for a kiss. "Good morning. Are you ready for your coffee?"

He turned away and reached up for a mug, elongating his back and making the muscles shift. "I'm ready for something all right."

Jake started laughing. "You are such a horn dog today."

"Today?"

"Okay, so you're a horn dog every day." He said it like it was a bad thing, but Caleb could see he had his own tent in his pants.

Jake lifted his eyebrow and went to get the milk out of the fridge. Caleb sighed and sat down on one of the kitchen stools at the counter. He got the subtext, "not right now, but if you're a good boy, soon."

"So, how was your trip?"

Jake topped off his own coffee and leaned against the counter, sipping. "It was okay. The shipment of parts was delayed for three days. Could you imagine? I told them that if this was going to be a habit, we were going to change our supplier. Finally, we got everything calmed down. I think the new manager is going to do well. He was on top of it."

Jake was a sales distribution manager for a major auto-parts chain. It was a good position, but one where he had to travel often to check in on the other stores all over the state.

It sucked when he was away, but there was no way that Caleb would ask him to change professions for him. Jake liked his job. He was good at it and well respected.

"How was everything here while I was gone? Did you ever catch that guy you were after?"

Caleb was a homicide detective with the Sheriff's Department. Young girls kept going missing and then showing up dead. Their main suspect had disappeared off the face of the earth, and they were out of leads. He sighed. "No. He's just gone. We've talked to all of his known associates, and either they're covering for him, which I wouldn't put past them, or he really is gone. With some of the things he's into, I wouldn't be surprised if he shows up in the Indian River here soon."

He put his mug down and ran a hand through his still damp hair. "The shitty thing is another girl went missing two days ago. Get this, she was taken from her bed, or that's what it looks like. Fucking sixteen years old." He shook his head and looked Jake in the eyes. "We have no leads. None."

Jake looked like he'd seen a ghost. His face had lost color, and his eyes were glazed over, staring at nothing.

“Jake?”

He shook himself and gave a very unconvincing smile. “Sorry. That’s just... It’s horrible. That poor girl’s parents.”

Caleb stared at Jake for a few seconds longer, checking to make sure there was nothing he was missing. Some people couldn’t handle the violence of this world. Jake was one of those people. He was good, through and through, and had a tendency to see that good reflected in others, whether it was there or not. It scared Caleb sometimes, because he worried that Jake would learn the truth the hard way. The thought made a shiver skate down Caleb’s spine.

Once he saw Jake’s color return, he picked up his mug and took another lifesaving sip of the bitter brew. “Yeah. I just wish we could do more. I don’t know what, but... something.”

Jake’s warm hand on his arm brought his gaze from the depths of his cup. The look on Jake’s face was intense. “Caleb, you do all you can do. You push yourself beyond sleep, beyond hunger, beyond everything, to try to save people. Don’t torture yourself. It’s people like you who make this world a good place to live in.”

Heat traveled from Caleb’s chest, up through the top of his head and back down, before finding a home in his heart. He leaned over and gave Jake the gentlest of kisses. “Thank you.”

Jake smiled and backed away, visibly trying to lighten the heavy mood. “So what’s on the docket for today? You’re off, right?”

“Of course I am. We have our poker game with the boys tonight. Besides, I want to spend time with my guy. He’s been away for a week and I missed him.”

“What guy is this?” Jake gasped and plastered a humorous surprised expression on his face. “You have a guy? What the... how?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s a hot little thing. Younger, and extremely sexy. He would look like a swimmer if it weren’t for the body hair.”

Jake grinned mischievously. “So, we have all day to ourselves before the poker game?”

“Yes. What did you have in mind?” Caleb’s now deflated dick had an idea and started to thicken.

“How about we go to the farmers’ market? I’m in the mood for your guacamole.”

Caleb groaned. *Aaaand, that's a no-go. Abort. Abort.*

"What?" By the look on Jake's face, he knew exactly what.

"You're killing me, you know that, right? It's been a week, seven days, one hundred and sixty-eight hours, a shit-load of minu—"

Jake shut him up with a kiss.

When they broke apart, both of them were panting. Jake smiled in that sexy, "do-me-now" way he had perfected, and Caleb thought he'd won; they were going to get it on. Well, he thought that for about three seconds, because as Jake walked toward the bedroom, he called out over his shoulder. "Come on. Get a move on, or we'll miss all of the good stuff."

"Killing me," Caleb mumbled. He adjusted himself and followed Jake into the bedroom to get dressed. He really would do anything for the man, even at the cost of blue balls.

Caleb was squeezing the Florida avocados, trying to find one that felt like it would be a good consistency for guacamole without being all brown in the middle. They had already picked out some beautiful, vine-ripe tomatoes and some sweet onions. They just needed to get the avocados and some limes and they would be good to go.

It was May, and already the heat was stifling. The sun shone bright and clear with very few clouds in sight. The humidity was probably close to one hundred percent, and it was only ten in the morning. By one, it would be hard to breathe.

Even so, he was having a good time. He was relaxed, and Jake had him laughing. He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed these moments. Yeah, the sex between them was crazy-hot, but the down times, when they could just be themselves and hang out—those were the best. He was in love with his best friend. There was nothing better in this world. He was a damn lucky bastard.

He looked over at Jake, who was staring at the Hass avocados a few feet away. Jake must have felt his gaze, because he glanced up and smiled. "I think these will probably be better. They're softer."

"You always say that."

"I'm always right too. Besides, I like the lumpy ones better."

"They're Hass avocados."

“Yeah, they are boss.”

“No.” Caleb chuckled. “Hass. Say it with me. Hhawss.”

“Shut up, or I’ll ‘haws’ you, buddy.” Jake threw the empty plastic bag in his hand. It hit Caleb’s shoulder before fluttering to the ground.

“That’s what I was trying to get us to do this morning, but you decided you wanted to come here instead.”

Jake laughed, grabbed Caleb by the arm and pulled him into a headlock. “Don’t worry. We’ll get to that. I just wanted to have some fun today, and if it was up to you, we would have never made it out of the bed.”

Well, that was true.

Jake started to give Caleb a noogie, but Caleb stopped him by poking a ticklish spot just under his ribs. He let go immediately, and still chuckling, backed away. Caleb straightened and tried to pat down his hair, knowing it was probably standing in all directions now.

“You turd.”

“Ha! Me? What about you, with that—” Jake stopped mid-sentence and froze. He didn’t even blink. He was staring at something over Caleb’s shoulder. When Caleb turned to look, he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. People out shopping; kids hopping around, begging for snow cones; little old ladies chattering—the normal weekend activity.

Caleb looked back at Jake and grabbed his arm. A whole body tremor shook him. His eyes were wide, and there was fear written in the lines of his face.

“Jake? What is it? Jake!” Caleb looked around again, trying to ascertain what would cause his fun-loving man to look so vulnerable.

All of a sudden, Jake seemed to break his trance. “I’m good. Let’s just get the rest of the stuff and go.”

He wouldn’t meet Caleb’s eyes, and his movements were jerky. “What’s going on? What was that?”

“Nothing.” He flinched away from Caleb’s hand. “Let’s just go, okay?”

Oh, that was bullshit. He went from laughing to being an asshole in a nanosecond flat. This wasn’t the time or place for a confrontation though. There were too many people around to gawk, and something had spooked Jake. Caleb needed to grab their shit, get them home and then find out what was wrong so he could fix it.

Caleb snatched some Hass avocados and limes, paid the vendor and then headed toward the parking lot. He tried to reach out for Jake's hand, but the man was having none of it. He strode toward the car like he was trying to escape. *Not good.*

The ride home was silent and stilted. Jake stared out the window the whole time, but it didn't look like he was actually focusing on the scenery. Whatever he was seeing was in his head.

Caleb hadn't seen him like this in a long time.

For months after they first got together, it seemed Jake was always looking over his shoulder or lost in thought. That scene they had in the kitchen wouldn't have happened even a few months ago. Jake would have freaked had Caleb come up behind him then. He tried to laugh it off, but Caleb knew something bad had happened to Jake in his past. He didn't know if it was childhood abuse or an abusive relationship, but whatever it was, it had damaged the physical trust most people had ingrained in them.

Which made it all the more remarkable that Jake was able to see good in people. Everyone liked him, and he was welcoming and inclusive. "The more the merrier" was his motto. He was always inviting people over for dinner or to the poker game, some of them virtual strangers. It was like he didn't think twice about the bad things that could happen.

But when it came to physicality, that was a whole other story. Caleb would never forget their first fight. They were arguing, and Caleb spoke with his hands. Jake jumped about a foot off the ground and cringed into himself. They both wound up in tears after that, but the reaction wasn't discussed in depth. Caleb just made sure Jake knew, without a doubt, that he would never lay a hand on him in violence.

Those times had slowly become more infrequent, until they stopped altogether. But it was during those first few months Jake would get into these moods. He would stare at nothing but seem to be seeing everything inside his mind. And whatever he was seeing was not good.

Caleb knew better than to try to confront him though. Whenever he'd tried to in the past, it seemed that Jake pulled deeper into himself, creating a wall between them that would sometimes take weeks to heal. He'd just got his Jake back from a weeklong separation. Call him selfish, but he didn't want to taint that.

Jake skulked into the house and then looked around like he was lost. Caleb didn't understand what was going on, but something was really bothering Jake, and he couldn't stand to see him that way. He had to try to help.

He walked over and put a hand on Jake's arm, but Jake jerked away. "Hey. What's going on? Talk to me."

Jake seemed like he was trying to decide what to say, but then just sighed. "Sorry. I'm tired. I think I didn't get enough sleep, and my body's worn out." He walked over and kissed Caleb's forehead. "I'm going to take a nap. I'm sure I'll feel better when I get up."

He patted Caleb's shoulder and shuffled toward the bedroom, watching his feet the whole time instead of where he was going. Something had set him off at the farmers' market. They'd lived together for almost a year now. Caleb knew all of Jake's moods, and this was not how he acted when tired. He looked like he'd seen a ghost and was acting skittish, almost like when their relationship first started.

Caleb realized he was still standing there, staring at the door with the plastic bags of vegetables still in his hands. He sighed and strode over to the kitchen counter to set them down. The one-eighty turnaround from the happy Jake of this morning to the shadow of that man from five minutes ago was torturing him. He knew he had the habit of overanalyzing things. That was what made him a good cop.

As he started to prepare the guacamole and snacks for the poker game, Caleb tried to piece together what he knew of the situation. He knew he shouldn't do it—it was a good way to destroy a relationship—but since he cared about Jake, and there was no communication going on, he felt his hands were tied. There wasn't much to work with, really. Jake was skittish and didn't like to be surprised. Sometimes he looked over his shoulder when they were in public together. He didn't like to sit with his back to a room, but he didn't want to sit side-by-side either.

Caleb just didn't know what to think. Did Jake not like to be seen in public with him? Was he afraid of what people would say to a gay couple?

He didn't seem to be in the closet, but now that Caleb thought about it, he'd never met one of Jake's coworkers. Not one friend, or any family. Jake said he didn't have family, that he was the only one left. Caleb knew it was a possibility, but it was strange that Jake had no one in his life.

Caleb heard a noise from the bedroom and glanced up from the bowl of delicious green goop he was stirring. It sounded like Jake was talking. He hadn't had a nightmare in months, but after the way he was acting, Caleb was compelled to check on him.

He wiped his hands on a kitchen towel and walked over to the door.

"Why aren't you calling me back, dammit. Listen, I think I saw..." Jake's voice was drifting away and coming back, as if he was pacing the room. Even though Caleb knew it was wrong, he stepped closer to listen.

"That's not supposed to happen. I need to know what's going on. Call me back. Agh!" There was a crash on the other side of the door, so Caleb opened it.

Jake was standing in the middle of the room, combing his hand through his hair. A phone Caleb had never seen before was on the floor, a little crack splitting its screen.

Caleb frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry."

He picked up the phone. "This is new. Is this your work phone? Damn, it's a piece of crap. You'd think they would provide something better."

Jake came over and snatched it out of Caleb's hand. "Yeah. You'd think."

Caleb studied Jake's face while he swiped at the screen of the junk phone with his thumb.

"Are you sure you're all right? You know, you can talk to me about anything, right?" Caleb walked toward Jake, but before he could make it, Jake pulled back the covers and climbed into bed.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Caleb gave a short nod. *Alrighty then. That went well.*

"Get some rest. Love you."

"Love you, back."

Chapter 3

THE DOORBELL started ringing at six on the nose. Jake strode out of the bedroom with his hair still wet, right after the first guests arrived. Caleb didn't have the chance to talk with him, but he did look better. His cheeks were flush from the heat of the shower, and that crooked smile he adored was back in place.

Their next-door neighbor, Matthew, was there, along with a couple of the guys from the force. Caleb liked Matthew. He was a congenial older man with silver hair at his temples and a white goatee. He and his much younger wife had moved in with their four-year-old son several months ago. They lived catty-corner to Caleb and Jake, and with no fence, it seemed as if they shared one big back yard. Matthew was a mean gardener and was always bringing them something or another—vine-ripe tomatoes, a cucumber the size of a grown man's arm, some oranges from his tree. He was always very nice and had a giving soul. Jake had asked him over for poker two months ago, and he was a regular there every week since.

"What's up, guys? I brought your favorite." Matthew held up a twelve pack of Stella Artois, Caleb's beer of choice. "You know these things cost more than some people's cars, right?"

"Who do you know with a car that costs under twenty bucks?" Caleb grinned and took the beer to put it in the fridge.

"Hey, it could happen."

"Definitely not to you. What are you driving around these days?"

Caleb could swear the man blushed, and then he mumbled something.

"What was that? A Ferrari? No, it was a Firebird, right? Fully refurbished and what color? Pink?"

That time Caleb got a glare. "I don't drive no pink car. Shut your mouth."

Jake started laughing, and it took everything for Caleb to keep a straight face. "What? I could have sworn it was pink?"

"It's dark purple, you little shit."

Caleb waved his hand. "Same thing."

When Matthew went to punch Caleb in the arm, he was ready for it and dodged, chuckling the whole time.

“Hey, now. No touching. You know I’m taken.”

“Yeah, like I’d want to touch that hairy ass.” Matthew gave a mock shiver.

Scott and Jason came into the kitchen to get a refill and stopped dead. Scott smirked, which never meant anything good. “Umm... why are you talking about Caleb’s ass? I didn’t know you swung that way.”

“I know, right? I get first dibs.” Jason smiled at Matthew and started shifting closer to him.

Caleb couldn’t stop chuckling long enough to comment. The look on Matthew’s face was priceless.

“Umm...” Matthew sputtered.

Jake saved the man. “Don’t have a coronary, Matt. Jason’s fucking with you.”

“Oh. Right. I knew that.” But it didn’t look like he knew anything of the sort.

Caleb let out another burst of laughter before clapping his hands. “Okay, let’s get this party started.”

The men all gathered around the table, and Jason dealt the first hand. They were all verbally sparring and dissing each other. Except Jake. He just sat there with a half-smile on his face, picking the label off the beer bottle. After an hour of this, Caleb found it hard to concentrate on the game because he was so focused on Jake. Before he could say anything, Jason did it for him, and it being Jason, there was no filter on the words.

“What crawled up your ass, got stuck, and died? Wait, maybe it wouldn’t have gotten stuck, being as you use that hole so much. So, let me rephrase: What crawled up your ass, passed out from the smell, and died from suffocation or gas inhalation?” Then, of course, because it was Jason, he found himself hilarious and started laughing, smacking the table and repeating, “Get it? Gas inhalation?”

“Nice, Jay.” Caleb rolled his eyes.

“He has been awfully quiet tonight.” Matthew studied Jake.

“Nothing’s wrong, and my digestive system is just fine, thanks. I’ve been working like crazy, and I’m dead on my feet.” Jake stretched his arms over his head, showing a good portion of his lower belly and happy trail.

Caleb licked his lips and... "Wait. You had a nap."

"So, maybe I'm coming down with something. All in." Jake shoved his coins forward.

"Oooo, I hope you haven't been kissing His Royal Sickness over there, Caleb. You might be contaminated," Scott said.

"He was contaminated a long time ago. They swap slobber constantly, among other things. I mean, come on, Scott, you should know this. We may need a HAZMAT suit to even come over here next week." Jason snickered. "Get it? HAZMAT suit. Contaminated. Come on, that was funny."

Scott looked at Jason like he had grown horns, which wouldn't be altogether impossible for him. "No. It really wasn't."

"Call." Caleb put his remaining coins into the pot. Matthew and Scott folded, and Jason suggested strip poker before putting his coins in as well.

Jake showed his hand. Full house. There was a round of groans while he pulled the pile of money to him. "You know, we can make this a semiweekly poker game, or maybe even more. I like it when you guys come over."

"We're going to stop if you don't quit robbing us blind," Scott griped.

"It's a good thing we only play for change then, huh?" Jake smirked and stacked his winnings in dollar increments.

Matthew stood and pulled out his keys, which was funny since he only lived next door. It must have been a habit. "All right, it's time for me to get home. I'm sure Sara has dinner in the microwave for me."

"She knew you were coming here, so why would she do that?" Scott said, as he put away the cards.

"Because she knows we only eat junk while we're playing, and for some reason she wants to keep me around for a while. She's always going on about healthy food." Matthew smiled fondly when he said this, a faraway look in his eyes. Sara was a good woman.

"You're a lucky bastard," Caleb said.

"Don't I know it. See you guys later."

A round of "good nights" followed him to the door. The cleanup didn't take long at all. Everyone pretty much had their jobs down to a science since they did the same thing every week, when they could. The day changed because of

Caleb's schedule, and occasionally, he would get called away. Scott and Jason were road cops, and they had a more regular schedule. Homicide detectives didn't usually get that. Unfortunately, murder wasn't a nine-to-five job.

Jake walked Scott and Jason to the door while Caleb finished cleaning off the table. He covered the remaining guacamole and put it in the fridge. When he turned back around, Jake was almost in his face. "Whoa. What—"

Jake slammed him up against the refrigerator door and crushed their mouths together in a brutal kiss. Caleb grunted and froze for a stunned second before diving in. He'd wanted this from the moment Jake walked in last night.

All thought flew from his mind as the blood drained from his head to his dick. Jake's rough hands gripped him tight, pulling at his shirt but not really trying to remove it. It was as if Jake couldn't get close enough to him. The sound of the fabric tearing broke them apart.

"Let's go to bed," Caleb panted out. His lips stung, and when he licked them, he tasted copper. He didn't give a shit, though, because Jake was already leading him to the bedroom. Well, it was more like Jake was dragging him there.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Jake shoved Caleb against it, and with a grunt, Caleb raised his lips for another hard kiss. They haphazardly tore their clothes from their bodies in their haste to get to skin. There was no sophistication, no smoothness or romance. This was straight up chaos.

Caleb loved it.

When they were naked, Jake spun him around and pushed him toward the bed. He tripped over their clothes but caught himself and backed up, never taking his eyes from Jake's. There was something in his gaze that Caleb couldn't read. It was wild and dangerous.

Jake pounced the second Caleb was on the bed. His head didn't even make it to the pillows before Jake was on him. Jake wedged himself in between Caleb's thighs and thrust against Caleb's hip while kissing the breath from his lungs.

Caleb wrapped his arms around Jake's wide shoulders and then ran his hands down the contours of Jake's back to his firm, hairy backside. Warm skin and soft hair tickled his palms. He squeezed and molded the cheeks of that gorgeous ass while pulling him closer to grind hard against him.

Jake shoved his tongue in Caleb's mouth as far as it would go, and Caleb sucked on it. Their movements were frantic, hectic and rough. Both of them were past their limit, their separation and teasing making them rush.

Jake broke the kiss to nibble on Caleb's jawline and neck, down to his collarbone. Caleb's back arched, and he let out a loud groan. His cock was so hard it hurt.

Suddenly, Jake twisted Caleb around onto his stomach and lifted his hips, positioning him ass up. When he was sufficiently raised, Jake bit his butt cheek, spread him open and dove face-first into his crack. Caleb moaned low, fisted the bedding, and thrust back for more.

Jake sucked and licked, stabbing that perfect wet tongue against him, nipping at his flesh. Pleasure surrounded him, and he didn't know how much more he could take. It turned out he didn't have to beg. "Jake."

Jake's moan added vibration that nearly made Caleb come on the spot. Before that could happen, Jake pulled back, smacked him hard on the butt and turned him onto his back. While Caleb was still arranging himself, Jake leaned over to grab the lube. Caleb pulled his legs up to his chest. His patience was running low, and he needed to be filled, now. Jake popped the top on the lube, slicked his dick, and dribbled some on Caleb's hole. When Jake's finger breached him, Caleb cried out. It was too much, not enough. He needed more. "Stop playing and fuck me!"

Jake took him at his word, moved closer, guided his cock into place and finally pushed inside. The familiar burn and ache was exactly what Caleb needed. He wasn't going to last long.

Still on his knees, Jake thrust hard. The bed springs creaking and slapping skin were the only things they could hear besides their own sounds of pleasure. Jake fell on top of him, buried his face in Caleb's neck and wedged Caleb's legs up higher. With every thrust, Caleb moved closer to orgasm. He hadn't even touched his dick, but it didn't matter. Jake's chest hair abraded his nipples. Jake's hands gripped his legs roughly, holding him open. Jake's breath was hot on his ear, Jake... Jake... Jake... "Fuck, yes!"

Caleb's whole body tightened and then spasmed, arching him off the bed as he came hard. He yelled and threw his head back, his cum painting their chests. Jake's hips snapped a few more times as he came too, filling Caleb up, making the glide slicker and easier.

Finally, Jake collapsed. He let go of Caleb's legs, and shoved his hands under Caleb's shoulders until he could squeeze him in a tight hug. Jake's face was still buried in Caleb's neck, and he was trembling.

When Caleb felt wetness start to gather there, he froze. "Jake? Jake, what's wrong?"

In response, Jake just shook his head and squeezed Caleb tighter. Caleb could barely breathe, but he was more concerned about Jake than worried about oxygen.

"Jake? Talk to me. What's going on?"

"Just... hold me. Hold me tight, and don't let go, okay? Don't let go." The last word was little more than a sob. It was followed by Jake's body jerking while he silently cried.

Caleb didn't know what to do, so he wrapped Jake up tight in his arms. "I won't let go."

"Hey, how are you this morning?" Caleb walked into the kitchen, still sweaty from a run, and gave Jake a kiss. He was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper and drinking coffee.

"Good. I just got a call. I have to be in Tampa tomorrow by ten thirty in the morning."

Caleb's good mood dropped a few degrees. Things had gotten back to normal in the past couple of weeks, and this wasn't the first time Jake had to travel for business since the weirdness at the farmers' market, but it seemed like when Jake came back from his trips now, he was distant. It would take a few days for Caleb to get his Jake back. Even when he was home from a trip, he wasn't really there. Not how Caleb wanted, at least.

"Okay. How long are you going to be gone?"

"Four days, probably. Maybe longer, but hopefully sooner." Jake looked up, an apology in his eyes. "Listen, I know I've been away a lot lately. I'm trying to get my team up and running. Once I have good managers in place, then I can slow down. Just visit stores once a month or so, to keep a handle on things. I know it sucks."

Jake stood and came in for a hug. Caleb tried to give him an extended arm hug, because he didn't want to get him dirty, but Jake wasn't having any of that. "Don't. I'm all sweaty, and you're dressed for work already."

“I don’t care. I like you sweaty.”

Caleb smiled and returned the embrace. His cell phone rang, and he let go of Jake with one arm to pull it from the clip on his hip. “Stevens.”

“Detective Stevens? This is Lieutenant Johnson. We have another one, sir.”

Caleb pulled away from Jake. “Where?”

“The body was found tied to a dock about two miles north of the port. It’s... it’s bad. I think she was in the water for a while, sir.”

Caleb’s head dropped to hang between his shoulders. “Dammit. Are CSI and forensics on scene?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” Caleb disconnected the call and looked into Jake’s concerned eyes.

“I guess I have to work today after all. When are you leaving for Tampa?”

“Early tomorrow morning, probably around six.”

“Okay, well, I don’t know when I’ll be home. Hopefully we can have a nice dinner together before you go.”

“That sounds good. Call me when you’re done, or when you have a break, and we can go to the diner. I know that’s your favorite.”

Caleb smiled and cupped Jake’s jaw, leaning in for a soft kiss. “I love that you know me so well. Have a good day at work.”

“You too.”

Chapter 4

CALEB CALLED Jake the second he finished at the crime scene. He just needed to hear his voice.

When Johnson said it was bad, he wasn't exaggerating. The poor girl had been beaten to death. There were premortem bruises and lacerations all over her body. Her wrists had been tied, because there were abrasions around them where the rope had rubbed her skin raw. That wasn't the worst though. There was no doubt the girl had been sexually assaulted. Her thighs also had abrasions on the inside, like they were tied open and she fought the bonds to close them.

She couldn't have been older than sixteen, and her life was snuffed out.

A body that's been in the water for a while could be disturbing on its own, but combined with everything that had been done to her, she looked like a sea monster. It was horrendous, a vision that Caleb would have a hard time shaking, if ever.

Caleb knew his eyes were haunted, because when they finally met up at the restaurant and Jake saw him, Jake flashed white and ran over to wrap him in a tight embrace.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Caleb. God!" Jake kissed his neck and rocked him slightly.

Caleb took the comfort for a few minutes and then broke away. "It's okay. Well, no it's not, but it's part of the job. I just wish we would catch this fucker before he hurts somebody else."

Jake's warm brown eyes were soft with compassion. "I know. You will. Your team is well trained." He squeezed Caleb's shoulder. "I know you want it to happen faster than it is, but you're doing all you can."

Caleb nodded and looked at his feet. He didn't feel like they were doing all they could. Instead, he felt useless and defeated. If they found another girl this way, he didn't know how he could live with himself. Maybe he took too much on his shoulders, but this was murder, not yard work. If he didn't do his job right, someone lost their life.

Caleb rubbed his eyes with his fingers and then squeezed the bridge of his nose. "I know you're right."

Jake draped an arm on his shoulders. "Come on. Let's go in and have a nice dinner. Let me see if I can take your mind off it for an hour or so at least."

At first, Caleb didn't move. He was not in the mood to be in public, and food wasn't really appetizing to him at the moment, but when he looked up into Jake's face, the hopefulness he saw there made him capitulate.

They walked into the diner and were immediately shown to a table in the corner. The tantalizing smells coming from the kitchen revived Caleb's appetite a bit. The place was a favorite haunt of theirs, so the staff knew them by name. Slowly, his muscles relaxed, and after some much needed banter with the cute waiter, he was feeling more himself.

They ordered their meals, and Jake made sure to ask for Caleb's favorite beer. Caleb smiled at that and shook his head. He didn't know what he did to get so lucky to have Jake in his life. Whatever it was, he was thankful.

"So, I was thinking..." Caleb looked up from his chicken dish to see Jake staring at him. "What about a vacation? Not right now—I mean, I know you have to get this case wrapped up first—but after. We could go down to the Keys for a week, or maybe Vegas. I've never been to Vegas."

"Damn. You know, I don't know when the last time I took a vacation was."

Jake smiled, causing the creases at the sides of his mouth to deepen. "Exactly. Me too. I think we need it."

Caleb returned his smile. "I think you may be right. So what were you thinking?"

"I don't know. Maybe..." Jake swallowed looking nervous all of a sudden. "Maybe, a... um... honeymoon?"

Caleb froze and then dropped his fork on his plate with a clatter. Food splattered onto the table, but he couldn't take his eyes off Jake. *A honeymoon? But that would mean...*

"Tha... umm..." Caleb cleared his throat. "What are you saying, Jake?"

Jake looked down at his plate of food, carefully set his fork down on the table, methodically straightened it, and just as Caleb started to squirm in his chair, Jake glanced up again. "Caleb, I love you. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I feel safe with you. You make me want to be a better man." He reached over the table and took Caleb's hand, leaning forward. "I never thought I would find someone like you. I didn't think I deserved it. You're my best friend, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Caleb searched Jake's face, his throat closing up. He was speechless. Obviously, Jake didn't get that memo because he started to look worried. "Say yes," Jake whispered.

Caleb let out a laugh that could be confused with a sob. It wasn't though. Or he would never admit it, at least. "Yes. Of course, yes."

Jake grinned, and tears filled his eyes. He leaned over the table for a kiss, and Caleb met him halfway. They brushed their lips together in a tender meeting, once, twice, more, before finally breaking away. They were both leaning over the table and gazing at each other with goofy grins on their faces. They didn't speak, just stared.

Caleb finally broke the spell by chuckling and shaking his head. "With how this day started, I didn't think I would be smiling by the end. You really took your job of making me forget seriously."

"So, you're happy?"

Caleb laughed. "No. I'm thrilled. I'm ecstatic." He looked at Jake seriously, trying to tell him without words all that he felt. "Happy is too sedate a word for how I feel at this moment."

Jake blushed and nodded. "Me too. Me too."

He leaned in for another kiss, this one more passionate than the first. Caleb grabbed onto the back of Jake's neck to try to ground himself. He was floating on the clouds and had no real desire to come down again. Caleb ran his hand from Jake's neck to his jaw, and the stubble there scraped his palm, so he swiped his thumb over it a few times. Time held no meaning. He forgot where they were for a moment. Someone coughed and reminded him that they weren't at their dining room table at home, but in a public place, so he slowed them down by giving Jake a few closed mouth pecks. When Jake pulled back from the kiss, he was beaming, his chocolate-brown eyes nothing but slits.

They were getting married.

The idea fully hit, and Caleb's eyes started to sting. "I love you so much," he said, thickly.

Jake cupped his cheek and leaned over the table for another kiss, but movement caught his attention first. They broke apart and sat back in their chairs.

Caleb expected to see their waiter, but there was a beautiful blonde woman standing next to their table instead. She was young, maybe in her early

twenties, but she looked like she just stepped off a runway. She was perfect, her makeup accentuating her big blue eyes, and not one hair out of place. But she was scowling at Jake, making what would have been a gorgeous face turn ugly.

Caleb looked at Jake, perplexed, just as Jake jumped out of his chair, causing it to scrape across the hardwood flooring with a screech.

“Jessica? What... what the hell are you doing here?” A look of utter shock was on his face.

“That’s what I would like to know? I come into town to surprise you, and this is what I find?” She flung her hand in Caleb’s direction, barely sparing him a glance.

Caleb frowned, his confusion increasing.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I haven’t seen...” A vicious slap to Jake’s right cheek cut off his words. His face swung with the impact and then turned bright red.

Caleb jumped up, ready to intervene, but before he could, Jake grabbed both of the woman’s wrists and pulled her in close.

Jake’s nostrils flared, and his cheeks twitched as he clenched his teeth. It looked like the woman was saying something to him, but Caleb couldn’t make out the words. Jake’s eyes widened, and he wildly looked around the room, then out the windows, before meeting Caleb’s gaze.

Caleb faced the woman, palms up. “Look... um... Ms. I... uh... I think there’s been some misunderstanding.”

She wrenched herself out of Jake’s hold and turned on him. “There’s no misunderstanding. I’m his wife!”

Caleb’s world stopped, along with the beating of his heart.

The word echoed in his head over and over. Wife?

Wife.

Wife! He looked back at Jake, for confirmation, but Jake’s head was hanging, and shaking back and forth. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be real. Five minutes ago everything was great, his future bright. He was so happy.

“What? That’s ridiculous. I... I...” It couldn’t be true, could it? I mean, they were just talking about their future. Jake had just proposed to him, and the look in his eyes... There’s no way Jake was married to this woman.

Caleb squared his shoulders and crossed his arms. "Listen, lady. I don't know who you are or what the hell is going on, but—"

"No, you listen, you faggot," she spat. She took a step back and wiggled her left hand in his face. The hand that held a nice-size diamond on the ring finger. "He's my husband. We live in Orlando, and he works here in Miami. He travels back and forth."

What the hell? "You have the wrong guy. Jake lives with me. We've lived together for almost a year, so there's no way..." Except Jake did travel for work. Sometimes he stayed for over a week at a time wherever he went. But they always spoke. They kept in touch the whole time. Wouldn't there have been some kind of suspicious behavior, some clue?

No, Jake loved him.

"Tell him!" The woman gave Jake a look that made Caleb take a step backwards and then grab the back of the chair for support.

Caleb gazed intently at the top of Jake's head, willing him to meet his eyes, to tell him this was all some kind of sick joke. "Jake?"

A small, hysterical laugh came from Jake before he raised his head and met Caleb's eyes. There was something there in those brown depths. Pleading? Pity?

"No," Caleb whispered. He realized he was shaking his head back and forth without conscious thought. A flash of heat traveled up his chest to his forehead, and there suddenly wasn't enough air in the room. "No, this is bullshit!"

Jake swallowed and nodded his head.

That was his answer? He didn't even have the balls to tell him to his face? "Say it," Caleb snapped.

"It's true," Jake said, just above a whisper. He cleared his throat and looked away.

At the confirmation, something reached into Caleb's chest and ripped his heart out. He blinked rapidly and clenched the back of the chair until his fingers ached. A year. A whole fucking year filled with bickering and laughter, frustration and love.

Really, it had been a year's worth of lies. All of those happy memories crumbled into dust at his feet.

“What about me? Was this a joke? Was I some kind of game to you?” He was yelling now. It was hot in the room, and he felt like his head was going to explode from the pressure in his brain. People at the nearby tables had stopped eating to stare at the floorshow, but he couldn't give a shit. His whole life had just imploded on itself.

Jake stood straighter and crossed his arms. “What were you? Let me see. A pleasant distraction. A warm body to ease the lonely nights. Someone fun to hang out with. Take your pick,” he stated flatly. Like he was listing items off the menu. Steak or chicken, pick.

Jessica screeched. “Really? What the hell, Jake?”

“Shut up, Jessica,” Jake growled back at her.

Caleb ignored her completely and ground his teeth together, trying to regulate his breathing. “You just asked me to marry you. What the fuck was that?”

Jake raised an eyebrow, then rolled his eyes and flopped his hands down, hitting his thighs with a smack. “Come on, man. You've been hinting at wanting to get married since all of these states started making it legal—saying it was just a matter of time before it was Florida's turn, and all that. I had to give you something. I wasn't ever going to go through with it. Obviously.” He was talking with his hands, flicking them around just as fast as the words were coming, and his voice was flippant, condescending. Caleb wanted to punch him in his betraying face.

Jake chuckled. It didn't sound like his usual laughter that lit up a room. It was dull and lifeless. “I can't believe you actually thought someone like me would want this long term, would want someone like you. I'm not gay, not really. I just like to dabble for some excitement. You know, a little change. You, on the other hand... well, you are a cocksucker of the highest order... and damn, you're good at it. I can't believe you didn't figure that out. I must be one hell of an actor, huh?”

The more Jake talked, the angrier Caleb became. He was huffing like a bull and ready to jump the table and tear Jake limb from limb.

“Agh!” Jessica got in Jake's space and poked him in the chest. “You're disgusting. Such a pig! You promised this would never happen again. You promised!”

The manager came over and looked at them one at a time. “Is there a problem here?”

Jake gave him a charming smile that didn't reach his eyes. "No, not at all. We'll be out of your hair momentarily. I apologize for the commotion." He reached into his back pocket, pulled out a fifty-dollar bill and handed it to the man. The manager gave them all another concerned glance before nodding and walking away.

"Let's go, Jake. I want to get out of here. We need to talk."

"Just give me a minute, would you? For Christ's sake!" Jake snapped.

"You know I can't do that. Let's go. Now." They shared a look that Caleb didn't have the will to try and decipher. With the manager's appearance, all of his anger evaporated like so much smoke. In fact, every emotion fled. His eyes no longer focused, and he felt so tired, numb.

He stumbled around the chair and slumped into it, looking across the room but not seeing anything.

Out of his peripheral vision, he could see Jake squat in front of him. "Look, Caleb. It's nothing personal. We had fun, and now it's over." Jake touched his arm, but Caleb flinched and pulled away, clenching his fists. "Go home. Just... go home, Caleb, and forget about me."

Jake stood again, mumbled, "I'm so sorry," and walked away with Jessica on his arm. Funnily enough, those three softly spoken words seemed the most honest thing said in the past five minutes.

Caleb didn't remember how he got home. He was just suddenly standing in the foyer of the house, soaking wet. Damn rain. He'd always hated the rain.

And in Florida, there was really no escaping it.

Numbly, he staggered into the bedroom, bumping into walls as he went, like some drunkard. There was no alcohol in his system... yet. It wouldn't stay like that for long though.

He was going to get dry and then plastered. He wanted gone from this world, if only for a little while. He wanted to go to a place where he couldn't remember his own name, never mind the name Jake Thomas.

As he walked, he peeled his soaked shirt from his body. When he stepped over the threshold of the bedroom, he flung it, not caring where it went. He toed off his wet shoes and pushed out of his pants and boxers, kicking them away and leaving them where they landed. He reached into his drawer, pulled out

some clean underwear and put them on, nearly falling on his ass in the process. Stumbling over to the closet, he pulled open the door and froze.

Half of the space was taken up by Jake's clothing. Jake's shoes were still lined up besides his. He looked around the room, picking out objects that belonged to the man he loved. His cologne was still on the dresser. The gray comforter that they purchased together was still on the bed. Pictures of them hung on the walls, and small trinkets littered the room. It looked the same as it did this morning, but everything had changed.

He turned back to the closet and pulled down one of Jake's shirts from a hanger. Bringing it to his nose, he took a deep breath. The shirt was clean, and there was no lingering sent of Jake there. For some reason, that made his eyes well up. His throat closed, his chest tightened, and he lost his fucking mind.

He threw the shirt onto the bed and tore into the others, wrenching the clothes from the hangers without a care and tossing them into the middle of the bed. He was breathing hard, trying to hold back the grief and cover it with his rage.

Once he was done with the clothes, he started on the shoes, followed by the pictures of them together. Pictures showing their happiness. Memories of a life. A life that was a lie.

He threw them across the room, aiming for the mattress. The sound of glass cracking didn't stop him. He had to clear out any trace of Jake. Any trace of the pain. He didn't care. He didn't stop to think if he would want these things, if he would want the memories.

He wanted none of it.

When Jake's belongings from the room were all on the bed, he started in on the bathroom. Anything that didn't belong to him got piled in his arms, and he stomped back to dump the products onto the mound he'd created.

When he was done, he looked around, trying to find something else to add, trying to find his sanity, trying to find something that wasn't there.

He strode toward the bed, pulled the comforter up at the corners and lifted, throwing the bedding and the goods it contained over his shoulder like a demented Santa, and carrying it toward the living room.

That was as far as he got before his emotions overwhelmed him. A moan of pain escaped, and he stopped, dropping everything to the floor. He fell to his knees and roared at the heavens, throwing his head back and screaming for all he was worth.

Why? How? What. The. Fuck!

Body-wrenching sobs escaped him, and for the first time since he was a child, he wept. He cried for the future he would never have, for the betrayal that was eating a hole in his soul, for the love that had so quickly turned to bitterness and hatred.

How could this have happened? How had Jake deceived him for so long and he not known it? He was a detective, for Christ's sake; he should have seen it, seen the signs. It explained so much. That was why Jake looked over his shoulder when they were out in public. That was why he had a phone that Caleb didn't know about, and why he had snatched that phone out of Caleb's hand so quickly. That was why he flinched away from Caleb's touch. He wasn't used to a man's touch at first. Before Caleb, he probably just had random fucks. No one was stupid enough to fall for his crap for long, except for Caleb.

He was that stupid. All this time, he was just seeing what he wanted to see.

He'd opened his home and his heart to Jake. For what? Jake used him. No matter how much of a bastard it made him, he would rather Jake had died than for this to happen. At least then, he would be able to remember their time together with fondness. At least then, he wouldn't doubt every single thing about their relationship over the past year.

He knew he was in the middle of a grade A pity party, but for the life of him, he didn't know how to stop it. Everything had changed in one evening, with one word: *Wife*.

Caleb felt a cold wetness on his cheek and looked up to see Kira staring at him with dark, soulful eyes, nudging his chin with her nose. He sobbed harder and wrapped his arms around the dog, burying his face in the golden fur around her neck. She whimpered and pushed closer to him, trying to offer him comfort.

"I-It's okay, girl. We'll make it... we'll... we'll make it through this. Somehow." Caleb hiccupped and tried to swallow down the boulder in his throat. "We'll be okay. It's going to be okay." He repeated the words like a mantra, rocking into the dog. Swaying, with his arms tight, he let his tears fall, drenching her fur.

He didn't know how long he knelt there. Eventually, his tears slowed and then stopped. A deep, searing pain had taken up residence in his chest and didn't seem to be going anywhere any time soon. Kira lay down with her head on his lap, and he wiped his face with his hands, trying to pull himself together.

Caleb was numb, and so tired. His emotions and energy drained from his body, released into the universe through his grief. It was time to move on. He had to, there was no other choice.

Just as he prepared himself to stand, there was a knock on the front door. His first instinct was that it was Jake. He'd come to say that it was all some mistake and he was back. He looked at the clothes sprawled on the floor, and it was the first time Caleb realized that Jake hadn't taken anything with him when he left. Maybe he had come just to collect his things.

Caleb smacked that down just as quickly as the thoughts came. If he lived with his wife and had another life that Caleb knew nothing of, more than likely he had clothes and belongings there too.

There was no mistake, and Jake wasn't coming to pick up his things. Jake was gone.

Before he could break down again, another knock sounded at the door, louder this time, more insistent.

He pushed himself from the floor, groaning as the blood circulated in his legs and his knees cracked. He must have knelt there longer than he'd thought.

He limped over to the door and opened it to see Matthew's concerned face.

"Is Jake here?"

"What?" Caleb's graveled voice was unrecognizable, even to him.

Matthew pushed into the house and looked him up and down. "What the hell happened to you? You look like shit warmed over. And why are you standing here in your underwear?"

Caleb let out a bark of laughter and ran a hand through his hair. "Long story."

Matthew studied his face for a moment before shaking his head and looking around. He toed the pile of clothes and stuff on the floor. "Where's Jake? I spoke to him earlier, and he said you guys were going to dinner and he was going to propose." He pointed at Jake's belongings. "What happened?"

"Yeah, about that. It seems Jake is married." Caleb tried to make it come out flippantly, but his voice cracked on the last word, ruining the effect.

"What?" Matthew yelled.

"Yeah, his wife showed up." Caleb paced the floor. "Can you believe that shit?"

“Caleb, Jake is not married...”

Caleb interrupted. “Yeah, that’s what I thought too.”

Matthew was shaking his head. “He’s not married.”

Caleb stopped and gaped at him. “You weren’t there. This blonde chick showed up and started yelling, and he’s marrie—”

“He’s gay, you idiot! And in love with your stupid ass.” Matthew grabbed hold of Caleb’s arms to stop him from pacing again. “Tell me what happened.”

“I did.”

“No. Go back to the beginning and tell me step by step what happened tonight.” Caleb had never seen Matthew look so serious, and there was something in his eyes that compelled Caleb to talk. As he was describing the scene, Matthew started to look angry. Finally, he was getting the picture.

Then a worried look took over. “Shit!”

That stopped Caleb in his tracks. It wasn’t a “shit, this sucks” or a “shit, that bastard”. The way he said it... He knew something Caleb didn’t.

“What’s going on, Matthew?”

Instead of answering, Matthew pulled out his cell phone and dialed, which pissed Caleb off completely.

“They got him. Those bastards took him right from under our nose.” Those words sent ice through Caleb’s veins.

Now Matthew was the one pacing, and the more he spoke into the phone, the more confused and freaked Caleb became. “Yes... I don’t know how they found him, but they did. What? ...Fuck!” He kicked a shampoo bottle, and it smashed into the wall and exploded. “That prick. If I ever get my hands on him... Yes. Track the GPS on his phone and let’s hope that he still has it on him... Right.”

Matthew ended the call and then looked up warily at Caleb. “I think it’s best if you sit down. I have some things I need to tell you, and you’re not going to like them.”

“Matthew...” The warning in that one word could not be mistaken.

The man sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Please. Jake’s in trouble. Just sit.”

Those words sent a stab of fear to his gut and got him moving. Caleb walked over to the couch, the cold leather reminding him he was still only in boxers. He couldn't give a fuck though. The look on Matthew's face said this was way more important than pants. Once seated, he took a deep breath and then nodded at Matthew.

Matthew sat down in the armchair across from him and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "I'm retired FBI. And Jake... Jake is in the Witness Protection Program."

What. The. Fuck?

Caleb leaned forward. "I'm listening."

"About eight years ago, Jake was placed into the program." Matthew spoke slowly, measuring Caleb's reactions carefully. "He turned in a big player in human trafficking. One of the largest organized human trafficking groups in the United States was brought down because of his testimony and the evidence they were able to compile with Jake's help. After the case was tried, and the major players were convicted and in prison, Jake was given a new identity and placed in Florida."

Caleb shook his head and frowned. What? "How the fuck did Jake get involved in human trafficking?"

Matthew hesitated. "The leader was his father."

Caleb's heart stopped dead in his chest and his breathing picked up. For the second time that day the ground beneath his feet lost substance. It became a dark, murky water, and he fell through until his head was fully submerged. Sound muffled, and the thumping of his heart as blood rushed to his head became a roar. He jumped off the couch.

No. No, this was a dream. All a dream. He was going to wake up. He had to wake up, dammit.

Caleb swung his body around and threw his fist into the wall so hard the plaster gave and a gaping hole swallowed his hand. He absorbed the pain as it traveled up his arm and into his back. He slowly withdrew his hand, watching his fingers extend and flex, then clenched once again. Blood welled on his knuckles and dribbled down the side of his fist. "I guess it's no dream," he said, flatly.

Everything sped up again, sound rapidly returning as he came back to his body with a snap.

Jake was in trouble.

Pain dropkicked his chest. He turned back to Matthew. "We need to find him. Now."

He didn't wait for an answer but instead strode to his room, ripped clothes from their hangers and threw them on as fast as possible. He couldn't think about the fact that this didn't change anything. Jake had still lied. Jake... Wait, that wasn't even his real name. He didn't know anything about the man that had shared his life and his bed for almost a year. Nothing.

Once fully dressed, he came out of his room to see Matthew on the phone again.

"Yeah, I understand." He disconnected the call, looking defeated. "They found a GPS signal, but it was in a park not far from where you were supposed to have dinner tonight."

"Well, we can't stay here. Let's go to the station and see if I can get a team together. We need supplies at the very least. On the way, you can tell me what you know of what's going on, and why you know it." Caleb raised his eyebrow at Matthew and pushed past him, snatched his keys and wallet from the table by the door and opened it.

On the step were Sara and Samson, Matthew's wife and son. Sara had her hand raised to knock, and her face was red and wet. Samson was clinging to her legs and crying. She looked up at Caleb, lowered her arm and whispered, "I'm so sorry," before bursting into tears.

Chapter 5

WALKING AWAY from Caleb was the hardest thing Jake had ever done in his life, and that was saying a lot. His life had not been the easiest, to say the least. But he would carry that look of betrayal and pain in Caleb's eyes to his grave.

Which, if things went the way he thought, wouldn't be long in coming.

Once they stepped outside the restaurant, Jessica went from leaning on him to dragging him by the arm. There was a black sedan with dark-tinted windows parked at the curb, which seemed to be her destination. "Let's go, *Jake*."

The only thing that made him go along with the ruse that Jessica concocted was to save Caleb's life. There was no way he would have done it otherwise, but then Jessica must have known that. Or someone did. Jake stopped and looked back over his shoulder, the pain in his chest almost unbearable.

"Do I have to remind you that your boyfriend in there has a rifle aimed at his head? You know Master wouldn't think anything of taking him out either. If you want him to live, start walking." Her nasally voice, reminding him the love of his life was in a sharpshooter's sight, made him want to rage. He wanted to punch her in the throat just to shut her up but knew that would mean certain death if anyone was watching. Not for him—he didn't care about himself—but for Caleb. She was right; they would kill him without a second's pause.

Jake shuffled to the car, knowing he was walking toward his own death. It seemed he never really escaped his past. All of those years of therapy, watching his back, wondering when they would come for him, it had been exhausting. Finally, he'd met Caleb and felt safe for the first time ever. He'd become complacent. He'd thought it was over, that he could finally live a normal life and be happy.

He was wrong.

He never should have moved in with Caleb. All his life ever brought him was pain and danger, and now Caleb was smack-dab in the middle of his nightmare.

Jessica opened the back door of the car, and Jake started to get in only to come up short. "Sara?"

"Just shut up and get in the car, Jake." Sara's eyes were wild, and she was trembling.

Jake got in the vehicle, and Jessica climbed in after him and shut the door.

"Sara, what are you doing here?" She looked over at Jessica and then back to him. She shook her head slightly and opened her eyes wide, like she was trying to tell him something.

"We didn't need you after all, little bitch. Master was right. All he needed was the knowledge that his lover was in danger." Jessica glared at Sara and then laughed. "Master will be so pleased. Tie him."

Sara shook her head. "I did my part. I told you where he would be, and I came along in case he needed more incentive to come with you. I just want my son and I want to go home."

Oh, shit! It all made sense now. They took Samson in order to coerce Sara into helping them. Like most mothers, Sara would do anything to save her child. Guilt ate at Jake. This was all his fault, every bit of it. He had brought this monster into their midst, and now everyone he cared about was in danger.

"I. Said. Tie. Him." Jessica ordered and then smiled sweetly. It seemed a life as a slave had taken Jessica's sanity. She spoke of Jonathan Harboro with complete adoration instead of the fear and loathing she should have felt.

Sara snatched the zip ties from Jessica's outstretched hand and looked up at him apologetically, her bottom lip trembling. "I'm sorry, Jake."

Jake smiled gently at her and held his wrists out. "It's okay."

Tears fell silently from Sara's eyes as she tied his wrists together. She made sure the bonds weren't too tight, and he was grateful for that. Zip ties could be vicious.

Once he was tied, Jessica patted him down. She took his wallet and phone from his pocket, pulled the cash from the wallet, put it in her bra, and then threw the rest out the window. He watched as his only means of calling for help bounced on the sidewalk and grass before coming to a stop under a swing-set in the park.

"How did you find me?" Jake asked.

"Oh, well, you know... money talks, and luckily Master has a lot of it. There were people who knew where you were. All Master had to do was find one." She waved her hand and shrugged as if it was no big deal.

Jake sat back without responding, resigned to his fate. At least Caleb would be safe now.

After a few minutes, they pulled up to a hotel, drove around the back and then stopped. Jessica got out of the car and pulled him out by his arm. He nearly fell, and she scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Walk much? God! Let's go."

A big man came around the front of the vehicle and boxed in his other side. Sara climbed out, quietly trailing behind. They led him to the delivery entrance of the hotel, and to a back set of elevators that must have been reserved for staff. They rode up silently, and the closer they got to their destination, the more spastic energy radiated from Jessica. She must be expecting one heck of a reward.

Jake closed his eyes and flexed his fingers, trying to relieve the ache in his hands. The doors opened with a ding, and they stepped out into an opulent hallway. Nothing but the best for Jonathan.

They dragged him down the hall, and Jessica let him go to open the door. Jake knew what was in that room—fear, pain, torture... hell. He thought that was his past. The reason he'd stayed in that one room apartment with 24/7 FBI guards for so long, without the taste of the freedom he so yearned for, was to put these people behind bars. To make certain they would never hurt anyone again. Never have the opportunity to kidnap a girl at twelve and take her away from her loving family. Never humiliate and sexually assault her until she was nothing more than a shell of a human being. Never kill a girl again—beat and gang rape her until her body gave out from the pain.

Not like they did his mother.

He couldn't stand back and allow them to treat human beings as animals. He couldn't live with himself if he did. Watching that done to his mother was the final affront. It was why he finally built up enough courage to escape.

It didn't seem to make much difference though, because as they walked into the room, he came face to face with his nightmare. A man he thought he would never see again, a monster.

His father.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here? The prodigal son returns." The dark eyes he saw in his worst dreams sparkled with malice. He might sound jovial and happy, but that was the biggest act ever performed. This man was the devil incarnate.

Jake raised his chin but said nothing.

Jessica walked right to Jonathan and knelt at his feet, leaning her head on his thigh. He pet her like a dog a few times and then pushed her away roughly.

She fell over and crawled into the corner to sulk. She should have realized by now that there would be no reward, no kindnesses from this man. Her Master was a brutal, sadistic sociopath with no conscience.

Sara strode around him. "I did what you wanted. Now where is my son?"

Jonathan raised an eyebrow and didn't answer for a few moments. Without taking his eyes from her, he said, "Go get the brat," and the big hulk that walked with Jake from the car left the room.

"You know, the only reason I am giving you your son and allowing you to leave is because you and your husband are FBI."

Jake's head jerked to look at Sara in surprise. She just stood there staring Jonathan down, shoulders squared.

"If your husband was home when he was supposed to be, instead of off who-knows-where, then things would have worked out a little bit differently." He smiled and a shiver traveled down Jake's spine. "You would have all just... disappeared. Unfortunately, I can't take the chance that your husband will come after me. From what I understand, he was a good agent before he retired, and I'm smart enough to know that a man with a revenge mission should not be taken lightly."

He walked over and got in her space, gripping her arms until she flinched. "Heed my words, though. You will say nothing about this to anyone. If you do, if you go to the police or your FBI buddies, if you tell your husband, I will find you. You won't see me coming this time—there will be no warning—you will just be dead. Do I make myself clear, little girl?"

Jake had to give it to her; she didn't cower in the face of his promise. That was what it was too; Jonathan Harboro didn't make threats. If he said something, he meant it. But Sara stood tall, glaring in his face. "I understand."

Jonathan scowled at her until the door opened and Samson came running into the room. "Mommy!" The little boy threw himself at her legs, crying.

Sara wrapped her arms around him. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

Samson didn't answer, just shook his head with his face buried in her thigh. Sara stroked his back and glanced up. Her gaze met Jake's, and he could see resolution in them. He shook his head, trying to tell her without words to let it go. To go home and be happy, not do something stupid, that would cause her whole family to suffer. She gave him a sad smile that was not reassuring. "Come on, buddy. Let's go home."

She picked up her son, looked at Jake one last time, and strode out the door. As soon as it shut, Jonathan gave the order. "Follow her. If she stops anywhere but home, or if she talks to anyone, put her down."

Two men Jake hadn't seen peeled out of the corners of the room and left.

"Now, where was I? Ah, yes." Jonathan walked over to stand before him. Jake raised his chin, and Jonathan smirked and then slapped him so hard he saw stars. "You little shit! Do you have any idea the trouble you have caused me?"

He grabbed Jake by the hair and kicked his legs out from under him, causing him to crash to his knees. "I told you, you are mine. Did you think I was joking? Did you think that some stupid faulty court system could actually stop me?"

He let go of Jake and backhanded him. Jake's face swung back, and he lost focus for a second. He shook his head to try to clear it. "First, you killed your mother, then, you run... now this?" He jerked Jake back by his hair again.

Jake tasted copper, and his mouth filled with saliva. He spat it at his father. "You had her beaten and gang raped by six men in front of me, while I was tied to a chair. I didn't kill her, *you* did."

"That was your fault!" Jonathan delivered a brutal kick to his ribs. "If you would have just obeyed, like a good little slave—" Another kick on the other side caused Jake to fall sideways "—it never would have happened. But no! You need to get it through your head: you were born a slave, and you will die a *slave*."

Jonathan stood and straightened his suit and tie, like he was preparing for a business meeting instead of in the process of beating the shit out of someone. It never failed to amaze Jake the depravity and evilness his father was capable of.

"When will our guests arrive?" he said, not even winded. Jake tried to catch his breath, and groaned with the effort.

Jessica stood from her kneeling position and checked her phone. "They are scheduled for eight o'clock, Master. So, a half hour or so."

"Very good. I am going to go get a coffee. I will be back in plenty of time. While I'm gone, I want him stripped and cleaned. We want to make a good impression." Jonathan walked back over to stand near Jake's head, his clouded vision just making out the shined loafers his father wore. "I'm going to make sure that, by tonight, you remember exactly what you are. You will never forget your place again."

Jake knew what that meant, and he blinked back the tears that blurred his vision. Men were coming who were going to test the merchandise—namely, him. It would be a night filled with pain and humiliation.

He didn't think he could do this again. He didn't know how he would survive it. It was different when he didn't know any better. All he'd experienced before was pain and humiliation. It was a way of life, the way he was raised. He was an accidental pregnancy to a slave girl. He knew nothing else. When he was old enough to fight back, they used the ones he cared about to keep him in line. If he disobeyed, they would torture his friends in front of him.

The final straw had been watching the light leave his mother's eyes. Listening to her beg for his help, pleading for him to save her. The last word on her lips had been his name. He'd escaped not long after, as soon as he'd healed from the beating he received that night as punishment for her death. One that nearly took his life as well. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he ran. Hiding in a laundry cart, naked, with no money or belongings to his name, he ran.

Now that he'd tasted freedom, how could he go back? He'd learned what love was, and what it meant to be happy. How was he going to survive the loss? What was the point, really? What was a life like that worth?

He couldn't do it. He refused. He would rather be dead than ever be forced to live like that again. Resolve filled him. They would never let him go. Never.

This time, when the opportunity arose, he wouldn't run.

No. He would take himself out of this world of pain for good.

"Sara? What are you doing here?" Caleb showed the crying woman into the house and shut the door.

Matthew rushed over, pulled her and his son into his arms and rocked them. "Shh... shhh. What's going on, sweetheart? What's happened?" Kira came over and started whining, trying to nose between the couple, but Caleb pulled her away.

"I... Ja-Jak... they..." There was no making out what the woman was trying to say through her sobbing. She had her face buried in her husband's chest, which wasn't helping either.

Caleb jogged to the kitchen, filled a glass with water, and grabbed some paper towels. When he got back, Matthew was sitting on the couch with Sara in his lap and his son clinging to his side. "Here, Matthew."

Matthew took the paper towels from Caleb and pulled back, dabbing gently at Sara's eyes. "Try to calm down, love. You're going to make yourself sick. Here, have some water and tell us what happened."

Sara accepted the towels from her husband, blew her nose and took a few deep breaths. "They have Jake. And I..." That was all she got out before she broke down again, but it was enough.

She had information about Jake. That's all Caleb heard, and they were the most important words uttered in the world. "Sara. Sara! Calm down and tell us what you know about Jake. It's important. Please!"

Sara pulled herself together, hiccupping and trembling. "I-I was leaving to go to my parents for a visit, and stopped for gas. After I pumped... a-a man. He got in the passenger seat and held a gun on Samson. He-he... I was so scared. He told me to drive, and gave me directions to... a hotel. There was another man there. A... big, he was big, and he took Sam-Samson. They took him away and said they would kill him." All of a sudden, she looked at her husband seriously, and her voice firmed. "Matthew, they were going to kill him."

"Okay, you're okay now."

She shook her head in denial. "No, you don't understand. They made me lead them to Jake. They told me if I didn't, they would kill Samson. They brought me along, just in case I was lying or in case they needed some incentive for Jake to go with them. I remembered that you told me Jake was going to propose to Caleb at the diner tonight. I brought them there. Oh, God."

Betrayal burned in Caleb's chest, and his first instinct was to rage at Sara. His intellect won the battle with his emotions, and he held his anger in check. It wasn't her fault. If she hadn't complied with their demands, she probably wouldn't be alive.

Sara shook her head and looked at Caleb. "I'm so sorry I led them to you. That woman... Jessica, I think her name was, she went into the restaurant and came out with Jake. She told him they had a sharpshooter across the street, and they would shoot you in the head if he didn't go with her. I don't know if that was true. I don't know how it could have been, because they just found out where you were, but it didn't matter. It worked."

Shame choked Caleb, and he had to fight to swallow it down. That explained what the woman whispered in Jake's ear after she'd slapped him. God, Caleb felt stupid. He should have known that Jake wasn't married. Jake had turned into a different person, and it was because he was trying to push Caleb away, to save his life.

Sara looked back at Matthew. "They're at the Ritz-Carlton. Room two twenty-seven. Someone tailed me the whole way home, so I went into the house, left out the back door and ran through the yard to come here, hoping someone was home. I didn't know what else to do. I think they may still be watching the house." She blew out a breath and squared her shoulders. "I'm still not exactly sure why he let me go. He threatened me, but he must have one hell of an ego or be completely insane to think that would stop me. I may be a woman, and I might have been compliant because he had my child, but I'm still an FBI agent."

"Wait. You too?" Caleb gaped at her. "You know what, never mind. We have to go. We'll make a quick stop at the station to get supplies and some guys." Caleb strode to the door while he spoke. They didn't have time for any more delays. They knew where Jake was, and he was going to get him.

"I'm coming too." Sara climbed off Matthew's lap, back to her fully capable self.

"Sara..."

"No, Matthew. I left him there. I know I had no choice, but I left him." Sara ground out between her teeth. "He's my friend, and I am not an invalid. I'm going with you."

Matthew nodded. "Get Samson into the car, and we'll bring him to the station. He'll be safe there."

She scooped up Samson, and they ran out the door, not wasting a moment. They pulled out of the driveway and turned down Matthew's street to make their way out of the complex. About a block away from their house, they saw a black sedan parked along their sidewalk. Two burly men occupied the front seats. Sara slumped down as they drove past, but neither man looked their way.

"All right, while we're driving to the station, talk. I want to know what the hell is going on, and I want to know now," Caleb barked as soon as they pulled onto the main road. He was driving as quickly as possible, but he didn't have his police vehicle. Those flashing lights would've sure been handy at a moment like this.

"I told you that Jake's father was the leader of this group. Jake's mother was his favorite slave. I don't know much, because I wasn't originally on the case, but from what I understand, they killed her. Jake escaped and went to the police, who brought the FBI in. They had been looking for a way to nail this group to the wall for a long time, but couldn't prove anything. Jake helped, and they took them down."

As Caleb listened, emotions swamped him, and he clenched the steering wheel until his knuckles were white. No wonder why Jake flinched at his touch and looked over his shoulder.

"So if they captured all of these guys, how the fuck is Jake's father out now? Did he escape?"

"No, they released him."

"What?" Caleb glanced at Matthew and had to stop short when he noticed the brake lights flash on the car in front of him. He smacked the steering wheel. "Come on, asshole. Why are you stopping?"

He swerved around the car and left beeping horns in his wake.

"How the fuck did that happen, Matthew? Why would they release someone like that?"

"Jesus. Just keep your eyes on the road, okay? We won't save Jake if you get us killed first."

"Matthew..." Caleb growled.

"He hired a snake of an attorney. The guy filed all kinds of motions. He appealed, and when that didn't work, they paid off one of the newbie police officers that handled the evidence on the case. They filed a habeas corpus, stating that evidence was mishandled. The judge heard it two months ago. Because a police officer admitted to it, they had to release him. Without that evidence, they didn't have a case to try him again."

"Well, why the fuck wasn't Jake informed? Why didn't he know about this?" They pulled into the station. Caleb parked and turned to glare at Matthew.

"They couldn't serve him. It would compromise his location. There were two people who knew where he was placed at the time—my boss, and Jake's contact. The habeas corpus was filed right around the time I retired. So, because this guy had such a long reach and there was a strong possibility he would

walk, my boss approached me, briefed me on the case and asked if I would relocate here to keep my eyes out for anything suspicious. I said yes. I had planned to retire to Florida anyway. I thought this would make me feel useful.”

Caleb’s nostrils flared, and he fisted his hands to keep from reaching out and strangling Matthew. Someone should have filled Caleb in on what was going on. How was he supposed to protect Jake if they kept him ignorant of such important information?

“Why didn’t Jake’s contact inform him when Jonathan was released?”

“He’s disappeared. When I called in after you told me what happened, they said the contact went missing. They don’t know whether he was paid off and left the country, or if he was tortured for the information on Jake’s location and killed. There’s an APB out for him, but no one has been able to locate him yet.”

“Son of a bitch!” Caleb slammed his hand on the dashboard a few times and shot out of the car.

They went into the station, and Caleb stomped into his boss’s office without stopping. The assistant called out, but he ignored her. “Captain? I need your help.”

He quickly introduced Matthew and Sara, and as he filled in his boss on the situation, Matthew was on the phone with the FBI, calling in teams.

“I can give you three guys, but that’s all I can spare. I’m sorry, Detective, but you know that we still have an unsolved murder case on going.”

Caleb had forgotten about the case, but now that it was mentioned, it sparked something in his head. “Matthew, you said this guy is into human trafficking. What are the age ranges of the girls?”

Matthew gave him a curious look. “Young. Twelve to seventeen. Once in a while they went older, but only if the girls looked young. There is a sick market out there, it seems. From what I’ve heard, they want them young enough to ‘train.’ That’s what they call breaking them down until they don’t even think of fighting back. Some of them even wind up with Stockholm syndrome and adore their Masters. It’s sad.”

“What kind of ‘training’ are we talking about here? Is it that BDSM kink thing everyone is talking about?” the Captain asked, looking disgusted.

“No,” Matthew snapped. “BDSM is consensual and has strict rules. It’s done for pleasure and the mutual gratification of everyone involved. This is

slavery, pure and simple. There are no rules, and nothing is mutual. Some of these men buy girls just to kill them. Others do unmentionable things to them until they die. Some of them last longer than others, but the final outcome is death.”

“Captain, the girls we’re finding are all young. They have binding marks. They’ve all been sexually assaulted. There might be a connection. The killings started here about two months ago. When did you say he was released, Matthew?”

Understanding radiated on Matthew’s face. “About two months ago. This could be your killer, Captain.”

The Captain looked at both of them for a moment, tapping his chin.

“Captain, the FBI is on the way right now. I know your team has worked hard to find the killer. I think it would be best if we work together on this. Then everyone wins. You get credit for the capture, and we get our man back. Win, win,” Matthew said.

The Captain looked between them again. “Okay. I will call in the men. Take two teams, and whatever supplies you need.” He looked pointedly at Caleb. “You’re not going.”

“What?” Caleb shouted.

“You know how this works, Caleb. This is too personal for you to keep a clear head.”

Caleb started to argue, but the Captain held his hand up and raised an eyebrow. “I could just wait until the Feds get here.”

Caleb gave a short nod.

“Show Matthew to the supply room and get him suited up.”

“Thank you, sir,” Matthew said.

“Yeah, yeah. Go! Meet in the conference room in five.” The Captain picked up the phone and started making calls.

Caleb rushed out of the office and down to the supply room with Matthew and Sara hot on his heels. Caleb grabbed weapons, vests and earpieces for the agents. While they were preparing, he suited up too. Matthew stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “What are you doing, Caleb? You heard the Captain...”

Caleb swung toward him. “I don’t give a fuck! If that was Sara out there, would you be able to sit back and do nothing?”

Matthew seemed conflicted, so Caleb continued, pushing the knife deeper. "You owe me, Matthew, you both do. They wouldn't have him right now if..." He gave Sara a pointed look, and she raised her chin, but tears welled in her eyes.

Matthew sighed. "Fine. But you will stand down and follow my lead."

Yeah, we'll see about that.

Five minutes later, they were in the conference room with Matthew giving the teams a brief rundown. He had a picture of Jonathan Harboro emailed over so everyone would know who they were up against. Caleb cut it short because he knew that if he didn't get to Jake soon, they may not get him out alive. Enough time had passed already. Jake had been in the hands of a monster for the past four hours at least. Caleb was afraid of what he would find when he finally got to him.

Once they arrived at the hotel, they grouped by the vans in the parking lot and Caleb took control. "Team one, you're with me. We are going up to room two twenty-seven. Team two, you take the outside of the hotel. You all know what this guy looks like. If anyone gets past us, you take them down. Use deadly force if necessary. Sara, you're with Team two. Matthew, you're with me. What's the ETA of the FBI?"

Matthew looked like he was going to argue, but he glanced away and ran his hand through his hair. "They said a half an hour about fifteen minutes ago. We should wait for them, Caleb." Caleb knew he was probably right, but he couldn't risk it.

"We can't. Too much time has already passed. This red tape may take Jake's life. We have to move, now. Stay safe, everyone. Coms in and eyes open. Let's go."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Caleb heard Matthew mumble.

Yeah, he hoped so too.

The teams were made up of four people each, plus Matthew and Sara. They were short, but they would have to make due. He couldn't wait any longer. God only knew what Jake was suffering at that very moment. They broke apart and jogged in different directions. Caleb watched as Sara went toward the back door with Steven.

Caleb went straight to the front desk. He told the manager who he was and showed his badge. The manager gave him a universal key card, and Caleb took

the team up to the second floor. He gave instructions for two men to wait down the hall near the elevator banks. Caleb, Frank and Matthew went up to the suite.

He gave them both hand signals. Frank was to clear the left of the room, Matthew the right and Caleb dead center. When he got nods, he prepared himself for what could be behind the door and pushed it open. He didn't prepare himself enough.

He made a rookie mistake. He got distracted.

The form that distraction took was Jake tied up to a hook in the wall so he was standing on his toes. He was naked. Some Asian-looking man was using a thin cane on him while a taller blond man jacked off. There were bleeding lacerations all over his back, butt, legs and even the bottoms of his feet. Some looked like they were made from a blade, some from a whip. His cheek was resting on the wall and tears were running down his face.

That momentary loss of attention cost him and his team. Gunfire deafened him, and he saw Frank take a bullet and fall to the ground in a heap. Caleb returned fire, taking out the first shooter, but there was a second, and Matthew went down. People were yelling and scrambling for cover. Caleb ducked behind the couch, barely missing being shot himself. He sat there for a second, back to the couch and gun raised, trying to hear what was happening. He didn't know how badly Matthew was wounded, but he couldn't take the time to look, and Frank... shit. Pain for his friends and their families tightened his chest, but he pushed it away. He'd have time to grieve later.

He peeked around the couch to get an idea of where the second shooter was and then jerked back quickly. He didn't want to accidentally shoot Jake. Once he got his bearings, he turned and squatted behind the couch, preparing to spring and shoot. He didn't get the chance.

Pain resonated in the back of his head and shot down his neck, and then everything went black.

Chapter 6

CALEB CAME to consciousness slowly, as if being pulled from a tunnel back into the light. Sound returned first, and he could hear someone speaking. Next came the pain. His head felt bigger than it should be, like someone was hammering it with a mallet. The pain throbbed. Shooting violently. Through his temples. Into his eyes. Down his neck.

He groaned and tried to open his eyes, which made him hurt even more. He tried to rub them, but couldn't bring his hands up. That was when he realized they were tied behind his back. He was sitting upright on a chair of some sort.

"Ah, so our guest is awake, is he? Good."

Caleb blinked a few times, his eyes watering. After a few seconds, the pain lessened enough that he could focus. He looked up and into the smiling face of Jonathan Harboro, Jake's nightmare, and now his.

"You ruined our little party, you know. You and your friends." The man tsked at him, actually tsked like a school marm. "You should have left well enough alone. Now that I have you, I've decided I'm going to keep you." He patted Caleb's cheek like a child.

"Fuck you," Caleb ground out.

"Hmmm, maybe. That is quite the possibility actually. Thank you for mentioning it."

Caleb glared at the man, and Harboro chuckled in response.

"First, we're going to have a different kind of fun." Jonathan moved to the side, and Caleb noticed they were in some kind of dusty, unused warehouse. He could see Jake kneeling on the dirty cement floor, naked, with his hands on his thighs. He had cuts and bruises all over him. Blood dripped down the side of his face, and one of his eyes was swollen. He was staring off into space, like his mind had shut off to protect itself.

"You see, my boy has decided to be difficult. So I'm going to help him feel a little more cooperative." With that pronouncement, he slapped Caleb hard. Caleb's head jerked to the side, where someone stuck a hot poker into his eyeball, or that's what it felt like at least. Jake looked up and whimpered, but otherwise didn't move.

“That’s right, boy. If you don’t do as I say, your toy here will be the one who suffers. If you’re good, then maybe I’ll let you keep him.” Jake looked at Caleb, and Caleb’s heart broke. There was nothing of the man he knew there. He was looking at a tortured, beaten-down boy. His eyes full of fear, no obvious fight in them left to see. Caleb knew in that moment, without a doubt, if he didn’t get them out of this soon, Jake wouldn’t survive.

Caleb’s heart picked up speed at the thought, urgency flooded his veins, and he surreptitiously started feeling his bonds with his fingers. It was rough rope, and the chair was wood. If he could find a loose screw, maybe he would have a chance to free himself. As he felt around the back of the chair, Jonathan went to the door and called out. A rough-looking man with a maniacal gleam in his eyes walked into the room and stopped about two feet from Jake.

“Blow him. Now. And do a good job, boy. Charles here missed your blow jobs, didn’t you, Charles?”

The man grunted and clumsily lowered his fly, fingers shaking with anticipation. Jake flinched and turned his head in refusal.

Jonathan sighed. “Fine, if that is how it’s going to be. I didn’t want to have to do this, but you really are leaving me with no choice.”

He strode back over to Caleb and punched him in the stomach. The chair lifted on two legs for a second from the force, and all the air left his lungs on a grunt. He couldn’t catch his breath and pain shot from his stomach to his head, upping the intensity of the throbbing and making his eyes water.

Jake cried out and then quickly crawled over to Charles. He pulled the man’s semi-hard penis from his pants and stroked it to life.

“That’s right. Now wouldn’t it be so much easier if you would just do what I say the first time? Hmmm?”

This guy was crazy. He sounded just as reasonable as if he was talking to a ten-year-old who wasn’t doing his homework, and everything he said had a singsong quality to it. It was like he was a fucking middle school teacher, but instead of history, he was teaching depravity.

This was Jake’s father. This was how Jake grew up, what he’d overcome. The pride and admiration he felt for the man grew. Not only had he pulled himself out of a horrible situation most people wouldn’t survive, but somehow, he kept his sanity and sweetness intact. Instead of the bitter, jaded soul that, by all rights, Jake should be, he was funny, happy and just plain amazing.

“You son of a bitch!” Caleb spat through clenched teeth. “When I get out of here, I’m going to rip you apart with my bare hands.”

Jonathan smiled and tilted his head to the side, studying Caleb for a few moments. Then he said, “You can try.”

He looked back up to check on Jake. “Stop playing and suck it like you mean it. That’s right. Don’t stop.”

Jonathan started to rub his own crotch, still spewing instructions. He walked over, grabbed Jake’s hand and put it on the erection visibly straining his pants.

Bile rose up Caleb’s throat as he got a good look at Jake’s childhood. Jake suffered though this torture for so many years. A man who was supposed to love him and protect him instead orchestrated and participated in his torment.

Jake ripped his hand away from Jonathan. As punishment, Jonathan came back to Caleb and hit him again, this time in the face.

The distinctive sound of skin slapping skin reverberated around the room two seconds before pain radiated up Caleb’s jaw and out his right eye. He shook his head a few times to clear away the stars, and then winced when Jonathan violently wrenched him upright again by his hair.

Jake slurped and sucked on the rank, unwashed genitals of his father’s bodyguard, trying not to gag. He just wanted to get the man off as quickly as possible so, hopefully, they would be left alone for a while. Jake was afraid that if his father hit Caleb in the head again, it would kill him.

Caleb.

Oh, God, when he’d walked into that hotel room, Jake’s soul had crumbled. He’d thought Caleb was safe. He’d thought Caleb would move on with his life and be happy. Now Caleb was stuck in this hell too.

He sucked harder, rolling Charles’s sweaty balls, and a shiver of revulsion went down his spine. He’d dealt with this before, he would do it now. He would do whatever he had to in order to keep Caleb alive. Then maybe, they could both escape. Maybe... God, please, help them both escape.

His father was talking—when wasn’t he talking—but Jake ignored him and kept working. *For Christ’s sake, come already, you ugly fuck.*

Jonathan walked closer, reached down and grabbed Jake’s hand. He rubbed it on his erection, and Jake pulled away reflexively. *Shit, he shouldn’t have done that.*

His father muttered, "Fine," and then walked back over to Caleb. The distinctive sound of skin slapping skin reverberated around the room as Jonathan backhanded Caleb in the face. It took everything Jake had not to bite down and cry out.

His chest hurt, and it was hard to breathe. It wasn't the pain from his beating, although there was that too, it was watching Caleb suffer. He loved Caleb so much, and the idea that he was causing Caleb torment made him die a little. He didn't know how much of himself would be left if they ever made it out of here.

He watched his father pick up a nasty-looking knife and hold it to Caleb's throat, and his heart froze.

"Ah, ah, ah," his father said. "Look at him. Isn't he beautiful?"

No, don't look. Close your eyes and don't look. Please. God, please don't watch this.

Jake heard a sob, glanced toward Caleb and met his eyes. Those gorgeous turquoise eyes that had captivated him from the moment they met. The agony and regret he saw there made Jake want to curl into a ball and disappear. Caleb's tears destroyed him, and he felt like rotting garbage left too long on the street. The piece of shit that his father always told him he was.

"That's it, boy. Give it to him good."

Shame filled Jake, and he tuned out the rest of the conversation. He couldn't think of Caleb or of what Caleb probably thought of him now. He'd always hoped that Caleb would never know about this part of his life. It was too late for that though. He'd always known that he didn't deserve love, and now Caleb knew it too.

Charles started to fuck his face, and he opened his throat and let him. All the better to get this whole thing over with sooner. The bitter taste of bile rose up his throat and filled his mouth, causing him to gag. He jerked back, trying to catch his breath, but almost immediately started the sucking again. He didn't want Caleb to be punished for what Jonathan would see as disobedience. He focused on finishing this chore without breaking down completely, without losing his sanity.

Without becoming an animal.

But maybe it was too late for that. What if he'd been born that way? They do say blood begets blood, and his father was definitely an animal. His mother was too, just different, tame.

What that made him, he wasn't sure.

Maybe he was supposed to live this way. Perhaps his father was right, and he was supposed to die a slave, and everything he was outside of this horrible place was just a lie. A beautiful, wondrous dream. But this... this was his truth.

Charles finally orgasmed, his sour cum filling Jake's mouth. Jake struggled to swallow, knowing both he and Caleb would be beaten if he didn't.

When it was over, he crawled a few feet away, put his raw back against the wall, pulled up his knees to his chest and wept. Trying to hold himself together while his heart and soul broke apart.

Caleb watched as Jake crawled to the wall and curled in a ball. He wanted to go to him and tell him it was okay, to offer comfort and take him home. To let him know that he didn't think any less of him or blame him. He wanted to say so much. Yes, Jake had kept things from him, but it didn't matter. It wasn't important that Jake wasn't who Caleb had thought, or that there had been so many things that they had never spoken about. Nothing was as imperative as getting them out of there alive.

Caleb felt around the back of the chair again for a sharp edge, something that he could use to cut through the bonds. He knew it was a long shot, but he had to try. He had to do something.

All of a sudden, the door to the room they were in burst open. Men in black, with FBI logos on their vests, swarmed in and chaos reigned. "Get on the ground" and "drop your weapon" was shouted round-robin style around the room. He tried to see Jake, but there were bodies in the way. So many people.

The knife was no longer at his neck, and Jonathan was yelling. He wasn't the only one either. The shouting volume increased and then gunfire echoed. Before he knew what happened, he was on his side, still tied to a now broken chair. Jake was on top of him, bleeding and struggling for breath.

Caleb's adrenaline spiked. "Jake?"

Jake looked up and his eyes were filled with pain and regret. "I'm sorry. I'm so..." Before he could finish his sentence, Jake slumped over. Caleb couldn't feel him breathing any longer.

"Jake?" he whispered. "Jake! Somebody? Help! Jake, wake up!"

Jake's limp body was rolled off Caleb. "Get the EMTs in here now. He's been shot, and I can't find a pulse."

Caleb fought his bonds, struggling to get free—to get to Jake. His wrists were raw, and every movement sent pain to his head, but he pushed that away as best as he could. He craned his neck around, but he couldn't see shit. "Get me the fuck out of these ropes! God dammit, cut me loose!"

Matthew crouched down into his vision. Caleb was relieved to see his friend, but he was too anxious about Jake to think about it for long. "Calm down, Caleb. The paramedics are with him now."

"Can you please cut these ropes?" Caleb gritted out through clenched teeth.

"I need you to be calm, because you aren't going to help him if you go off half-cocked. Are you calm?"

"Yes, you fucker!" Caleb shouted at him, spittle flying out of his mouth.

Matthew shook his head, but he cut the ropes. As soon as Caleb was free, he tried to sit up, but a white cloud filled his vision and the room spun. Nausea turned his stomach, and a hot spike of pain shot through him. He was panting and swallowing reflexively to try to keep from puking.

"Whoa, there. You look like you need a doctor yourself." Matthew helped him sit up. "Can I get an EMT over here?"

Caleb jerked out of Matthew's grasp. "No. Need to see Jake."

"The EMTs are working on him. They are trying to stabilize him, and if you go over there, you'll just be in their way."

"I need to see Jake, now. Help me up." He didn't wait for Matthew's help, but struggled to his feet. Once standing, he swayed and almost fell over, but Matthew steadied him.

"Caleb, you need to be checked out. You have blood in your hair and you hit your head pretty hard when you went down. You won't do Jake any good dead. Now stop being a stubborn asshole."

Caleb wanted to fight, but he could barely stand, his vision was blurry and the room was moving like a tilt-a-whirl, so he knew Matthew was right. They tried to get him on a gurney, but he glared at the paramedic until they helped him walk outside and over to the ambulance.

He struggled into the ambulance, Matthew right behind him. As they checked his vitals and shined lights in his eyes, he grilled Matthew. "I thought you were dead."

"Nice to know I'd be missed so much."

Caleb couldn't hear any amusement in Matthew's voice, so he knew he was just as worried about Jake but trying to lighten the mood for both of them. It didn't work.

"The first bullet hit my vest. The second grazed my arm. By the time I got my breath back, everyone was gone, including you."

Caleb nodded and looked to the floor. "Frank?"

Matthew sighed. "He's alive. He was hit pretty bad but they've stabilized him."

Caleb blew out the breath he was holding and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. "How did you find me?"

"The FBI showed up about the time I was able to pull my ass off the floor. They were not happy we went in without them, by the way."

Yeah, Caleb was sure they weren't, and rightly so. Caleb shouldn't have been on that mission. He was too close to the case, and his inattention caused Frank's injury. Caleb could have easily gotten one of them killed. That would be one of his biggest regrets.

He grunted but didn't say anything. The EMT cut off his T-shirt and started an IV.

"Anyway, Sara and Scott were at the back door when Jonathan Harboro and his crew carried you out. Scott was caught off guard and was shot, but it wasn't serious. Sara hid in some bushes, but was able to get the license plate number of the SUV they used. We were in luck. It had a LoJack, which lead us right to you."

Lucky? Caleb guessed they were that. It could have been worse. They could still be in that hellhole with no way out.

Now, Caleb just hoped Jake made it. Then, he wouldn't just feel lucky, he would feel blessed.

Chapter 7

WHEN THEY got to the hospital, they ran a ton of tests on Caleb. He had a slight concussion, along with some bruises and cuts, but he wouldn't stay the night. They kept him for several hours for observation while they tried to convince him to stay, but gave up, made him sign a consent form saying that he refused medical care, and released him. He didn't mind. He'd sign anything to get to Jake.

When he finally convinced a pretty nurse to tell him where Jake was being treated, they wouldn't let him in the room. There were guards stationed at the door, and no matter what he said, they refused him entry. When he raised his voice and demanded they step aside, another FBI agent helped him find the exit.

He went home feeling worried, confused and miserable. Did Jake not want to see him? Was Jake too injured to decide? Jonathan Harboro was dead, so Jake was no longer in danger. Caleb had asked because he wanted ten minutes alone in a room with the fucker. Heck, five would have sufficed. But that would never happen.

When they'd tried to cuff Harboro, he lunged for a weapon and caught an agent off guard. He'd aimed for Caleb's head. Jake had jumped in front of the bullet and taken it instead. It just made him love the man more.

Caleb went home and took some pain pills, deciding that he would get some much-needed sleep, which wouldn't happen at all without being knocked unconscious. He would go back to the hospital the next day and persist until they let him see Jake.

The trouble was, when he went back the next morning, Jake was gone. No one would tell him where he was either. It was as if he'd never existed.

Two weeks crawled by with no word since Jake had disappeared. Matthew didn't even know where they relocated him. All he knew was that Jake was alive and well, and that the FBI had placed him somewhere else.

Caleb's chest hurt all the time. Everywhere he looked there were reminders of the happy life that they'd shared. Kira was moping around the house, just as depressed as he was. Every time they heard a car door shut, she would run to look out the window, and Caleb would glance up at the door. They were a pair, the two of them.

Waiting for a ghost to materialize out of thin air.

Caleb tried to pretend like everything was normal. He went to work, did his job and went home. He almost lost his badge for the stunt he'd pulled at the hotel, but because he had such a good record, and no one had died, they put him at a desk job while Internal Investigations performed a full review of the events. It didn't look like he would be back to regular duty any time soon, if ever. He also had to go to a shrink twice a week. For what, he wasn't sure. It wasn't as if they were going to be able to take the picture of Jake being used out of his head. Or of Jake shot and fading away right in front of him. His dreams would be haunted from now until eternity.

The good thing that came from all that happened was that they'd found their killer. They linked Jonathan Harboro to the dead girls, and he'd paid with his life. They found two of the kidnapped girls in the warehouse where Jonathan took them. They were in little dog cages, filthy and traumatized, but they would live.

Caleb was grateful that Jake was finally safe, wherever he was.

Jake's father would never darken his door again. It was just a shame that after everything, Jonathan had taken something else from him. From them both. He tore apart a relationship that had the potential to be something great—a forever type of thing, which rarely happened.

Caleb tried to stay positive, but it wasn't easy. It was his day off, and it was raining. He hated the damn rain. Maybe he should move somewhere else, like Arizona. It didn't rain there, and there wouldn't be so many memories everywhere he looked.

He couldn't do it though. He couldn't take the chance that Jake would come back and he wouldn't be there. Maybe that made him pathetic, but then, he already knew that.

He shuffled out of the bathroom and toward the kitchen, mopping his wet hair out of his eyes. The coffee wasn't made, of course. Jake wasn't there to make it. Like the fool he was, he stared at the coffee pot, the recollection of walking into the kitchen with Jake bent over feeding Kira flashing through his mind.

A knock on the door pulled him out of his thoughts. He shook his head and walked over, Kira at his heels. He cracked the door, blocking the opening with his body so the dog wouldn't sneak out, and froze when he found Jake on the

other side. He blinked a few times but didn't say anything, waiting for the mirage to evaporate before him.

His heart raced so fast he thought he would pass out, and the ache that had taken up permanent residence in his lungs increased. Happiness flooded him, but he couldn't move or speak, all he could do was stare.

Jake had a sling on his arm, and there were dark smudges under his eyes, but he was the best sight ever. He was standing in the rain, water running in rivulets off his hair. Half his body was under the awning, so his face wasn't in the rain, but the rest of him was soaked. He was holding a metal bucket in his arms with a bouquet of... beer bottles? Caleb's favorite beer, Stella Artois, was arranged in the bucket with bows and ribbons. He almost laughed at the gesture until he saw the look on Jake's face.

"Before you slam the door in my face, I just wanted to say something to you. I'm sorry. I should have told you, I know that now. But I had started my life over. I was no longer that lost boy. I *was* Jake Thomas. I remade myself. I thought my past would stay there, and I didn't want you to think differently of me." Jake winced and tried to adjust the bucket.

"Give me that." Caleb leaned out the door, took it from Jake's hands and set it on the table in the foyer. Kira was having a conniption, trying to get past him to Jake. He pushed her back, stepped onto the stoop, shut the door behind him and crossed his arms. He had to, or he would pull Jake to him. It seemed Jake wanted to clear the air, and so Caleb would be patient. He'd waited this long, a few more minutes wouldn't hurt.

"I don't even know who you are," Caleb said.

"Yes, you do. You know what's important. You know what I look like when I first wake up. You know that I am a grumpy bastard when I'm sick. You know that I leave my socks all over the house. You know *me*. You know the important things. You should know that I love you with everything I am, 'cause I do. Everything." The pleading expression on Jake's face broke Caleb's heart, and he blinked against the burning in his eyes.

He smiled at Jake. "No, I meant I don't even know your name. I don't know what to call you."

"Oh." Jake looked shell-shocked for a moment, then held out his left hand and smiled. "My name is Lucas Donovan, but you can call me Jake. Nice to meet you."

Caleb looked at that outstretched hand and broke. Patience be damned, he practically threw himself at Jake. Their bodies slammed together, and Jake grunted, stepping backwards from the impact. He hugged Jake hard, burying his face in the crook of Jake's neck. If Caleb was hurting him, Jake didn't complain. He needed this so badly. Needed to hold him, hang on and never let go.

He was squeezing so hard it hurt. That was why his breath was stuck in his throat and his chest was tight. His face was wet too, but that was because they were in the rain. That had to be it. *Fucking rain.*

He didn't know how long they stayed like that, clutched together, both of them trembling like leaves in the wind. It was a while though. Long enough for Caleb to remember Jake's scent, long enough that the sun broke through the clouds, long enough that the ache in his chest finally eased. When they broke apart and went inside their home, and he watched with fond amusement Kira's welcoming dance, he decided he didn't really mind the rain so much after all.

The End

Author Bio

Taylor Law is a northern-born, southern girl with a free spirit. If it's romance, she loves it. Taylor has lived in the southern United States most of her life, along with her huge family. She started writing at a very young age: her first poem at six, her first song at seven, and stories followed directly after. She hasn't stopped since. A romantic clear to her soul, Taylor continues to believe in the elusive "Happily Ever After." On any given day, you can usually catch her with a book in her hand, or creating something.

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ONE STEP AT A TIME

By S.N. Kat

Photo Description

A black and white picture shows five naked men running toward the ocean's waves. The men seem to be of good physique, but it is unclear as some of the bodies are blocked. The shadows on the sand indicate it is either early morning or almost evening.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

There are usually six of them engaging in this early morning ritual run to the water. Where is the sixth one?

This story can go either happy or sad, but I prefer happy. Please NO polyamorous, ménage, group sex or BDSM. Everything else is up to the author.

Sincerely,

Enjee

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, sweet/no sex, established couple, angst, sap, hurt/comfort, fraternity, self-esteem

Content Warnings: assault

Word Count: 14,427

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ONE STEP AT A TIME

By S.N. Kat

The sun had yet to rise over the ocean. The early morning breeze swept down the sand. A lone figure stood watching the waves crash back and forth. As a large gust swept through his sandy blond hair, he took a deep breath, breathing in the peacefulness, the relaxation that the sound, the smell, the sight brought him—or at least once brought him. Opening his hazel eyes, he saw a glimmer of light start creep up over the horizon. *It's a new day.*

As he took in another deep breath, a voice interrupted his thoughts. “Why are you here?”

Colton turned around to see Damion walking across the sand. “I could ask you the same thing,” he replied.

“Don’t avoid the question. You shouldn’t be here at all.”

“I’m fine,” Colton snapped. He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. “Sorry. I’m just a little tense.”

Damion put a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You should be resting. Go back to the house. Or to the hospital—”

“I’m fine,” Colton repeated. “I just needed some air.”

Damion let out a soft sigh. “We are only worried about you. You need to take care of yourself. You shouldn’t run today.”

Colton let his gaze go back over the dark water. He inhaled deeply, trying to draw in everything about the beach that had once calmed him.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be running today,” Colton said after a few minutes of silence. “I don’t have the energy to do it.”

“That’s ’cause you haven’t been sleeping.”

Colton wanted to give a sarcastic response back, but Damion was right. He hadn’t slept for two straight days. And it seemed like his mind wasn’t going to let him find rest anytime soon.

With a heavy sigh, Colton took a few steps forward, until he was inches away from the rhythmic water.

“Let’s go back to the house, C. We’ll make you some food.”

Colton allowed a small smile to form. “No thanks. You guys don’t need to give me food poisoning to get me to go to the hospital.”

“That’s not—”

“I know, man,” Colton interjected with a small chuckle. He let himself feel the emotion of joy for a minute before he turned to his friend with a serious look. “I will go back to the house and rest. Soon. Just give me a few minutes to enjoy the beach. I need to feel the morning breeze.”

Colton looked away from his friend’s sad eyes. He didn’t want to see that look anymore.

“Okay. But I’m staying with you.”

I know you will. Colton sighed. “You need to lead the run today. And make sure everybody in the group is emotionally okay.”

“Brett said he’ll handle that. I need to make sure you’re all right.”

The stare from Damion gazed right into Colton. *Stop being such a good friend.* The emotions he had held back from surfacing started to appear. He didn’t want to break down. Not now. Not ever.

“I’m fine,” Colton said mechanically. He turned back to the water. “I have a promise to keep with myself. And him.”

Five Weeks Ago

It started off like every Saturday morning in the Alpha Kappa fraternity house: wake up late, take some aspirin, go back to bed. The Phi Delta party last night had been more than over the top. It seemed the entire campus had attended, and the beer kegs had an endless supply of nourishment. And like usual, most of their guys had stumbled into the house as the sun was rising.

Colton stirred from his slumber as the sun’s rays sneaked through the blinds. He sat up in his bed to look for his phone when an arm slid down his waist. He turned to see the figure still asleep in his bed. Colton smiled down at the body and ruffled his hand through the dark locks that lay on the other pillow. The sleeping figure turned his head into the moving hand and murmured something inaudible.

Colton swiped his finger across the screen of his phone to read it was seven in the morning, too early for most of the house to be awake. He carefully moved out of the bed and dressed without waking the sleeping man.

Colton made his way quietly down the stairs and into the kitchen. A tall, dark figure stood by the refrigerator, drinking a glass of orange juice. "Morning, Colton."

"Morning, Damion. Are you the only one?" Colton asked as he sat down to put on his shoes.

Damion placed the empty glass down on the counter with a small smile. "Why do you ask that every time? You know nobody else is coming."

"You never know. One day, one of the guys might have the urge to—"

"Wake up three hours after he fell asleep to go run off the hangover from last night?" Damion sarcastically interrupted.

Colton gave him a defeated look. "Yeah, that."

Damion gave him a pat on the back. "Don't worry, man. I'll always be your running partner." The two men walked out the back door toward the trail which led to a sandy shore. "Even when your boyfriend is too exhausted to get up with you."

Colton's step faltered at that remark. His cheeks glowed pink. He shot Damion a sharp look, but his friend looked away innocently.

"At least he has a good reason to not get up and exercise. I wouldn't want him to intrude on our little weekend ritual," Damion added with a smirk he couldn't hold back.

The blush was in full flame now. "Okay! Stop with the dirty comments."

Damion let out a laugh as they reached the beach entrance closest to their fraternity house. "I'm just teasing you. You need to lighten up. You guys have been dating for a while now."

"I know. I just can't handle the teasing." Colton glanced around the beach. "And sometimes you're too loud."

"Nobody is around us, and none of the guys care," Damion replied as he stretched his arms. "Well, at least they don't say they have a problem. If they do, they are at least considerate enough to keep it to themselves."

Damion was right. Most of their fraternity members did not care two of their brothers were gay. And dating each other. And one of them was their president. Sometimes it felt too surreal to have this much acceptance outside his family, even if the word of their relationship hadn't really been passed around

the entire campus and community. They had a group of friends—*brothers*—to support them. It was a nice feeling compared to the harsh reality of the outside world.

“How many miles do you want to do today?” Damion’s question brought him out of his thoughts.

Taking a deep breath of the salty air, Colton took off down the beach. “Until you can pass me.”

Two hours later, Colton and Damion returned to the fraternity house laughing. The sweat was pouring down Damion’s torso, and it made Colton’s shirt cling like a second skin.

“It’s a shame we can’t do this every morning,” Damion commented.

Colton looked puzzled. “Why not? We just have to wake up a couple of hours earlier.”

Damion let out a chuckle. “Fat chance you are getting me up earlier before I have to go to class.”

Colton opened the door to their fraternity house while shaking his head. “You don’t make any sense. You are up early now.”

“Give me a better reason to get up early on a weekday besides hanging out with your ass, and I will,” Damion replied as he walked into the kitchen.

The two were surprised to find some of the guys were actually up, eating and drinking their headaches away. The guys stared, annoyed by the two energized boys.

“You guys are too energetic,” one of their fraternity brothers, Alex, mumbled.

“You guys need to party a little less.” Damion spoke after calming down his laughter.

The others groaned. “I don’t get it. You drank just as much as us. How are you all bright and cheery?” Alex questioned Damion.

Damion flexed his biceps. “Because I have the body of a god.”

More groans erupted. “Oh, yes. We need to be reminded of your scholarship, football body. And what about you, Colton? You disappeared early last night.”

Colton felt a blush on his face that wasn't from the eight-mile jog and short swim he had just finished. "I, uh... wasn't feeling too well. So I turned in early."

"And before you ask where I went to, I made sure Colton got back to bed. Safe and sound."

A man with only basketball shorts and a smirk on stood in the doorway of the kitchen. Colton knew his face burned a brighter shade of red.

"Morning, Pres. You missed out on some of the Triple Beta girls losing their shit last night," Alex said. "And their clothes."

The dark-haired man walked across the kitchen to the blushing man. "Not a big concern of mine right now. Morning, Colt," the man said as his hand cupped the red-hot face.

"Hey, Eli. How—" Before another word could get out, Elijah had claimed Colton's lips with a soft and gentle kiss. Elijah's tongue slowly moved into Colton's open mouth and grazed the roof of it. As Colton was about to let out a moan, Elijah pulled off of him.

"I needed my 'good morning' kiss," Elijah said, wearing a sly smile, likely delighted that his boyfriend's face grew redder.

"It's enough some of us didn't get any last night. Don't be all *cutesy* in front of us," Alex commented. "Go get a room."

A soft chuckle left Elijah. "That's an odd comment considering we already have a room."

Could Colton's face get any hotter? The brothers of the house bunked two to a bedroom with each bedroom containing two twin beds. Colton and Elijah had been sharing a room for the past year, where their beds were pushed together.

"Have you eaten?" Elijah asked Colton.

"Not yet. I was going to take a shower and then grab some food. Wait for me?" Colton was walking out of the kitchen.

"Always. I'll be down here doing damage control on last night's party," Elijah shouted.

The moans and groans started up again. "Come on, Pres. We're in pain here. Be nice."

Like every Saturday night, Colton and Elijah had their date night. The small city their college was located in didn't offer much in variety of food or entertainment. But the people were friendly, and the community supported the university and its programs.

"This is odd," Elijah muttered as he was pulling his truck into the parking lot of their fraternity house.

Colton noticed it too. The only vehicles in the lot were those of their brothers. On a Saturday night, there was either a party at their house or the guys went out.

Colton and Elijah walked through the front door and saw the men of Alpha Kappa sitting around with a few male friends. There wasn't a girl in sight. And they were just sitting around talking. No drinking games. No music. The three kegs in the middle of the room and bottles of liquor in various places indicated the men were actually drinking.

Colton stood unmoving at the door. He wasn't sure how to proceed with what he saw. The guys of Alpha Kappa never sat around and... talked.

"I saw you leaving with Rachel from Triple Beta last night. You get some?"

Colton let out a soft sigh. That sounded more like the fraternity brothers he knew and loved. Elijah seemed to hear the conversation, too, and moved toward the only open sofa. Colton followed him, greeting his friends along the way.

"No man! We were starting to fool around in her dorm, but when I took off my shirt, she flipped out," one of their brothers, Peter, answered. "She said I am too hairy! And that it looks disgusting. Can you believe that?"

Colton sat down beside Elijah with a Solo cup full of beer.

"She wanted me to shave my chest and back hair. When I told her no, she kicked me out."

The other man looked at Peter with slight curiosity. "Why didn't you guys just turn off the lights?"

Peter groaned. "I mentioned that. But she said she would 'still be able to feel the nastiness.'" Peter took a sip of his beer. After he swallowed his drink, he asked quietly, "It's not that big of a deal, right?"

Colton flinched at the topic of conversation. Taking a sip of the beer, he glanced around the room, forcing himself to find another conversation. But it was too late. Colton could only hear the words from Peter. The more he listened

to Peter chat about his problems of last night, the harder it was to breathe. When he was at the point of hyperventilating, a familiar hand was there, rubbing small circles on his lower back. The hand was soothing and warm, and helped calm him down. He glanced over at Elijah, who was looking straight ahead, probably trying not to draw attention to his breathing-labored boyfriend. Colton was grateful for the touch and thought.

Colton turned his attention to his other brothers. It quickly dawned on him most of the guys were having similar talks.

“Did you hear Travis slept with Brittany after the party? I’ve been talking with her for nearly a month, and a douche of Phi Delta only spoke two sentences to her. Must be because of the Adonis-like body he has.”

“Two girls from Sigma Lambda were turned down because they weren’t skinny enough. By guys who were big enough to eat them!”

Not all of the conversations Colton heard were so compassionate. A fair amount of his brothers were discussing their latest conquest, boasting about their skills in the bedroom.

“I didn’t make it back to the house till late. The girl I was with couldn’t get enough of me... Who was it? Fuck if I remember her name. But she was hot.”

It seemed to Colton his fraternity brothers were split on their topics. There were some brothers who were wallowing in self-pity. Some were bragging to the extent they should be hit. And some were talking about other people’s pains. It was a very odd night. As the night wore on, the tension in the room seemed to thicken. It might have been the alcohol consumption, or maybe too much testosterone in the room. But you could feel a fight brewing amongst the brothers.

Elijah stood and slammed his Solo cup down when he saw Peter starting to march across the room. “Stop talking! All of you!” The room became still almost immediately. All eyes turned to their president. “Do you guys hear yourselves? It makes me sick.”

Elijah scanned the room and all, probably to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “You guys need to get your acts together. There are some of you”—he pointed to one side of the room—“who don’t have any respect for anybody. And there are you guys”—pointing to another side—“who don’t have any respect for yourselves. And finally, the rest of you are being silent about the problems. Agreeing to whatever is being said. It’s like a room full of girls.”

There was a quiet snicker in the back of the room. The brother standing next to that man punched him in the arm. Elijah stared hard at the man who had giggled until he looked away guiltily.

“This is an ongoing problem with individuals. Both men and women. This idea that the people we hang out with, date, have sex with is based on what the person looks like—that the first impression of the physical self is the only impression. And this goes for how other people view themselves. An individual needs to physically accept oneself; you only have one body.”

Elijah took a breath as his eyes scanned the room. “Why can’t we be accepted for what’s inside? I know that sounds corny as hell, but isn’t it true? As we get older, our outer appearances will change, but our personalities and beliefs will stay the same.”

The president started to walk the room as he gave his speech. “College doesn’t last forever, guys. I know this is supposed to be the time of our lives, and believe me, we should make great memories. But you develop as a person in these four, five, however many years it takes to get your degree. That’s the kind of person you are for the rest of your life.”

Colton still had his cup touching his lips. He couldn’t move due to the words Elijah preached. It wasn’t the most eloquent or articulate of speeches Elijah had given, but it hit upon a touchy subject amid the group, particularly because they were college students.

Elijah gave one more look at his brothers, frozen around him, before he finished his speech. “You guys think about it, or whatever. I’m going to bed.”

The fraternity watched as their president stomped out of the common area and up the stairs. The men waited for the slam of a door, but it never came. Most of the eyes turned to Colton as he remained sitting with the cup to his lips.

Great. Colton closed his eyes and downed the rest of his drink. He slowly stood up and threw the cup into the nearby trash can. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll go talk to him. But know I agree with everything he said.”

Colton made his way up the stairs with more grace than the man before him. He leaned against the doorframe of their bedroom to see his boyfriend lying face down on the bed. “That was some speech you gave down there,” Colton said quietly as he shut the door.

“It was a crappy speech and you know it.” The muffled sound of Elijah’s voice reached Colton’s ears. “But, damn, did it need to be said.”

Colton sat down on the bed beside Elijah and rubbed his hand over the broad back. "It was an inspiring speech. I think it has them thinking differently down there. And you know us guys; it takes something big to get a group of us actually thinking."

A chuckle vibrated through the sheets. Elijah turned on his side and looked up at him. He laced their fingers together and brought their hands to his lips. After the gentle kiss, he tugged Colton to lie beside him. Colton went willingly.

The kiss this time was placed on Colton's lips. They kissed slowly, gently, exploring each other's mouths. Elijah rolled on top of Colton, his hands rubbed up and down Colton's body. Colton moaned into the kiss and arched into the touch. When Eli tried to lift Colt's shirt up, Colt grabbed Elijah's hands and broke the kiss. Breathing heavily, he stared up into his boyfriend's eyes and saw the mixture of emotions. Passion. Lust. But then, hurt and regret.

Elijah looked away from Colton. "Sorry," Elijah softly muttered. When Colton caught his breath, he lifted his hand to cup his boyfriend's cheek.

"No, I'm sorry." Elijah still didn't turn his way. "Let me up to turn off the lights. I'll be right back." Colton tried to relax as he walked across the room. The conversations he overheard earlier had him feeling more tense than usual.

He sat back down on the bed, this time the covers turned down for him. Elijah, lying under the bedspread already, pulled the sheets over them and wrapped his arms around him. Colton felt Elijah rub his head against his hair.

Elijah's breath evened out, and his hands tightened around Colton. Moments passed and nothing happened. When Elijah didn't progress any further, Colton asked, confused, "You don't want to do anything, Eli?"

Elijah left out a soft sigh. "Sorry, I shouldn't have pushed you. I'm just a little upset from the earlier uproar. Mind if we just snuggle tonight?"

Colton chastised himself for making Elijah feel that way. He needed to sort out his internal battle. One day. Hopefully soon. "Sorry."

"Not your fault. You know I'll never make you do something you don't want to."

Colton smiled into Elijah's chest. "I love you."

Colton felt Elijah's lips turn upward on his head. "I love you too. And remember, one step at a time. I'll wait for as long as it takes."

It hadn't been twenty-four hours since Elijah had made his zealous address. And surprisingly, the men of Alpha Kappa were acting almost normal. Usually when their president was upset, the men were either too nice or overly cautious around the man. But on Sunday night, the weekly Alpha Kappa meeting progressed smoothly in the fraternity house.

For forty-five minutes, different brothers talked about what events had happened the past week and what the next few weeks looked like for Greek and campus life. After starting late, of course, it was actually over an hour into the meeting.

Colton tried to hide a yawn. As he looked around the room to his semi-attentive brothers, he noticed he was the only one pretending to be enthused. This was the duller part of their weekly meeting. Usually everyone was trying to stay awake.

To keep himself awake, he began to focus on that puzzle. His thoughts didn't last long when their vice president, Brett, stood to give the closing remarks.

As he walked into the middle of the room, complete silence took over the room. Instead of everyone's eyes focusing on Brett, they were turned to their president, still seated.

"Pres. Your reprimand did a good number on us last night." Brett held up his hand when Elijah looked as if he was going to stand. "Hang on. Let me say this. We've been talking nearly nonstop about what you said. And we agree. We do need to do something about this problem. We need to change and show ourselves—and others—that someone's worth should be assessed based on who a person is, not what he or she looks like."

There were a few whispers in the room, probably from the men who didn't live in the house and had missed out on all the talking that apparently had happened today.

Brett continued with his prepared speech. "People do need to be more accepting of both themselves and others. And like you said, college is the time where we develop these ideals."

Colton glanced over to Elijah and saw his normal stoic face. But Colton knew better. There was a glimmer in Elijah's eyes that spoke of pride for his brothers.

Present Time

Colton took a few steps back from the water's edge. Standing on the beach did nothing to help him relax as it used to. He wanted to feel okay, to feel normal. And if he couldn't get that sensation on the ocean front, where could he go? His other, better choice was not an option right now.

He flinched at the thought and then scolded himself for letting negative thoughts return. Colton stared down the still-deserted sandy shore. He felt Damion's presence behind him, keeping a watchful eye on his friend.

Colton needed to do something to relax. "Want to go on a run?"

After a short silence, Damion responded firmly, "I know it is Saturday morning, but I don't think we should. You need to get to the house and rest."

"No. I need our ritual. I need something normal right now." Colton stared at his friend, pleading with him.

Colton could see Damion's resolve crumbling. Damion looked up and down the barely lit beach as if he was trying to find a way to deny Colton his running pleasure. "Fine, but not too far. We don't need you passing out before you get to a bed."

Colton gave a soft nod and fake smile, but he had different ideas than Damion. *If my mind will let me, I'll pass out on this very beach.*

Three Weeks and Five Days Ago

The plan seemed too simple to Colton. How was this going to change how people felt about themselves or others?

Over a week ago, the men of Alpha Kappa decided to start up the *Run for Self*. The idea was inspired by the Nearly-Naked Mile that a few campuses did every year. The Nearly-Naked Mile was a jogging event where you shed your clothes before running and donated them to the homeless.

If people of all shapes and sizes could be comfortable running after shedding and then donating the clothes off their backs, why couldn't a bunch of students feel comfortable about running for themselves? It was silly, right?

Six men stood on the soft sand in various arrays of clothing. The guys, whether they had athletic bodies or not, were surprisingly shy about this task. The brothers decided to add that the run could also be a positive method for those who wanted to shed off the beer gut or get into better cardiac shape.

All the brothers understood that no one was obligated to participate in this cause. It was an individual choice. Not one man would be seen any differently if he decided to not participate.

Over the last week, the men of Alpha Kappa held meetings to discuss the philanthropy they wanted to start. They wanted to do a four-week-long running event where people ran in the clothing most comfortable for them. The running around campus and the community was mainly to promote the cause. The big part of their idea was to bring in counselors and public speakers to their campus. They already had five people who were committed to come throughout the month, and the college's counseling department was on board. All they needed was the approval of a few deans. Which, on Friday, they easily obtained by using Elijah's and Brett's persuasive and organizational skills.

On Saturday, Elijah and Brett had an informal meeting with the presidents and vice presidents of all fraternities and sororities on campus. The men explained their philanthropy idea to their fellow students but were met with mixed support. Most of the students seemed excited and promised to talk to their chapters at their next meeting. But some seemed very indifferent to the idea.

Brett believed it was a successful meeting. Even if some people didn't want to participate, word of their event would still get passed around.

The men of Alpha Kappa decided to have three groups run every day for a span of twenty-eight days. The frat brothers would run on the beach in the morning, and on campus around noon and in the evening.

For the first run, the group consisted of Colton, Elijah, Damion, Brett, Alex, and Peter. Elijah thought it was a victory this many of his brothers had woken up early to go running. Colton took it as a small insult since they didn't want to run with Damion and himself on Saturday morning. Damion laughed at him and commented, "At least we get to run every morning like you wanted."

Colton let his gaze travel across the beach. There were not many people visible along the sandy shore this early in the morning, but that didn't hinder the men's attitudes. They needed to feel comfortable where they were running, and if it had to be a semi-deserted beach, then that's where they would run.

Colton took a deep breath, as he always did before a run, to bring in the taste of salt. He let his arms stretch in the breeze to feel the cool air rush over him.

"You guys ready to start day one?"

His boyfriend's voice pulled him away from the pleasure of the beach. Elijah was already stripped down to basketball shorts. Damion also showed off his physique and had body paint on his chest and back reading "Run for Self." Brett also had only shorts on, while the other three men wore T-shirts.

Colton knew he should at least remove his shirt. He had a pretty good body. Running and lifting weights with Damion kept his body toned. But he could never bring himself to work out or run without a shirt on. He was more comfortable being covered.

Colton glanced over at his friends getting ready for their first run of many. He shyly glanced over at Elijah. Today was going to have many firsts. He had never run with his boyfriend before. Just seeing Elijah's body shine in the early morning sun had him holding his breath.

Focus! Colton scolded himself for having such lewd thoughts in public. Maybe that was why he never pushed Elijah to go running with him.

"You sure you want to keep the shirt on this time? You have to have a body to show off." Damion thankfully interrupted his thoughts.

"My body just can't compete with your athletic figure," Colton said with humor. "Don't worry, though. By the end of the month, I'll be running bare-chested with you."

Colton glanced over at his boyfriend to see him smiling back. He had already made that promise to himself. And Elijah.

Four Weeks and One Day Ago

"You know you are going to want to change by the end of the week. Just go with the afternoon group. It fits your classes better."

Elijah's eyebrow rose. "Nah. I need to learn to get up earlier anyways. And besides, I have always wanted to go running with you on Saturday mornings. I could never just roll out of bed. This cause is to help all of us in some way."

Colton and Elijah were nestled up on their bed working on homework when the topic of the philanthropy event started again. They were going to start running on Monday. Just three days away.

Colton nervously shifted to look at Elijah. "Eli? Does this run have anything to do with me?"

Elijah hesitated a bit. "No. And yes. It wasn't started because of you, you know that. But I think it's a good opportunity to help you accept yourself."

Colton pushed away from Elijah and got out of the bed. "We've had this conversation. I'm fine with myself. I like myself." Colton stared down at his boyfriend with shame. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap."

Elijah placed his textbook down and crawled across the bed to Colton. When he reached the edge, he grabbed Colton's hands and brought them to his face. "I love you. And I know you love me. But there is a part of you that you don't want anybody to see. And it seems like me especially."

Colton could feel Elijah's eyes gaze into his, like he was looking inside him and seeing all of his painful experiences. So Colton did the thing he knew best when he was backed into a corner: deny.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Colton muttered.

Elijah gave an incredulous look. "Really? You're going to play the denial game?"

Damn, he knows me too well. "Well, it's not that big of a deal now. I've lived with it so far."

Elijah's eyes softened with a hint of sadness. "Let's make love right now."

Colton's eyes got wide. "Now? It's four in the afternoon. And there are still some of the guys here."

"The guys being here never stopped us before. We can be quiet." Elijah wiggled his eyebrows and added some pleasure in his voice. "I'm good at making you breathless in bed."

Colton tried to extract his hands from Elijah's vise-like grip, but Elijah wasn't letting him escape this time. "Let-let me go."

"Never. You have to know by now that I'll never turn you away, that I'll always want you." Elijah's eyes softened and his thumbs started running soothing circles over Colton's hands. "I want you in every way you can give me, body, mind, and soul. And also I want to give you all of me." Elijah let a smirk escape. "Not that I haven't already."

Colton's body relaxed a little, to the point where Elijah pulled him over his lap, straddling the man. Elijah's hands roamed Colton's back.

Before his emotions got the best of him, Colton rested his forehead on Elijah's and whispered, "You already have all of me. I told you that months ago, on our one-year dating anniversary. That this wasn't a college fling. That this was forever for me."

Elijah tipped his head back to look into his boyfriend's eyes again. After a moment, he placed a gentle kiss onto each eye. Colton saw the moisture on the departing red lips. He was crying.

"I know. And I feel the same. But I want you to be comfortable in your own body so you can show me all of it, not hide the scars of your past."

Colton placed a soft kiss on Elijah's wet lips. "I will. Just keep giving me more time. I promise, one day, I will be ready."

A hand stroked through Colton's hair. "Take your time. I'll wait forever if I have to."

Present Time

"Stop! Come on, man, stop!"

Colton's heart beat faster and faster with every stride he took, his breathing more ragged than ever in his life. He was losing control of his body's feelings and functions, but, damn, did it feel good.

He passed another pier when he finally noticed a little more light had begun to shine on the shore. Colton slowed to a leisurely jog as he took in the scenery. The sun peeked above the horizon, letting off an assortment of colors. The sky and water lit up like a beautiful, artist's painting. *How can it be this beautiful when I feel like dying?*

"Gotcha!" A hand grabbed his arm in a death grip and halted his movements, nearly bringing him to the ground. Damion leaned over, heavily panting. "What the hell? Didn't you hear me?"

Colton took deep breaths of oxygen. "Sorry. I didn't. I guess I was in the zone."

"*The Twilight Zone*," Damion muttered. After a few deep breaths, Damion straightened up with his fingers still wrapped around Colton's arm. "I know you're in pain. But you can't run yourself into the ground. You're not the only one who is hurting."

Two Weeks and Six Days Ago

It was not one week into Alpha Kappa's *Run for Self* when Abby, the president of the Sigma Lambda sorority, made a visit to Elijah.

Abby informed Elijah that the women of her sorority wanted to be part of the run. The sorority girls appreciated the idea of the cause and held high respect for the fraternity for starting the event. The men of Alpha Kappa were beyond happy. Having more people express they wanted to increase their self-acceptance was the reason why the guys were doing this. More so, the fact the fraternity would have females running with them delighted most of the brothers.

The next day, Elijah booked the quad and gave a short speech to gathered students about what Alpha Kappa was doing and why. Some took interest and some completely ignored him. It was hard to make a stand when you were afraid to accept you needed help. And it was hard to support a cause when you were some of the people causing the mess.

As the days passed, the running groups became larger. Because the college was located in a small town, word quickly spread through the community. Students from both the college and local high school had come dressed in various levels of clothing, wanting to participate in the event. Some people wore clothes that showed off who they were as a personality. Some people showed off the scars, the hairiness, or the God-given body they were proud to have. It became a different type of run than what the fraternity started with, but the theme and meaning were the same: Be proud and accept yourself.

The six brothers who ran in the morning decided not to change to another time. They had a routine to help push each other and the large group that had formed with them. After week two, Colton had removed his shirt. He was a little uncomfortable and hesitant at first, but as he continued to run with people who were half-naked like him, he stopped thinking.

Along with the runs, Colton decided to go to a few of the talks and counseling sessions throughout the week. He sat quietly in the group sessions, which he was told was okay to do. He wasn't ready to open up to strangers when he couldn't fully open up to Elijah. The speakers did bring inspiration and a new perspective on what he thought about himself and other people. Elijah sat quietly with him at every event, just being his support pillar.

Present Time

Colton looked up at the glowing sky. His hands were behind his head and his body covered in sand. Damion stood nearby, making sure he wouldn't get up after being thrown down. Colton knew he was no match for the football player's strength.

A few minutes ago, Colton had become hysterical. He couldn't get himself to calm down. The hands on him were not soothing or calming. He had started to hyperventilate when Damion finally got through to him. "Pull it together, man! You're doing this for Elijah! You have to do this for him!"

The words had the effect of ice water poured on him. After he had stood frozen for a few moments, he had started shaking again, but this time from a different emotion, anger. Colton had launched into a tirade of everything that had gone wrong and who to blame—himself. Damion had finally thrown him to the ground, telling him to "calm the fuck down."

The only sounds heard for minutes had been the waves crashing and deep, heavy breaths.

Damion sat none too graciously beside his stretched-out friend. "Sorry I threw you down, but you were losing it. I guess football is my second nature."

Colton stared at his best friend. "No. I needed that. Thanks. Just try to remember I'm not built like a tank as you guys are."

Damion let a smile appear. "You are strong, C. Physically and mentally. You just need to see it."

Yes. Yes, he did.

Five Days Ago

It was the beginning of week four of the *Run for Self* when motivation finally hit Colton. Over the last three weeks, nearly all of the Greek societies on campus had helped with the event. Many of the groups were able to get enough speakers and counselors to come to the college to give daily talks and outreaches to both students and people in the community. The men of Alpha Kappa never would have thought something so small would have grown into what it became.

The month-long run was almost over, and Colton was feeling a little freer. The runs themselves didn't spark any self-discovery. Well, besides seeing Eli's half-naked and sweaty body in the outside light. But the talks and groups helped him learn more about himself, about how he could both accept what had happened and how to let others in.

Colton had sent Elijah a text earlier in the day to come back to their room after his afternoon class. While waiting for three p.m. to arrive, Colton tried not

to talk himself out of his plan. He tried pacing and reading chapters from a textbook he had a test on tomorrow. Running was out of the question; he would keep running and not come back until dark.

The sound of the door opening had Colton tensing up, and he dropped the textbook he was holding. Elijah poked his head in with a curious look. "Is everything okay, Colt?"

Colton let out a soft breath and reached down for the book while Elijah came into the bedroom and shut the door behind him softly. After placing the book on his desk, Colton extended his hand to Elijah. Without hesitation, Elijah took Colton's hand in his.

"What's wrong? And don't lie, because you are a horrible liar."

Colton inhaled softly. "There is no one in the house now."

Elijah looked at his boyfriend perplexed. "Okay. They're probably in class, or out running, or at the quad. Why? Do we need to call a meeting?"

Colton let out a soft chuckle. "Gosh, no. Not for this." He squeezed Elijah's hand and looked into the dark eyes he loved so much. "Want to make love?"

Elijah's eyes were as wide as saucers. "Right now? It's the middle of the afternoon."

The shocked look on Elijah's face made Colton smile. He moved his hands around Elijah's back and pulled him close. "Yes, right now."

Many emotions traveled across Elijah's face. He first showed elation, but then his face fell to a frown. Elijah placed his forehead on Colton's. "We don't have to rush this. You don't need to push yourself to do something you're not ready for."

Colton's heart skipped a beat. *How did I get such a loving man in my life?*

"I want to do this, Eli. I'm ready to show you everything."

Elijah searched Colton's eyes for a few more moments. Colton kept strong, not letting any of his past hesitation or regret show. He wanted to allow the man he loved to see he was ready.

Elijah gently lifted Colton's shirt over his head. His fingers and eyes grazed softly over the toned muscles. Colton shuddered at the thought of Elijah memorizing every contour of his body.

"Shhh. It's okay. We'll go as slow as you need. If you say stop, I will stop." Elijah's eyes followed his fingers as they traced up Colton's bare chest. "All you need to do is think about how much I love you."

Elijah led Colton to the bed. They softly fell onto the mattresses and allowed their hands to just roam.

This wasn't anything new to them. They had made out, pleased each other, had sex. But in the light—where they could see each other's entire body and every emotion—it was a whole new experience. Colton felt the fear of doubt return as Elijah removed his own shirt.

His boyfriend was a little more buff than he, but that was because Colton ran more than he lifted weights. When Elijah reached for the button on Colton's jeans, Colton pushed the hand away.

"Sorry," he quickly said, looking away. "It's a bad habit."

His boyfriend's hand tilted Colton's face so they looked into each other's eyes. "Don't be sorry. You don't ever have to be sorry with me. I said it once, and I'll say it again: we can stop whenever you want to."

Colton loved hearing those words, but he knew there was only so much time a person could wait. And he had made Elijah wait a long time.

"I don't want to stop. I want to show you everything. I want you to do everything. I want you to... feel everything."

Colton couldn't look away from those dark eyes. And he tried. Thoughts of their past love-making appeared in his mind. It had always been dark, their hands the only source of sight. But even then, Colton hadn't let Elijah see all of him. Colton loosened himself every time Elijah took him.

The first few times had been very awkward. It had taken a while for Elijah and Colton to find the right rhythm for their lovemaking. When Colton had first explained his situation to Elijah, he had thought he would be dumped right there. Who could want a boyfriend with his condition?

But, like every time, Elijah had surpassed all expectation. He had taken Colton's hand and kissed each finger slowly. "Thank you for telling me. I know that was very hard for you, to put all of that pain out there, but I'm happy you want to be with me as much as I want to be with you."

They had talked the rest of that night, just holding hands and being with each other.

"Colt, I want all of that, too. But I don't want it unless you are ready." A gentle smile appeared on Elijah's face. He ran his hand gently over Colton's chest and down his side. "I love you far too much to push you into something you're not ready for. I'm a patient man. You know that."

The comforting hand continued to go up and down Colton's side. "I'll wait because I love all of you. All of your perfect imperfections."

Damn him. Colton launched himself on top of Elijah. The kisses were demanding and needy. Colton felt Elijah trying to slow him down, but he wasn't going to stop. If Elijah could be that kind of man for Colton, then he deserved the same treatment.

Colton pulled back for air. "I want this. I really, really want this." Colton held strong as he looked into Elijah's dark pools.

Elijah let his hands wander down to Colton's jeans. Colton let out a loud moan when Elijah squeezed him through his pants. Elijah's eyes grew darker with desire as he watched Colton's face. His tongue licked his lower lips, and he leaned in for a deep kiss.

Colton tried hard to stay relaxed as Elijah flicked his jeans button open. When Colton didn't push him away, Elijah started to pull down the zipper.

There was a knock at the door.

"Hey, Pres. There are some guys here from Phi Delta to see you," Damion said through the wood.

Elijah groaned. "I'll be down in a minute."

Damion coughed on the other side of the door. "I'll let them know. And... sorry for interrupting."

The two men heard Damion hurry away from their room. Elijah planted a small kiss to Colton's lips. "Want to come with?"

Colton remained motionless. The perfect opportunity was ruined. He rolled off his boyfriend and grumbled into his hands.

"Don't worry. If you want, I'll go kick them out and come right back."

Colton looked over as Elijah pulled his shirt back over his torso and adjusted his pants. The moment was already destroyed. He needed more time to work up the courage to do this again. "I'll come with you. It won't do you any good if I'm here all by myself."

Elijah gave Colton a sensual look and a moan to follow. "Good idea. I don't want to think about you pleasuring yourself while I'm not here to help."

Colton blushed. "Not what I meant." And then he added, "Pervert."

Elijah chuckled. "Just a man in love."

If Elijah was sexually frustrated from their interruption, no one could tell. It seemed that he was now trying not to yell at the three Phi Delta fraternity brothers in their common room.

“Explain to me again why you want us to stop the *Run for Self*. I must have had an aneurysm when you were telling me.” Elijah spoke through gritted teeth.

Colton stood on the far side of the room with Damion, watching the action. Elijah and Brett were sitting on a couch opposite the Phi Delta members. It was probably also a good thing there was a coffee table in between them. As cheap and broken as it was, the table was still a barrier.

Daniel, a Phi Delta, repeated his condescending speech. “We want you to stop the event you guys started. You’ve been doing this for about three weeks, and you’ve had a good run, pun not intended.” He stated the same joke for a second time. “It’s great for the community and all, but it is actually hurting some of us on campus.”

Elijah clenched his fist. Brett was smart enough to notice he needed to take over the talking. “Who are these people that our cause is hurting? If you let us know, we would like to have a polite talk with them to discuss their problems. We did not intend for our idea to injure anybody.”

“Smooth, Brett,” Damion whispered. Everyone in the room knew who the “injured party” was.

Daniel didn’t even blink. “There are some people on campus who are having difficulty with... the new way of thinking. It is too different, and it is affecting the lifestyle of many people.”

Brett sat back in the couch. “It’s a good thing people are thinking differently about themselves and others. The original idea came from men and women on our campus having low self-esteem and viewing others as nothing but a physical object. For these people who are having trouble coming to terms with the fact others are bettering themselves, my advice to them is to take a good, hard look in the mirror. What kind of person wants to prevent individuals from being happy and reaching their full potential?”

This was one of the many reasons Elijah and Brett were voted as the president and vice president of Alpha Kappa. They were organized, eloquent, and knew how to stand up for what was right. Yes, they did go crazy with the fraternity shenanigans, but they made sure to keep their brothers in line.

Daniel shifted uncomfortably. The two men with him remained silent as one of them figured out how to respond. Elijah got to it first.

“Thank you for stopping by to let us know of the concerns from around campus. We take it to heart and want to make sure everyone is happy. Please tell those people having trouble with our event to come talk to us personally so we can get this sorted out.”

The Phi Delta trio left soon after. Brett laid his hand on Elijah's shoulder, stopping him from leaving the room.

“Don't let those jerks get the better of you. We're doing something good.”

Elijah let out a loud sigh. “I know. And I won't do anything stupid. I'm just dumbfounded those assholes thought they could get the running and seminars to stop because they can't get laid.”

Brett nodded his head in agreement. “Some people don't like change. Especially when it is against something they've had come easy to them all their lives.”

“Then those people need to learn what a little hard work is. It might change their attitude for the better.”

Present Time

Colton stood up and brushed the sand off of his clothes. With a heavy sigh, he finally said something he had been keeping to himself.

“I could have done something.”

“No, man, you couldn't have,” Damion quickly interjected. “It's not your fault.”

“It doesn't matter that it wasn't my fault. Something could have been done differently, and we'd be getting up right now, like always, eating and joking around about who we are going to see this morning.”

Damion stood next to his best friend. “Life can be a bowl of shit sometimes. And there is nothing you can do to make it something other than shit. There was a shit platter waiting for you guys.”

Colton stared at Damion with amusement. “Wow. That was a colorful analogy.”

“Sorry, C. I'm tired, too.” Damion spoke softly. “But you know it's true.”

Colton looked out to the ocean. Yes, he probably knew it better than any guy in their fraternity. But even though it was true, that didn't mean he had to like the idea.

Two Days Ago

They were out celebrating. The event had raised so much awareness on campus and in the community. It seemed that instead of doing this for a month, it was going to be all the time.

Who knew that one little thought and some exercise could change so much? If they hadn't had the support from all of the students and community, none of this would have happened. That was what Elijah said in his speech, before the crowd cheered for him and Alpha Kappa's work.

Colton took another gulp of his beer as he watched people in McCalister's mingle. The local pub, which had been supporting their philanthropy with money and apparel, had opened its doors for a celebration tonight. So much money had been raised for speakers and support given to the students.

"How're you feeling, handsome?"

Colton glanced over at his boyfriend, making his way toward him. Elijah started to signal the bartender for a beer, but Colton already had one waiting for him.

"I'm feeling like I'm on cloud nine. All this energy in here is just... amazing." Colton looked over the crowd again and saw the people chatting happily, dancing crazily, having a great time.

Colton leaned over to speak in Elijah's ear. "How does it feel to be the man of the month?"

Elijah smiled as he swallowed his beer. Looking out into the crowd, he said, "I don't feel like the man of the month. I feel like I'm part of something huge that has started a change, even in our small town."

Colton gave his boyfriend a skeptical look. "Just like you to be modest. Please accept your role as our fearless leader and take the credit for this. You never take credit."

Elijah shook his head. "Credit is given where credit is due. No one person did this. We all had a part in it."

Colton smiled. He took Elijah's free hand and squeezed firmly. Elijah smirked and took another sip of his bottle.

Colton leaned into his boyfriend's ear again. "Let's get out of here. We were interrupted last time, and I want to give you all of me." Then, with more heat in his voice, "With the lights on."

Elijah choked on his beer. After catching his breath, Elijah started to pull him out of the pub. They said goodbye to a few of their brothers and began walking down the street.

"Let's walk. I want you totally sober when we do this. No regrets."

None with you, Colton thought happily.

They walked down the street, a mere two-mile walk from their frat house, laughing and bumping into each other.

Present Time

"You should be with his family."

Colton stopped walking. Damion took the opportunity to catch up to him and stand beside his best friend.

"They need all of the love they can get. They are going through a hard time, too," Damion said.

"I know," Colton said softly. "I was with them all of yesterday. And last night. I just needed some alone time. To see the ocean."

"Can't get out of your routine for Saturday mornings?"

A light chuckle left Colton's lips. "I guess not. It's a place I can relax, let off steam, go for a run with my best friend. I love this place."

"But now it has become something bigger."

"Yeah. The meaning is different now."

"Acceptance of self?"

Colton looked at Damion. "Acceptance of self. One run at a time."

The two men continued walking, but this time, in silence. Colton knew he had to go back to the house soon. He needed to take another shower. He couldn't seem to remove the smell of alcohol or blood from his skin.

There had been so much blood and alcohol. "I read the report yesterday. They said they didn't mean to do it. They only wanted to scare us a bit."

"It is crazy what people will do when their life has been changed. And the thought that they were heavily intoxicated and drugged didn't help their sense of logic," Damion commented. "At least they were caught."

"It wasn't hard to identify them. We knew who they were before they even attacked us. And then they ran scared after they... stabbed Elijah."

Yesterday Morning

Colton had his head cradled in his hands. Around him was the movement and loud talking of the busy waiting room, but all he could concentrate on was the floor, the unmoving floor below him.

A few of his fraternity brothers sat with him, and others were pacing.

The waiting area in the small hospital's Emergency Room was already full with people anticipating answers. The doctors told the fraternity they could only allow fifteen of them in at a time.

Colton pulled out his cell phone for the countless time. 3:47 a.m. Elijah had been in surgery for about three hours. He hadn't heard any news from the doctors once Elijah went through the surgical doors.

After they had pushed Elijah through the emergency room doors and beyond Colton's sight, Colton had finally called Damion. In between stopping the bleeding, calling 911 and riding in the ambulance, he thought of no one but Elijah. Colton then called Elijah's parents to tell them the news of their only son. After being on the phone for twenty minutes, trying to answer their questions, Elijah's parents were on the road, driving the six hours it took to get to the college campus. The police arrived from the crime scene an hour later to take Colton's full statement about the attack. After giving his statement and the attackers' names, he felt more exhausted than after having run a marathon.

When the police left, Colton collapsed into the plastic chair behind him. He went back to his comfortable pose where his hands cradled his throbbing skull. With his head down, he almost fell asleep. As he closed his eyes and tried to relax, all he could see were images of his bloody boyfriend.

Colton forced his eyes open, never wanting to see those images again. But he was tired, so tired. Tired of answering questions. Drained of energy from the agony and disorder of the last few hours. Worried that Elijah wasn't going to—

He shut out that thought immediately.

Thankfully, Damion, his savior, stayed nearby, answering any questions that came Colton's way. A hot, fresh cup of coffee stayed on the table next to him, courtesy of his best friend.

All Colton could think about was his injured boyfriend. He was in critical condition because of Colton. Elijah was an idiot for what he did. What a brave, loveable idiot.

Two Nights Ago

They could probably leave the fight with minor injuries if their attackers didn't pull any weapons. Elijah and Colton were no wimps. They kept in shape and were pretty agile.

On the walk back to their house, four drunken guys stumbled towards the couple, shouting obscenities. Colton and Elijah recognized the students from school and tried to keep their distance from the belligerent men. After they unleashed words of anger, the men launched themselves, fists flying, at Colton and Elijah.

With the inebriated state of their attackers, Colton and Elijah dodged most of their punches and landed a few of their own. But it was still four on two.

After a few minutes of bad dancing, the one that seemed the most dazed pulled a knife. The knife-wielding man swung at Colton. As he evaded the attack, Colton tripped on the curb of the sidewalk and fell onto his back. The man took the opportunity to fully charge the downed Colton.

Then Elijah suddenly appeared, tackling the attacker to the ground, but he paid a price for his bravery.

When the drunk and drugged students realized the damage they had caused, they all fled. Colton scrambled to Elijah to assess his injuries. There was blood everywhere. It seemed like there was more blood soaking into the earth than remaining in Elijah's body.

Colton tore off his shirt to apply pressure on the most critical wound, making sure not to jostle the embedded knife too much. His frantic shouts to his boyfriend only received a blank look from the bleeding man. A small smile slowly formed on Elijah's face, and it seemed he tried to lift his hand up.

"You're the injured one, idiot! Stay still and stay awake!"

Colton pulled out his phone and dialed 911. During the ten minute wait for the ambulance, all Colton could do was apply pressure, wait, and pray.

Yesterday Morning

“Colton. Colton, baby. How is Elijah?”

Colton slowly moved his head out of his hands. His head felt like it weighed a literal ton. Colton saw Elijah's mother standing in front of him, worry etched all over her face.

Checking the wall clock, he saw it was five fifty in the morning, more than an hour earlier than he expected them.

Colton stood to give Elijah's mom a warm hug. Thank God Damion had brought him new clothes. He didn't think Elijah's parents could handle seeing their son's blood all over him. “Hi, Mrs. Anderson. Elijah is still in surgery. At least, that was the last thing I was told. But he should be out soon.” *At least, I hope so.*

Colton offered a reassuring smile. He needed to stay strong for his boyfriend's parents.

“Don't lie to me, Colton. Elijah always said you were a horrible liar. I just need the honest truth,” Mrs. Anderson said with a firm voice. Colton looked down at the woman in front of him and saw the dark circles, the tear stains from the five-hour drive.

“I would never lie to you. But if you want to hear everything, then can we wait for your husband to come in? I'm not sure if I'll have the energy to keep repeating this story.”

Elijah's mother patted Colton's arm. “Of course. Let's sit down first.”

A few minutes later, Mr. Anderson came rushing into the waiting room. Colton retold the events of the past few hours to his boyfriend's parents. He tried to keep his voice level as he restated everything. He needed to stay mechanical so he wouldn't break down, especially when the man and woman in front of him looked like they took the news in the worst possible way.

“How much longer will he be in surgery?” Mr. Anderson asked softly.

Colton held the somber gaze of the man seated near him. “I'm not sure. The doctors haven't been around for a few hours.”

For the next hour, the men of Alpha Kappa hovered around Elijah's parents, trying to tend to anything the couple might need.

At seven thirty, the doctors finally emerged with news.

Present Time

"How are his parents holding up?"

"Like any parents would be: Upset. Angry. Scared."

Colton kicked some sand up. The grains flew into the air and blew over the waves. The sun now lit up the entire beach in an orange hue. In the distance, Colton could make out the morning walkers and joggers that frequented the beach. The new day arrived too quickly. He wanted time to slow down.

"How are you holding up?"

Colton sighed. He hated that question. It'd only been a day, and he had been asked that too many times to count. "Fine."

"Don't lie. You can tell me anything. You know that."

Colton let out a heavy groan. "I'm angry it happened, and more upset that I didn't stop it."

"Again, not your fault. He did it because he cares about you. You need to remember that."

"And what am I? The damsel in distress—"

"No! But, by your story, you were going to have a knife in your chest."

Colton clenched his fist in a deep rage. "Well, fantastic, because Elijah got that instead."

Yesterday Afternoon

Colton didn't want to be there. There was too much hustle and bustle. He just wanted to be with his fraternity brothers and Elijah's parents. It was a little over twelve hours since the attack, and he already wanted to forget it ever happened.

"Thank you for coming down to the station and identifying Mr. Anderson and your attackers. Do you have any questions?"

“Yes. There was a fourth man who wasn’t part of the lineup. Daniel Clark. He was the one who... stabbed Elijah.”

“We have Mr. Clark under hospital arrest at the moment. You can identify him at a later time, when he is released to us.”

“Why is he in the hospital?”

The police officer led Colton into the office area and handed him a cup of dark coffee. “When we found the four men this morning, two of them had large traces of cocaine in their system. Mr. Clark had to be taken to the hospital because he was starting to go into cardiac arrest.”

Colton’s eyes widened. “But he is only twenty-one.”

“When mixing large quantities of cocaine with alcohol, a heart attack can arise, no matter the age.” The officer set down his own cup and looked Colton deep in his eyes. “I have to ask you again. Did these men attack you and Mr. Anderson because you are gay?”

A sigh escaped Colton. “As I said before, this attack was not a gay bashing. We were attacked because they were drunk and drugged and did not agree with an event our fraternity is holding. That’s all. Please do not make this into something it is not.” And in a whisper, “I beg you.”

“We’re not trying to blow this out of proportion. I only asked because the media has asked again. We’ll continue to keep the story as local and small as possible.”

Colton allowed a soft smile to escape. “Thank you.”

The officer took down a few more notes before he stood up to walk Colton out of the station. “How is Mr. Anderson doing?”

“He came out of surgery a few hours ago, but the doctors still have him on life support, and he hasn’t woken up yet. All we can do is wait.”

“We’ll be hoping and praying for him down here. You guys have really helped my daughter and her friends out. We really like what you guys are doing for the community.”

For the first time in fifteen hours, Colton felt joy from his fraternity’s cause, in spite of what had happened.

After returning to the hospital, Colton sat with Elijah’s parents in a cafe lounge. His own parents were out of the country on a business trip, but the

international phone call he placed to them was as good as if they were here. His parents had been continuously texting and emailing him for information about Elijah.

“Why don’t you go in and sit with him?” Elijah’s mom asked for the third time.

Colton gave her a sad smile and patted her hand. “I don’t want to interrupt your time with him.”

The truth of the matter was he didn’t want the possible last image of his boyfriend to be him injured in a hospital bed. At the moment, the last image he had of him was full of blood and pain. He wasn’t sure which image was better to have.

Elijah’s mom returned the pat to Colton’s arm. “We are going to grab something to eat. Why don’t you watch over him for the time being?”

Colton stood up. “That’s okay, ma’am. I’ll go get you some food.”

“Just go in there already,” Elijah’s father said decisively. “We know you are dying to see him. Stop trying to act strong for everyone.”

Colton flinched at the honesty. Maybe he was as bad of a liar as everybody said. Colton sighed in defeat and nodded his head slowly. He walked down the hall toward the room that held his still-sleeping boyfriend.

When he closed the door behind him, Colton could not move. He saw tubes and machines hooked up to his Elijah’s body. Colton slowly walked toward the bed and stood a foot away. He wanted to reach out and touch him but was afraid of pulling any of the cords that kept the man alive.

Thick gauze covered the left side of his face. Elijah’s right eye was shut as he slept peacefully in the sterile room. There was a large amount of gauze and padding covering the broad chest of his boyfriend.

Colton reached out and gently stroked the visible dark locks, the one part of the injured man’s body that he deemed safe to touch.

Colton sat in the plastic chair next to the hospital bed. As he looked over his helpless boyfriend, looking so weak and battered, all of the emotions he had kept hidden surfaced. He managed to hold the tears back this time, but his breathing labored.

“You have to wake up, Eli. I need you to wake up.”

Present Time

“How’d the runs go yesterday?”

Colton and Damion were now on the walking trail that led to their fraternity house. They had finally left the beach when they knew the first group of runners would show.

“Our brothers didn’t go on the morning run, but the other students still ran. A few of the guys ran during the day. Word of the... incident didn’t really spread around campus until noontime.”

Colton didn’t want to hear that last bit. “Yeah, I know.”

“Are you going to run tomorrow? I know it is the last day, but you need to get some rest.”

Colton held his head high. “I’ll be running tomorrow. I made a promise I intend to keep. Even if I run only a single mile, I’m going to be there tomorrow morning.”

Damion opened the door to the house and let Colton in. “I’m not trying to stop you. Just let me run beside you so I can catch you before you pass out.”

“I can still run farther than you, even without any sleep.” Colton made his way to the refrigerator and pulled out the orange juice. “And before you tell me again, I am going back to the hospital after I take a shower.”

Colton snuggled closer to Elijah. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of his boyfriend. He wrapped his arms around the body next to him, the warmth lulling him back to sleep.

He knew he was dreaming, that this wasn’t reality. After Elijah got out of surgery, Colton could actually get a few hours of rest since the images of Elijah bleeding to death lessened.

His boyfriend was in the hospital, and he was trying to, once again, escape the pain with sleep. For the first time in two days, he was actually successful.

He felt a soft touch in his hair. Colton sighed and turned into the touch.

“Hey. Wake up.”

Colton groaned. He didn’t like that idea. He snuggled closer into the warm body.

Elijah let out a soft chuckle. “Colt. Come on, babe, wake up.”

Why was his boyfriend trying to get him out of bed? Shouldn't it be the opposite? Colton squeezed his arms tighter around Elijah's body in protest.

A sharp hiss and intake of breath had Colton pulling away from Elijah. Had he hurt him? Colton stared wide-eyed at the man wrapped in bandages.

Colton wasn't dreaming. He was in Elijah's hospital room. Elijah had his right hand on his chest and his face was knotted in pain. "Oh God, Eli. I'm so sorry."

Colton didn't know what to do. He didn't want to hurt his boyfriend further than he had in his dreams.

Wait. "You're awake."

Elijah's right eye focused on Colton. "Yup. And before you. That has to be a first."

Colton stared at his boyfriend. The bandages covered the left side of Elijah's face, but there was a small smile next to the gauze.

Colton put his hand up to his cheek and pinched himself, hard. "Ouch."

Elijah's smile dropped. "What are you doing?"

Colton rubbed his pained cheek. He now looked at Elijah with relief. "I needed to make sure this really wasn't a dream."

Elijah's right eye softened. He started to lift his right hand to Colton. Colton gently grabbed the raising hand, lacing his fingers with Elijah's, and placed it back to the bed.

The tears started to drip down Colton's face. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to cry."

"Hey. It's okay. I'm okay."

"No. No, you're not. You are in the hospital wrapped up like a mummy. How do you call that okay? And stop smiling, damn it."

Colton had no idea how Elijah could smile with his situation. "I'm okay because I'm alive." Elijah's face turned stern. "Mummy?" He unlaced his fingers and reached his hands up to touch his face, feeling the bandages for the first time. Then his right hand traveled down to his chest. He hissed a little when he reached the muscles over his heart.

Elijah looked back to his boyfriend. "What happened to me?"

Colton had known all along he would have to repeat the story one more time. This time, he didn't want it to be mechanical. "As you tackled Daniel to the ground, you tried to disarm him of his knife. But he had the advantage and managed to strike it down the left side of your face. And then it continued... Daniel, he... stabbed you right beside your heart." Colton clenched his fists. "Your left lung collapsed from the puncture of the knife. The surgeons were able to remove all of the excess air, but the chest tube has to stay in for a few days." He raised his hand to wipe the tears falling. "The doctors said if the knife was any closer, you would... you wouldn't be here now."

Colton couldn't stop all of the emotions and thoughts from surfacing. He had held them in for the past two days, trying to stay strong for Elijah's parents and the fraternity, and for himself. Crying meant he accepted Elijah wasn't going to wake up. That he was grieving.

Colton felt Elijah's hand lift up his chin. "I'm not gone. I'm here, for a long time." Elijah gave Colton a smile, but Colton couldn't bring himself to smile back. Yes, he was happy Elijah was awake—overjoyed—but Elijah had still wound up in the hospital, undergoing nearly seven hours of surgery.

"You're still going to love me when I have more scars than you?"

Colton looked horrified at Elijah. "How could you even ask that? I'd love you no matter what you look like."

Elijah chuckled. "Then I don't see a problem at the moment."

"Stop being so optimistic! Why aren't you angry? Or depressed? You almost died!"

Colton flinched at the hurt look on Elijah's face. He really didn't want to make his boyfriend upset. His emotions were going haywire from the past two days.

"You're right," Elijah said after a few moments. "I am upset, and angry—angry we were attacked, and upset I'm lying in a hospital bed. I don't even want to think of the recovery I'll have to go through to breathe without it stinging."

Elijah took a soft, slow breath and laced his fingers back with Colton's. "But I'm also happy—happy to be alive. And happy you aren't hurt. I'm feeling both. I just prefer to feel the one that makes me feel better."

Colton stared at him in shock. "I never knew you were so simple-minded."

“Get used to it. You’re stuck with me.”

The smile Elijah wore finally became contagious. “I would never change that.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, discussing their four attackers, Elijah’s parents and the last couple of days of *Run for Self*.

“I’m going to do the last run tomorrow. I still have a promise to keep with you.” Colton stood from his chair to stretch.

Elijah wore a worried expression. “Only if you really want to.”

“Stop saying that. I really want to.” Colton smiled down at his incapacitated boyfriend. After taking a breath, his face turned serious. “Since we’re on the subject, I need to show you something.” Colton walked over and locked the door to the hospital room.

Elijah’s eyes were wide. “Here? Now?”

“Yes, here and now. I almost lost you without showing you all of me. It doesn’t need to be a big special moment. I just want you to accept me how I am.”

“I do accept you. I just want you to accept yourself,” Elijah replied resolutely.

Colton returned to the plastic chair. “I do. I finally do.”

Colton kept his eyes locked with Elijah’s as he pulled off his shoes and removed his shirt. He stood and slowly stripped off his jeans, tossing them on the chair. With a deep inhale, Colton pulled down his boxers and stood still so Elijah could see him completely naked for the first time.

Elijah stared at his nude form. Colton watched as his boyfriend’s eyes roamed over his body, engraving all of the contours and muscles to memory. Colton fought to keep his hands at his side, to not prevent Elijah from seeing anything.

“Come closer.” Elijah spoke softly. Colton took a step forward when Elijah reached out his hand. “Can I touch you?”

Colton took a small gulp and nodded slowly. Elijah reached out his hand and lifted Colton’s penis.

Colton let a sharp hiss escape him.

“Sorry. My hand is probably cold.”

Colton just stared at his boyfriend's face. He tried to read Elijah's thoughts. His nerves started to get the better of him when he couldn't interpret Elijah's focused face.

"You're so handsome," Elijah finally whispered, his eyes now locked with Colton's. Those dark pools expressed so much love and happiness.

"You don't think it's weird or disgusting?"

"I don't think any part of you is disgusting, especially not your genital region," Elijah said with slight amusement.

Colton's cheeks gained some color, and he looked away from Elijah. "I always thought a missing testicle would be a horrifying sight to you. It's like there is a part of my masculinity missing, like I'm not whole." Colton blinked back his tears. "And when my body rejected the prosthetic, it was at that point I knew I could never be a full man again."

"Hey," Elijah said quickly, "losing a testicle to cancer doesn't make you less of a man. It makes you more of one. You survived testicular cancer. You should be so proud."

Colton swallowed the lump forming in his throat. "I am happy and proud to be a survivor. I just always assumed people would see I am missing a ball and think less of me. It's what happened in my hometown."

Elijah again took Colton's hand in his. "You never told me, but is this why you also wear a shirt when you work out? Why you wake up early to change clothes?"

Colton squeezed Elijah's hand softly and nodded. "I was young, in middle school, when I was diagnosed with testicular cancer and had my right testicle removed. The day I returned to school was the last day I changed clothes in front of others for P.E. class. It became a habit to be fully clothed all the time."

Colton shrugged his shoulders and tried to wear a smile. "Kids can say some mean things. And during those years, in the peak of puberty, when your emotions are unstable, you believe anything people say to you. I truly believed that nobody would like me because of what I was missing. That, when it came time to have... sex, I would be rejected."

He looked away from Elijah, not able to look into his boyfriend's pained eyes. "I thought I could become emotionally secure if I escaped my hometown and went to college. Leave the place of my pained past. It helped a little, but as you know, running away doesn't solve everything."

Colton turned back to Elijah wearing a genuine smile. "Then you came into my life and eased all of my past scars. Crushing the insecurities I had, slowly and effectively. I wanted so hard to keep you and please you that I was too worried and tense most of the time around you."

"I remember it all," Elijah said. "I thought it was adorable, but I also knew there was more to the man than the boy of your traumatized past. I believed that you could walk away from your painful memories, one step at a time, as long as I could be beside you. That you don't have to worry about what others think as long as you're happy with yourself."

Colton smiled down at Elijah. "Yes. I've finally learned that over the past month." Colton leaned down and placed a gentle kiss to Elijah's lips. "What did I do to deserve such a guy like you?"

Elijah moaned into the kiss. "Let's see. You agreed to go out with me after I stalked you for a semester. There were many nights you stayed beside my bed when I had the flu. You then helped me come out to my parents in junior year. I'll never forget the first time you said you loved me. I'm actually not sure what I do to keep you with me."

Colton lifted his face so he could see Elijah's visible eye. "You love all of me. Period."

A warm smile appeared on Elijah's face. "That's great. It's the feeling that comes to me most naturally."

The Next Day

The cool breeze swept across the sandy shore as the sun barely peeked out from behind the water. The beach was completely deserted except for five shivering men.

"Are we really going to do this? It's freezing," Alex complained, his arms wrapped around his chest.

Peter laughed at his friend. "I guess you should grow some hair on your chest. You'll stay warm all year long."

Alex gave Peter an amused look. "At least my chest doesn't need a blow dryer to completely dry."

"I told you that in secret," Peter exclaimed.

Damion walked over and set his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Dude, we all knew. You have more hair than some girls. You *need* a blow dryer."

After a few more words, Brett put their bantering to a halt. "If we wait too long, people are going to come for their morning walk."

The men went rigid and looked around to see if the beach was still vacant. No one moved from their spot as they knew what was to come.

"Remind me why we couldn't do this in front of a mirror in the house?" Alex inquired.

Colton stepped forward. "For the past twenty-seven days, you have been running on this beach to prove something to yourself. We need to finish it on this beach."

Alex glanced away nervously. "I'd join a nudist colony if I wanted to do this," he muttered.

"Listen guys," Brett interjected, "this is the last run, and we are out here before dawn to complete this event. Is this any different than what we're used to? Well, yes. We aren't actually going to run. Think of it as the final test of this journey. If you can't be comfortably naked in front of your brother, then you probably won't be in front of a girl."

That seemed to make some of the guys stop talking. *Is it always about sex?* Colton thought, entertained.

The five men on the beach hesitantly stripped off their clothes while glancing around for people walking on the beach. Once all clothing was discarded, a weight seemed to be lifted from the group. The guys glanced at each other quickly. They were more fixated on their own bodies, out in public during the dark morning.

When the men were comfortable enough to look at their brothers with little awkward glances, they picked up their clothing and began to walk along the sand. A few minutes later, they were talking to one another as if they were fully dressed.

Colton stayed with Damion most of the walk, in the front of the group. He tried not to hold his clothes in front of him, blocking his genitals from being seen, but it was harder than he imagined.

Damion noticed the extra tension in his friend. "There's no rush to change yourself today, C. We are all taking this one step at a time."

Colton smiled at Damion and thought of Elijah's words. Then he felt giddy. He looked at the barely lit waters and breathed in a lungful of salty air.

"Hey, Damion."

"What's up?"

Colton gave Damion a playful smile. "I'll race you."

Colton dropped his clothes and took off for the ocean. He heard Damion give chase. When he was close to the water's edge, Colton turned and saw all four of his brothers had started to run toward the water.

As he fought the waves to go further, Colton could only hope the amount of steps he and the others had taken over the past four weeks would help them finish their journey.

The End

Author Bio

S.N. Kat is an avid reader of M/M fiction. Located on the East Coast of the U.S., she spends her days doing analytical research, and her nights watching and playing sports. With the free time she never seems to have, she reads, cooks, and occasionally gets sleep.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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ONLY TO YOU

By Gabrielle Bhlack

Photo Description

Two attractive young men of Korean descent are facing each other, surrounded by blue pulsing lights. The dark haired man on the left is slim, but muscular and sporting several unique tattoos on his naked torso, above his skin-tight white jeans. He is gripping the reddish-brown hair of the second man while singing to him. That man is wearing a dark blue suit accented by silver sequins on his lapels and the belt over his jacket.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name is ____ and I'm a singer. I'm well known and well respected in the biz, but I'm a very private man, which means that I tend to keep my status as a gay man on the low. I'm usually pretty good at keeping my life under wraps, especially since the entertainment company I have a contract with keeps me on a tight leash. I don't want the world to know that I'm gay because that would cause a lot of problems in my life, especially if people discover something that I'm just starting to find out about myself: I'm a submissive. I've never done anything about it, but I want to. I've read so much about it and watched so much kinky porn but I've never met someone that I'd trust enough to go that far with.

I've got a meeting coming up with my record label... They want me to meet up with someone to talk about maybe doing a duet but I'm dreading it. What if our styles aren't cohesive? I guess I'll find out tomorrow.

P.S. This contemporary story can have an HEA or an HFN, I'm fine with either one. The BDSM element must be sexy and steamy, but not too over the top. Thanks!!

Sincerely,

Erika K

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: rock stars, in the closet, BDSM, new sub, coming out, Korean pop/K-pop

Word Count: 42,852

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THANK YOU ALL!!!

ONLY TO YOU
By Gabrielle Bhlack

Prologue

Darkness... all around him is darkness, causing him to be acutely aware of every little thing that is happening to him. The blindfold covering his eyes completely takes away his sight—the rope binding his arms tightly behind his back takes away his ability to touch—being taken without any say on his part... all of these things are his choice.

A faint stirring of air is the only warning he has that he is no longer alone. He waits patiently; feeling the cold from the hardwood floor beneath his knees. Anticipation grips him, until the touch of a hand gently caresses down the side of his face. How he wishes the blindfold was not covering his eyes, making his world dark, like a starless night in the desert. Even so, he is glad that the blindfold is there, making it impossible for him to see what is about to happen. A warm hand drifts across his shoulders. He takes a deep breath, trying to keep his body from shuddering with excitement.

“Are you ready to begin?” a masculine voice whispers softly but firmly behind him. The feel of Master’s heated breath across his ear sends bolts of electricity shooting through his body, exciting him even more.

Choices, life is always about choices... until the session begins. Then—freedom! There really is no choice at all, he comes here to give up control and escape from reality. No matter how many times he is asked, the answer will always be “Yes, Sir.”

Swish. Without warning the tips of the flogger make contact with his back. The slight sting makes him lose his breath for just a moment.

“Breathe, little one.” He feels Master place a tender kiss upon his forehead.

“Now, count for me.”

He rapidly swallows, trying to alleviate the dryness in his mouth. “Yes, Sir.” He awaits the sound of the flogger flying through the air until he finally hears it.

Swish

“One!”

Over and over the flogger caresses his body. “Two! Three! Four!” On and on he counts... his cock is aching from the need to come, but he knows that this will happen only when he is commanded to do so.

“Open!”

Catching the musky scent of Master's cock, his mouth opens without a second thought. The wonderful feeling of the thick cock slowly entering his mouth helps him to remember why he is here, in this place, at this time. The feeling of being filled and controlled by Master in even this simple way has him fighting the tightening of his balls even more.

“Take more of me! Open up that throat like the good little cocksucker that I know you are!”

Breathing through his nose, he attempts to please. As two hands firmly grasp the sides of his head, controlling the movements of his face and mouth, he grows even more excited and sexually frustrated. This is what his mind and body craves.

Hands are softly running through his long, dark hair, when his head is abruptly pulled back.

“Now, take all of me!”

Even though he thought it wasn't possible, his cock swells even more. Oh, how he wishes he could have just a small reprieve from the glorious agony he is feeling right now.

The touch of Master's foot gently beginning to work his cock brings tears of relief to his eyes.

How does Master always know what he needs?

Truth be told, it has been like this from the very first time they met. Master just instinctively knew what his mind couldn't even begin to understand about himself. This was the real reason he was here, because Master sees him for who he truly is, and he is loved all the more for it.

“Do not come,” Master commands as his foot continues its ministrations.

As the cock hits the back of his throat, he works diligently to open up and take all that is offered to him.

Once again, Master's hands are controlling the speed and depth of the entry into his mouth. The hands in his hair, pulling his head forward, are making the invasion into his throat even deeper. This is what he was meant to be, a receptacle for Master's cum. He is not a man looking for release, he is a man in search of the mind space that he is slowly beginning to float into. That place where nothing matters, except the wants and needs of Master, which in turn fulfills his own desires.

Sucking with loving care, he can feel the cock swelling in his mouth, and he knows that the end is near. Soon he will receive his reward for pleasuring Master so well.

“Yes, suck harder! Oh, my wonderful little slut! This is all for you! Don’t miss a drop or you will not be coming tonight!”

As the hot cum shoots into his mouth, he savors the slightly salty taste as he carefully swallows down every single drop.

Yun closes his eyes, cutting off his view of the video on the monitor. His hand grasps his cock even harder, quickly moving it up and down, he is so close to coming that he can hardly breathe.

Something must be wrong with me, for such an obscene act to turn me on so.

But now is not the time to think about that. Yun continues to work his cock, unable to stop himself, he opens his eyes and is once again mesmerized by what he is seeing on the screen.

As he watches the man on the video, he admits to himself, that this is what he needs. He needs to feel the ropes tightly binding his arms. He needs to be on his knees pleasuring another man’s cock. He needs to taste the cum as it shoots down the back of his throat. It is all too much. His hand loses its rhythm and his back arches with the explosion of his release.

Chapter One

I can't believe I've finally made it to this place in my career. Being a singer and performing is all I've ever wanted to do with my life. Through hard work, and using what many call natural talent, I've managed to work my way up from some of the roughest dives in Korea to places even singers more experienced than I have yet to perform.

The show has been sold out since it was announced that I was coming to Los Angeles, which seems to be the pattern of ticket sales for my concerts over the past few months. As always, when I'm about to go on stage, I have more adrenaline than blood rushing through my veins. I can hear the crowd from here in my dressing room. The opening act has them really fired up, especially the young girls. I would be flattered by their screams of excitement if I hadn't recently discovered that I prefer men.

Many artists play the mysterious, unreachable card, but for me it's not an act. Reporters have tried and failed to discover my sexual orientation in the past, but it would appear that it was something even I had been trying to discover about myself. I know for a fact that my record company is on the conservative side, as are most things in Korea. So my discovering that my sexual preference runs toward men is somewhat disconcerting for me. As with most things in life, this discovery was not something that I'd gone searching for, it was more a case of it finding me, in the form of Michael.

I was relaxing with a drink at a little bar in an out-of-the-way part of town, where I was sure I wouldn't be recognized. I was trying to wind down from my performance that night, when an attractive, older man came over and introduced himself to me. It started off much the same way as when a man and woman might first meet. Michael walked over and flashed his bright smile in my direction. His green eyes sparkled in the bar's semi-bright lighting. The attraction I felt upon meeting him was quite instantaneous. Now, this wasn't the first time that I'd ever been attracted to another man, but it was the first time that I had felt a compulsion to act upon those feelings.

I invited him to join me at my table, and we began the *getting to know each other* part of the night. I learned that he was in Korea on business from San Francisco, and that he was slightly familiar with the Korean language and culture because of an uncle of his who had told him stories of when he served there during the war. He didn't ask me too many questions about myself, beyond the usual "so what do you do for a living?"

When I mentioned my name, and that I was a singer, he surprised me by not asking how famous I was, but rather what kind of music I performed, if I enjoyed touring, and about life on the road. It was very nice to be with someone who wasn't familiar with my name or face; someone, who didn't ask for a picture or an autograph right on the spot. That night, it was just me and a new friend having a quiet drink together.

Michael and I talked late into the night. We were surprised to find that there were many things that we had in common. Conversation had been comfortable, and Michael really seemed interested in my life while on the road, and all the wild and strange things that could happen while touring. As I was relating a particularly humorous story, I noticed Michael had gotten very quiet and was looking at me quite intensely. The next words he spoke, I must say, took me by complete surprise.

"I've seen you in here at least twice this week, Yun, and even though I didn't know who you were, I was very attracted to you. I was afraid that tonight would be my last chance to get to know you, and I just couldn't let this opportunity slip away from me."

I stared blankly at him for a few minutes, unsure of what to say to his honest statement. In Korea, someone who is *byuntae* or gay is never looked upon with favor. That may have been one of the reasons why I hadn't really looked at my sexuality too closely in the past. But the time I had spent with Michael that night, made it clear to me... my attraction to men was not just going to go away. There was no point in trying to deny it any longer—I was gay.

I looked down and saw Michael's hand lying near mine on the table. Deciding to take a chance, I slowly slid my hand over and pressed it gently against his. Michael then turned his hand over to firmly grasp mine. Just from the simple act of our hands touching, a wave of need, like I had never felt before, ran through my body.

I sat there staring at our entwined hands, mine looking somewhat smaller compared to his, and I wondered why it felt so right to be there... in that place... at that time... with that particular man.

"Yun, I need you to look at me," Michael said as he lightly squeezed my hand.

As I tried to look up from our joined hands, for a reason that I couldn't understand, I found it hard to look him in the eye.

He once again gave my hand a squeeze with an even more substantial amount of pressure.

I felt compelled to keep looking down, but I knew that if I wanted to explore whatever there was between Michael and me any further that night, then I was going to have to make a decision—right then.

I slowly raised my head, until I could see the intense hunger in his eyes. In that moment, I knew that for the first time in my life, I had found a man that I couldn't walk away from.

We left the bar just before it closed for the night. Even though I still had to pack and make last minute arrangements for my first tour in the United States, the thought of Michael in my bed was what consumed my mind.

I dazedly stared as he started to walk in what I assumed to be the direction of his hotel. After a brief moment of hesitation, I caught up to him and placed my hand on his arm. As he turned to look at me, it felt like he was trying to see right into my soul. The look of decisiveness on his face made me realize that he was prepared to see where our feelings would take us. I knew that I would have to make a choice as he was reaching his hand out toward me. It was either now or never, and my body was screaming *Now!* I placed my hand in his as a sign of my submission. I eagerly followed as he turned to continue the journey to his hotel room.

As we arrived at Michael's hotel, he dropped my hand and proceeded to walk over to the wall of elevators at the far end of the lobby. I must admit that at that point I was feeling extremely nervous, but I still found myself going to stand by him. The ping of the elevator car arriving made me look up from the floor, and I watched Michael enter as the doors slid open.

"Come, Yun," was all he said as he raised his hand to push the button that would take us to his floor. I felt I had no choice but to follow him.

Arriving at his floor, I realized that I had been so busy watching Michael out of the corner of my eye that I hadn't even noticed that the elevator stopped, and the doors had opened, revealing the hall to his room. During the ride up, my mind had been full of rapid thoughts such as: *Was this wise? What am I thinking? I can't do this! Turn around and walk away!* On and on they ran through my mind, causing me to question my own sanity. However, the only thought that I found myself listening to was the one telling me that the right thing for me was to be with Michael, so I followed him to the door of his room. When he had the door unlocked, he turned and stopped me from entering by

placing his hand on my shoulder. His eyes locked with mine, and again I saw the attraction from earlier. Bringing his body close, he pressed his chest to mine, forcing my back against the wall behind me.

Michael raised his left hand to caress my face, tracing down from my brow to below my chin. The heat from his touch shot straight to my cock, making it throb and thicken. With his finger, he firmly raised my head, so I was once again looking into his eyes. I watched as his head slowly lowered, his mesmerizing eyes never losing contact with mine. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure that I was going to pass out right there on the spot. Then his lips touched mine... they were firm and immediately took complete control, forcing my lips to part.

Michael reached down and grasped both of my hands in one of his and slowly raised them to the wall above my head. As he securely held them in place, he firmly pressed his body into mine. I could feel the hard length of his erection pressing into my thigh. At that moment, my breath just left me, and I was afraid that I was going to come right then and there.

Lowering his head, Michael nuzzled my neck and whispered to me, "You like it when I hold you tight don't you, Yun?" He softly blew into my ear, causing shudders to run down my body.

"I just knew when I first saw you that this was how you would react to me."

I stood there, trying to take in what he was saying to me.

"Yun, do you understand what is happening here?"

As he asked the question, my mind finally came to understand that what we were doing was very important to him, and therefore it would also be very important to me if there was to be an *us* that night.

Michael gently placed his free hand under my chin and brought my face up, forcing me yet again to look into his eyes. "If you're not comfortable with this, then I'll walk you back down to the lobby."

I knew that I could still choose to walk away. I appreciated his concern for me even though we barely knew each other. It meant a lot to me that he wanted to ensure my comfort.

I answered him in the only way that I thought would make him truly understand the extent of my own need and commitment to this sexual experience... with a kiss. Nothing sensual or heated, just one that I hoped would let him know that I was interested in discovering more about these

strange, new feelings that were urging me to step outside of my comfort zone and offer my body into his care and control.

He slowly lifted his head, pulling away from the kiss, and welcomed me into his room with another one of those warm smiles. That night I learned two things; I learned what it felt like to be with a man, and I learned that I was a natural submissive—and that it felt wonderful.

“Yun? Yun? Yun!”

The sound of my manager yelling my name abruptly snaps me out of my pleasant reverie. With a sigh, I turn around to look in his direction. I have always considered Young Soo somewhat attractive with his short, black hair and his tall, lanky build. I might even have found myself attracted to him if not for two things. One, he is money hungry. Two, he can be extremely annoying when it comes to getting something he wants, like money.

“What is it, Young Soo?”

He just rolls his eyes and says, “You go on in two minutes. Now is not the time to be daydreaming, so finish getting ready. You can’t keep all of those new fans waiting!”

From my dressing room, I can hear the audience excitedly shouting my name, and I feel the anticipation building inside of me. Nodding my head toward Young Soo, I take one last quick look in the mirror to make sure my hair is just the way I want it, and then I draw in a deep breath. Turning away from the mirror, I head out of the dressing room.

From behind the curtains, I see the lights dim, cuing me to take the stage. This is what makes all of my hard work and sacrifices worthwhile. Nothing in my life can compare with the adrenaline rush I get right before I go on stage to perform. The shouts and screams from the audience is almost deafening, but I thrive on the raw energy that comes from a live concert, so I allow it to wash over me as I finally step out... the lights come up, and the music blasts throughout the building.

Chapter Two

By the time I had finished the concert, it was just a little after ten. Even though I feel like I could sleep for a week, the buzz leftover from the show is keeping me from crashing on the sofa in my dressing room.

Grabbing a towel, I head toward the small bathroom at the back of the room. All I can think about is getting cleaned up and heading back to my hotel room for some much needed rest. Rubbing the towel over my sweat-drenched hair and face, I almost make it to the changing screen, when I hear a quick tap on my door. Past experience allows me to predict who is on the other side. I turn back and drop down on the sofa. With a weary sigh, I unenthusiastically respond, "Come on in, it's open."

As the door opens, my suspicions are confirmed with the sight of my manager, Young Soo, who is wearing the same pleased smile that he always wears when one of my shows has been a huge success.

"You were amazing tonight, Yun! Great job!" Young Soo exclaims.

"Thanks," I reply as I lay my head back and close my eyes.

For the past three or four years, I've heard him use almost the exact same congratulatory line after every concert. Deciding to just let him say whatever it is he needs to say, I look in Young Soo's direction and try to move the conversation along.

"Is there something more you wanted, Young Soo? If not, I would like to head back to the hotel and grab a few hours of sleep!"

I dab the towel along my forehead again, ridding it of any excess sweat before smoothing my reddish brown bangs back into place.

Young Soo doesn't move from his place by my door, he just kind of shrugs his shoulders before saying, "I just wanted to congratulate you on another successful show. Remember, tomorrow is your last night in Los Angeles, and you'll be heading to San Francisco the next day. As always, I've made the reservations for your hotel suite, and all the arrangements for your shows have been finalized."

I only half listen to him check things off, mostly wondering why he feels like he needs to do a checklist now, when I am so close to either falling on my butt from exhaustion or curling up for a nap on the sofa. As I continue to listen,

he drones on and on about the plans for the next phase of my somewhat rigorous touring schedule. I barely catch myself from giggling out loud when I have the passing thought *maybe he just likes hearing himself talk*. What in the world, men don't giggle. It is way past time to call it a night.

"Can we go through your checklist in the morning, Young Soo?" I ask, feeling completely overtaken with exhaustion and yearning to get away from my overprotective manager. "Right now I just want to grab a quick shower and head out."

"Alright, I'll get out of your hair, but don't forget you also have an autograph signing at the concert theater at seven tomorrow evening. Your fans will be expecting you."

I nod and make the appropriate sounds of agreement as I stand and walk behind my changing screen. I know they're old-fashioned, but I always feel more comfortable getting ready behind one of them, as opposed to stripping in the small bathrooms that the dressing rooms always seem to have.

At the sound of my dressing room door finally closing, my mind silently screams, *Alone at last!*

After a quick shower, I throw on a dark blue button-down and an old pair of shredded, acid-washed blue jeans. Stuffing my sweat-dampened clothes from the performance haphazardly into my black backpack, I head out of my dressing room, trying to get to the back of the building, before anyone from the media spots me.

As I step out into the cool night air through the back entrance of the theater, I search the nearly empty parking lot for the limo that has been hired for me. Since I'm so unfamiliar with the city, Young Soo is always against the idea of me taking a cab anywhere.

I was just reaching into my pocket to grab my phone, when I hear a loud, piercing honk. There to the left, under the streetlight, sits my limo, driven by my very sexy driver, Absalom. He's easy on the eyes with his long black braids, which he usually wears pulled back into a ponytail. He also has a tight, compact body that always seems to catch my attention when he gets out of the driver's seat to open my door for me. The rich, dark chocolate color of his skin has me imagining what it would taste like if I took a bite, just to see if he truly is as scrumptious as he looks. You can tell by the way he fills out his uniform that he takes pride in his body and works hard to keep it in great shape. A fact that I'm always thankful for, every time he comes to pick me up.

How could I have ever questioned my sexuality? Ever since the night of carnal exploration with Michael, I find myself imagining other adventures that could feed my newfound sensual appetite.

As I make my way toward the car, I notice two shapes as they begin to move out of the shadows. A feeling of uncertainty comes over me, and I notice Absalom opening his door of the limo. I've often wondered if maybe he was actually more than just my driver, but I've never had cause to find out in the past. As the shapes move closer, I instantly feel myself relax. I wave my hand to him, indicating that all is well, and turn to greet the woman and the small girl by her side. The child appears to be no more than seven or eight years old, and I can tell that they are both of Asian descent.

When they suddenly stop, my curiosity compels me to move a bit closer to them. As I get within speaking range, I watch as the girl steps behind the older woman, popping her head around to see me. Not wanting to make her any more nervous than she already is, I kneel down to her height, making it possible for us to see eye to eye with each other. In the light from the streetlight, I notice that she has something clutched tightly in her small hand that appears to be an autograph book.

I'm inclined to believe that both of them are Korean, since they are Asian and have come to my concert. They are both quite lovely with their long dark hair, high cheek bones, and almond-shaped eyes. Not certain whether either spoke English, I am thinking that it would be best to go with a simple *hello* in Korean and see what happens.

"Annyeonghaseyo." I feel a small smile tug at my lips when the young girl's beautiful eyes brighten, and she waves to me shyly.

She understands Korean, so I know that I had been correct in my assumption. I'm still unsure if either one of them speaks any English, so I decide to play it safe and use my native tongue once again. Since I'm already on eye level with the young girl, I pose my question to her.

"Yeonguh hashil jool ahseyo?"

The young girl smiles and says in a sweet, shy voice, "Yes, I can speak English, so can Mamma. You are from Korea as well."

"Yes, I am. Do you like my music? Is that why you're here?"

The girl's smile lessens a little when I ask her this, and she once again moves in closer to her mother. Her mother gently wraps her arms around the

young girl and answers for her. "We have only been in this country for two years, but Mi Sun learns quickly. She speaks English quite well, but she has not made many friends here yet, as she is terribly shy. Mi Sun heard your music last week, when we were coming home from shopping, and she could not stop talking about it. Her father was quite amazed by the effect your music has had on her. It has really gotten her to open up and to express herself better, so he allowed us to come to your concert tonight."

I smile at Mi Sun's mother. She'd named her daughter well, since the child is beautiful, very sweet, and respectful. It isn't often that I get to meet someone from my home country, so this evening is turning out to be extra special for me. Hearing that my music, specifically, has made such a difference in the life of this shy, sweet girl... well, it just gives me such a warm feeling inside to know that it is benefiting others, as well as giving me a great sense of accomplishment.

I turn in Mi Sun's direction and hold out my hand for the little book she is still holding so tightly in her hand. She hesitates to hand it over, and I feel the need to reassure her that I wasn't going to do anything wrong. "It's alright, Mi Sun. May I write in your book?"

I see Mi Sun look to her mother for guidance. When her mother nods, Mi Sun hands the little book over to me. As I reach for the pen in my pocket, I begin flipping through the pages. I was right, it is an autograph book. Mi Sun seems to treasure it, but I have a hunch that she doesn't quite understand its use. I flip back to the first page and sign my name in easy to read English.

I show the signature to Mi Sun and watch as she traces the writing with her index finger. She looks up at me, her pretty eyes shining with happiness. I close the book and hand it back to her, saying, "That's my name, Mi Sun, now you have something, so that you can always remember this night."

She nods, still smiling widely at me. I rise to my full height and once again start for my limo. I'm nearly there, when out of the corner of my eye, I see Mi Sun running toward me. I quickly turn around and kneel down again. I'm shocked when she throws her arms around me for a quick hug.

"Gamsahabnida!" She says excitedly!

She only said "thank you" but the way she said it, with such enthusiasm and in that sweet little voice... it just makes my heart fill with happiness. I smile warmly and say in a voice, that I hope will express to her how genuinely

pleased I am, “You are very welcome, Mi Sun. Perhaps I’ll see you again someday.”

She waves and runs back to her mother. As they slowly walk away, I turn to see Absalom standing there, holding the back door open for me—just as he always does. So I do my best to give him a smile. I slide in and lay my head against the back of the seat, exhaustion once again overtaking me. As the limo heads toward my hotel, I can see him smiling at me through the rearview mirror. He seems to approve of my exchange with Mi Sun, and I wonder why it would matter to him.

He answers my question before I even get a chance to ask it.

“You were nice to her... sometimes that’s all a kid needs to be happy.”

I smile back at him. I couldn’t agree more.

By the time I drag myself through the doorway of my hotel room, it is well past midnight. I look around and am surprised to realize that all the euphoria that I normally feel after finishing a concert is not there. With the success of my first concert here in L.A. behind me, I feel that this tour could be the realization of my dreams, the accomplishment of a goal that I had set for myself a few years back, when I first started performing in Korea. Even though I get how wonderful my career is going right now, I can’t help but wonder why I have the feeling that there’s still something very important missing in my life?

I move through the room, heading directly to the bedroom. I’m glad that I grabbed a quick shower after the show, because I’m just too tired to bother with it now that I’m this close to my bed.

After changing into a pair of comfortable gray sweats and a worn black T-shirt—which happens to be some of my favorite *just hanging around* clothes—I head back into the sitting area. As usual, I’m drawn to the large windows that reveal the stunning beauty of the L.A. night. Looking out into the darkness, I watch lights from the buildings sparkle like stars, making a dazzling picture for all to see. Leaning against one of the window panes, an incredible feeling of longing comes over me. As I gaze out over the brightly lit city, the loneliness is almost too overwhelming to bear. It’s at times like this that I can’t help but think of Michael and wish that he was here with me.

With a sigh, I pull the cord to close the curtains, managing to effectively shut out the rest of the world. I head back to the bedroom, adjusting the

overhead lights, so that the room is now drenched in darkness. Climbing into the king size bed, I let the warmth of the blankets and the softness of the silk sheets carry me away to my dreams. The only place where I don't feel so alone.

Chapter Three

The rattling of my cell phone, as it vibrates on the night table, slowly rouses me from my sleep. As I lay here on my stomach with my eyes still closed, I have a pretty good idea of who it is that would be calling me this early in the morning. Placing my pillow over my head, pretending that I don't hear a thing, the phone stops its little dance, and I give a huge sigh of relief... but luck is not with me. Seconds later, the dance begins again. Realizing that Young Soo is just going to keep calling until I answer, I blindly reach over. Not quite ready to give up on the possibility of a couple more hours of sleep, I drag the phone under the pillow, to my ear.

"It's early, Young Soo." I truly hope he'll take my hint and decide to call back later. But once again, no luck.

"Now, Yun, don't be that way. This is your last day in L.A., surely you would like to go out and see some of the sights before the signing tonight!"

This gave me pause. Usually when I'm touring, it is a mad dash from one concert to the next. The only downtime I ever seem to have is when we're traveling on the bus or plane. So this is somewhat of an anomaly for me, free time—what should I do with it?

"Do you have any suggestions for what I might do for the day?"

I don't know why I'm surprised when Young Soo replies, "Absalom will be there to pick you up in about an hour. He is playing tour guide for you today."

His comment has me quickly throwing the pillow off my head and sitting up on the bed. Looking down, I notice that I wasn't the only thing that has popped up with the mention of spending the whole day with Absalom. Now, I'm thinking spending some one-on-one time with my sexy limo driver is something that would be well worth getting out of bed for. I can just picture him with all of that luscious dark chocolate skin and those amazing black braids hanging down his back. Yes, this would be a great way to start my day.

Even though I really didn't want to let Young Soo know how intrigued I am with his plans, I can't seem to contain my excitement.

"Well, I had better head for the shower, since he will be here shortly. I'll see you at the signing tonight. Thanks, Young Soo, for thinking of this."

Choosing to ignore what sounds suspiciously like Young Soo chuckling, I quickly end the call and head for the shower.

As Absalom pulls the limo up to the front of the hotel, we're laughing so hard we can't even speak. I'd forgotten how great it feels just to take time for myself, and even though I hate to admit it, I was glad that Young Soo had suggested this time off.

Absalom had certainly done his homework. We'd gone to the best stores and bought the most fab clothes. He'd found a great restaurant for us to have brunch; the food was wonderful, and the company was even better. I don't know how Absalom knew about my passion for designer clothes and great food, but I sure enjoyed the benefits of his suggestions.

I am still chuckling to myself, as Absalom comes around to open my door. After the day that we had spent together, it feels strange to have him doing this for me. He was at the airport with Young Soo when I first arrived in L.A. several weeks ago, and even though Absalom is a man of few words, we have slowly been getting to know each other during this time.

Today certainly has brought a new dimension to our relationship—I think it would be safe to say that we are now *good* friends. Although, at times I think that I'd like to see this turn into more of a *friends with benefits* type of situation. Even though there have been a few occasions where I felt that Absalom might be attracted to me, he's never given me any indication that he would be interested in pursuing that attraction.

Trying to get myself into some sort of serious mindset, I climb out of the limo to help Absalom retrieve all of my bags from the trunk.

"OK, I may have gone a little overboard with the shopping today," I comment to Absalom as we juggle the armful of bags that we both end up carrying.

Absalom just gives me one of his all-knowing smiles and tells me, "I'm pretty sure there is no such thing as, *too much shopping*, when you are shopping on Rodeo Drive."

I just start laughing all over again and nod my head in agreement.

As we enter the hotel, heading toward the elevators, I notice Young Soo sitting on one of the chairs in the lobby. As he looks up from the computer he's

working on and catches sight of us, he hastily puts away the computer and comes over to join us.

“So, is it safe to say that today’s outing was a great success?” Young Soo asks, as he takes in all the shopping bags that we’re carrying.

“Yes, I had a wonderful day. This is an amazing city, with so many things I would still love to see. Maybe I will get a chance to come back again sometime soon.”

I’m sure that Young Soo has no clue that one of the major attractions that L.A. holds for me is Absalom.

I’m excited to continue my concert tour after the signing this evening. San Francisco really sounds like a place I’m going to be comfortable in. However, I knew it wasn’t going to be the same without Absalom there to help see me through the everyday things that can be so confusing for me when I travel to a new city or town. I’m sure that if I was honest with myself, I would admit that the closeness that I feel to Absalom is playing a large part in my desire to not see the last of him when I leave L.A.

The ding of the elevator’s arrival pulls my thoughts back to the present and the chore of getting all of my wonderful purchases up to my room. Young Soo is going on and on about the signing later this evening, and all the arrangements that have been made. As I hand Young Soo the key card to my suite, I feel a gentle bump to my lower back. Looking over my left shoulder, I see Absalom rolling his eyes, and I smile ruefully back at him. This isn’t the first time, and I am sure that this won’t be the last time that we’ll be hearing the details, as Young Soo loves to repeat himself, several times, when we’re preparing for an event.

“I have arranged for free T-shirts for the first one hundred fans that arrive for the signing,” Young Soo was saying as he unlocked the door.

Knowing he’s waiting for a response, and frankly, I am surprised by his thoughtfulness, I say, “That sounds great, I’m sure that they will appreciate the T-shirts, and it will certainly be much easier for me to sign *them* than some of the things the fans bring in for me to sign.”

“You mean, some of the *body parts* that the girls want you to sign,” Absalom says with a smirk on his face.

“Yikes, don’t remind me! If I have one more girl pull down her shirt for me to sign her boob, I think I’ll scream.”

“Now, Yun... you know that young girls make up a large part of your fan base. I know I don't have to tell you that fans equal concert ticket sales.”

“I know, Young Soo, and I love the rush of a live concert, but it is a little awkward, when it's a one-on-one situation, like when I'm doing a signing or meeting fans backstage after a concert.”

Moving into the bedroom, I throw my bags on the bed. Turning to retrieve the rest of the bags from Absalom, I roll my eyes at him. Both of us just shake our heads and turn toward Young Soo, trying to keep a straight face.

“Speaking of the signing, I had better hit the shower and get my things packed. I assume we're heading to the airport right after we finish up?”

Young Soo is absently looking through my bags as he replies, “Yes, that is the plan. I will let you know a few minutes before it is time to head out. We don't want to arrive at the airport in a mad dash for our flight.”

In his usual abrupt manner, Young Soo heads for the door. “What do you say we all meet out front in about an hour, and then we can head over to the signing together.”

We hear the click of the door closing, before either one of us can even respond.

“Well, I will leave you to your packing. I guess I will see you downstairs in an hour or so.”

Watching Absalom walk toward the door, I'm once again in awe of his wonderful body. The way he carries himself is a show in itself, making my cock stand up and take notice. Just the thought of saying good-bye to him tonight, knowing that I would never see him again, is getting harder and harder to accept as the time to leave grows closer.

“Don't go!”

I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth.

“I mean... wait a minute.”

Absalom turns with a questioning look on his face. As he walks slowly back toward me, all I can think is... *what in the world am I going to say now.*

Realizing that this is a now-or-never moment for me, I take a deep breath, open my mouth to speak and... *nothing*. My mind is blank. Then it occurs to me; actions speak louder than words. Quickly I close the remaining distance

between us and just reach out and hug him. I'm afraid to look at him, as I am sure he must be confused by my actions. Then, to my surprise, Absalom slowly wraps his arms around me.

"I need you to come with me... to San Francisco... please." Well, now it's out there. I drop my head to his shoulder and squeeze him tight. The silence is deafening—I hold on and listen to our quiet breathing... in... then out... and still he doesn't say a word.

How do I make him understand what he's come to mean to me, and how much I value our friendship. Now is probably not the best time to approach the *attraction* issue, except that it is playing such a huge part in my asking him to come with me that I'm not sure I can leave it unsaid.

"I know it's asking a lot of you, but this thing between us, call it friendship or whatever you feel comfortable with, I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose you. You've become an important part of my life, and the thought of leaving without you—it just seems wrong."

The feel of Absalom gently laying his head against mine gives me hope.

"This *thing*, it *is* strong, it's touched me as well. I dreaded seeing you leave tonight and was wondering how I was going to handle tomorrow without you there. So, how can my answer be anything but *yes*."

A feeling of lightheadedness comes over me. It is then I realize that I've been holding my breath. After taking a moment to pull myself together, I lift my head and see the most beautiful smile in the world on his face. That's when I knew, no matter where this *thing* went, I would always have a true friend in Absalom.

This change in plans calls for some fast organization on our parts. We have bags to pack, phone calls to make, and of course a signing to get to. Just as we're closing the last suitcase, my phone rings.

"I am down here in the lobby, and there is no car, no Absalom, and no Yun. Now tell me, what is wrong with this picture? The signing starts in less than thirty minutes, and we need to get over there—now!"

Ahhhhh, Young Soo, always there to keep me on track. I'm so excited about Absalom agreeing to go with me, that not even Young Soo can irritate me right now.

“Yes, I know. We’re on our way down. There’s been a small change of plans, but I’ll explain on the way to the signing.”

I could just imagine the look on Young Soo’s face. I never—I mean never—mess with his schedule and plans. This one time though, I’m going to have my way. I knew after I explained my reasons, Young Soo would be easily persuaded to go along with my plans to take Absalom with us.

“Okay, we will talk about whatever it is later, but we need to get going.”

I hear the phone click off on the other end. As always, Young Soo likes to have the last word.

As I suspected, it was just a matter of explaining to Young Soo that I felt comfortable with Absalom as my driver and that we had become friends, of a sort, so I’d asked him to come to San Francisco with us. Needless to say, I arrive at the signing with a smile of joy on my face and a feeling of excitement in my heart.

Pulling up to the front of the building, where the signing is being held, the number of people who are lining up to get in is unbelievable. I’m always amazed, but secretly ecstatic, by all the fans that listen to my music, buy my CD’s, and come to my concerts. Young Soo always insists on having these signings when I first arrive in a new city, and when I’m leaving. It seems like such a small thing to me, but the fans are thrilled to be able to spend a little time with me, and I am slowly getting better with the one-on-one aspect of my career. To me it starts with the music, but it ends with the fans.

Absalom carefully parks the limo and comes around to open the door for me. As I exit the car, I can’t stop myself from giving him a wink and a quick smile. The screaming of my name, by the fans still waiting to get in, breaks the spell that Absalom seems to hold over me. I head for the front door of the building, following Absalom as he makes a path for me. Waving to the crowd, I’m so hyped-up I feel like my feet are barely touching the ground as I make my way inside.

They sure know how to throw a party in L.A. The fans are enjoying the abundance of food that’s been brought in, and I’m having a great time getting to meet the people that my music has touched in some small way. Absalom

stays nearby, giving me the support that I hadn't even known that I would need until now.

Signing yet another body part—unfortunately the T-shirts had run out very quickly—I look around for Young Soo. I have a feeling that it's getting close to the time when we need to head to the airport. As Young Soo had said, we didn't want to have to make a mad dash for it.

"Can I get you something?" Absalom, once again, is looking out for me.

"No, I was just wondering where Young Soo has disappeared to. I have not seen him for a while."

Absalom, who stands a good eight inches taller than me, sweeps the room, looking for Young Soo.

"He's over in the corner, talking on the phone."

"Well, you may want to go let him know that I'm finishing up here, and I can be ready to head to the airport in just a few minutes." I hear loud giggles coming from behind my back. Rolling my eyes at Absalom, I turn to the group of girls standing there.

Within minutes, Young Soo is by my side, ushering me towards the front door. Stepping out into the cool night air, I take a deep breath. Even though I love meeting my fans, it can be exhausting to be the upbeat K-pop star all the time.

Glancing over, I see Absalom opening the car door for us, and I gratefully slide in. Grabbing a chilled bottle of water, I guzzle it down. My eyes make contact with Absalom's in the rearview mirror, and the heat from his look scorches me through and through.

"Yun. Yun. Yun!" Finally, it hits me that Young Soo is repeating my name.

"Yeah, I hear you," I reply, as I slowly drag my eyes away from the mirror.

"Yun, we need to talk," Young Soo says as I turn my attention to him.

"Oh, Young Soo, can't we talk about my schedule for San Francisco after we get to San Francisco?"

"Yes, yes... we will talk about that later, but this is important, and I feel that we should discuss it now."

I'm not sure why, but I have a feeling that I'm not going to like whatever it is that Young Soo wants to talk about.

“All right, what is so important that it cannot wait until tomorrow?”

Young Soo reaches over and grabs a bottle of water for himself. Slowly twisting the top off, he takes a quick drink and twists the top back on. I find myself thinking how unusual it is for Young Soo to stall, when he's the one who insisted that we needed to talk. Now I'm getting very worried, because Young Soo has always been very up-front with me; annoying on occasion, but always honest.

I watch him as he passes his water from one hand to the other, then back again. Then he turns toward me, and I see a look of determination in his eyes that I've never seen before.

“Okay, here's the deal. I have been working with your record company, and we've arranged that in San Francisco, you'll perform with a singer from Korea that has already established himself here in the States. We have a meeting with him first thing in the morning.”

Speechless... I am absolutely speechless. I haven't performed with anyone on stage since my early days, when I first started out with a group of other young K-pop artists. My first thought is—*why?* And then my next thought is—*who?*

Chapter Four

Early the next morning, I arrive at the hotel that has been chosen as a neutral meeting place for all parties, with Young Soo and Absalom by my side. My manager is here to make sure everything goes smoothly. Absalom, on the other hand, has decided to come with me just to offer his support, and I couldn't be happier.

As we make our way toward the front desk to get directions to the room where the meeting is being held, I can't help but be apprehensive about this whole situation. When it comes to my music, I have my own style and way of doing things. The thought of having to perform with someone that I don't know gives me a tight, edgy feeling in my chest.

It doesn't help matters, that after landing in San Francisco late last evening, I had no time or energy to track down Young Soo to see if I could get more information about the performer I was to meet this morning. The only thing I do know about him is that he's Korean. For some reason, which I don't understand, my manager seems to think that knowing his nationality alone should put me at ease.

What an idiot! I think bitterly. Young Soo knows that I hadn't really been close to anyone back home in Korea. In fact, there had only been a few people that I'd hit it off with, one of them being my trainer who had been on the K-pop scene for many years prior to my own introduction into this business.

Young Soo's reasoning for this collaboration seems completely asinine to me. However, there are two things I'm sure about. One, when I get him alone, I'm going to have a serious talk with Young Soo about making these kinds of decisions on his own. Two, I'm going to need a strong drink and a long venting session with Absalom.

The clerk in charge of the front desk is very friendly and helpful. Even though I tell her it's unnecessary, she insists on escorting us up.

She's an attractive young woman with blonde hair that glistens with red highlights. She appears to be quite shy and doesn't attempt to flirt or throw any of her *assets* in my direction. If my tastes had run toward women—she would have made a great girlfriend.

A few moments later, we arrive at the room where the meeting is to take place. There we find a set of tall, light oak doors that allows the light from the

sconces on each side to bounce and dance off of them, giving the doors and the surrounding area a kind of warm energy that seems to say *come on in*.

As the clerk moves to open the doors, she makes a polite gesture for us to proceed forward into the room. I can feel the nervous tightness clutching a little harder at my chest. I'm really not ready for this, as I have no idea what to expect.

Young Soo heads in first, immediately directing orders to the young clerk, who is surprisingly agreeable to taking down notes and suggestions. I must admit that I feel bad for her, as Young Soo can be quite demanding. While he's busy trying to make the room perfect, I take the opportunity to step inside and briefly glance around, taking in my surroundings. The room seems to have a cozy, intimate feel. I straightaway spot one of the nicest things about it—the large window with its beautiful view of the city's skyline. Unfortunately, even this serene scene doesn't calm the feelings of uncertainty rushing around in my stomach.

At that moment, I sense someone behind me, and I feel myself tense as a strong, yet gentle hand is placed on my shoulder, which prompts me to turn around. It's Absalom, and he doesn't say anything at all, but the way he's staring at me seems to be a silent inquiry, asking if I'm alright.

I turn back around and continue to just stare out at the beautiful view, until I feel Absalom gently squeeze my shoulder. I don't move as he leans in and whispers in my ear, "I'm here, Yun, you don't have to be nervous. I can stay in here the whole time."

Suddenly, I feel as if most of my fear and anxiety just melts away. I can't explain the feeling, nor can I explain why Absalom's presence makes it so much easier to deal with what may become a potentially career-changing event. All I know is that with him close by... I'll be okay. No matter how this meeting turns out.

Young Soo has arranged for some refreshments to be brought to the room. I guess he feels that we will all behave more civilly to each other if we aren't worried about our stomachs interrupting our interactions. I'm not sure how I feel about eating, but as the food arrives, I decide that trying to get through this meeting on an empty stomach is not a smart idea. I look over, and I'm surprised to find that the friendly desk clerk is also helping to bring things in. Once everything is set up, the clerk shyly smiles, gives me a small wave and says, "If you need anything else, just call me at the front desk. My name is Ashley."

I smile in her direction. She has gone above what one might expect, and I make a mental note to be sure and mention this to her superior. She really does deserve credit for how helpful she's been... especially after having to put up with Young Soo.

Shortly after we start eating, there is a sharp knock against the door. Soundlessly, Absalom leaves his seat to go answer it. I appreciate the gesture, but I catch myself hoping that he doesn't think that I expect him to do everything for me in his role as my driver. Hopefully, by now he knows I consider him my best friend.

I find my eyes drawn to the doors, but I can't see who Absalom is talking to. I then look at Young Soo and notice that he also has his eyes on the door.

It seems that the moment of truth had arrived along with the singer that I'm supposed to perform with.

Absalom pulls the door wide open to allow our guest to enter the room and I find myself standing, out of respect, as I have been taught from a young age. I stand there in awe, because entering the room is the most attractive man that I've ever seen. One that I'd never thought to actually run into while I was here in the States, but if I was honest with myself, that I had secretly hoped to meet some day. *Kwan*.

Young Soo stands also and moves to offer his hand in greeting, and our guest immediately accepts. The two begin to talk, and I just stand there—staring.

Finally, I manage to break out of my stupor and turn to Absalom to quietly say, "Do you know who that is?"

Shaking his head, Absalom whispers in reply, "He simply said he had business with you and your manager, he didn't tell me anything else. Just remember what I said, Yun, I'll be here for as long as you need me to."

Young Soo steps forward and gestures toward the man he has been speaking with and says, "Yun, this is the singer I've been telling you about."

As I start to walk in Young Soo's direction, I try my best not to sound too irritated when I reply in a matter of fact kind of way, "It is not polite to lie, Young Soo, especially in front of our guest. You know very well that you have told me next to nothing about him, not even his name."

Young Soo shoots me an annoyed glare and then just as quickly returns his gaze to our guest, saying, "Please excuse Yun, this week has been a bit rough

on him. He isn't usually this forward. A little rest and he'll be far more receptive to this concept."

The minute Young Soo finishes his sentence, the other man's warm dark brown eyes meet mine, and he replies in a smooth, deep voice, "It's fine, Young Soo, I appreciate his honesty. Nowadays there are so many people out there who are afraid to be honest, it's refreshing to know that Yun isn't one of them."

The way he says my name sends wild shivers of anticipation and apprehension racing through my body. *I want him.* I can feel the strength and confidence radiating off him in heated waves, and the fact that I want to be on the receiving end of that strength scares me more than the prospect of performing with him.

He steps away from Young Soo and moves closer to me, holding out his hand for me to take, but I'm once again taken in by his eyes. He blinks, and whatever trance I seem to be under is instantly broken, and I allow myself to take his hand. The smile he gives me sends sizzling sensations of desire coursing through my veins.

An emotion sparks in those eyes that I can't read, and his already deep voice seems to deepen even further as he says, "Your manager failed to properly introduce us, Yun, I'm looking forward to working with you and getting to know you better. My name is Kwan."

Chapter Five

The moment after Kwan introduces himself to me seems to last forever, but Absalom whispering in my ear somehow manages to bring my mind back from wherever it had been temporarily vacationing.

“Yun, I think you can let go of his hand now. He’ll probably need it later.”

I shake my head to rid it of the mental fog that has—without warning—wrapped tightly around my brain. I release Kwan’s hand and take a step back; I can’t help but be annoyed with myself. Here I am, meeting the man of my dreams, who I’ll probably be performing with, and all I’m able to do is stare and mentally drool. *So much for first impressions.*

Kwan doesn’t seem bothered by the fact that I’ve been holding his hand for such a long period of time. On the contrary, he seems to be enjoying watching me squirm under his piercing, hypnotic gaze.

Not wanting to embarrass myself further, I force myself to look away and listen, as Young Soo attempts to fill in the awkward holes of the conversation left by the odd tension that seems to have popped up between Kwan and myself.

Young Soo starts by offering Kwan a chair and something to eat, which Kwan politely turns down, stating that he’d eaten before making the trip to the hotel. Absalom and I resume our seats at the table, but I find myself unable to eat another bite. It feels impossible to focus on satisfying the needs of my stomach when Kwan is so close, and my body is demanding that I satisfy other, more important needs.

Who am I kidding; it’s impossible to focus on any aspect of the meeting, when the whole time all I want to do is catalog the many wonderful things about his body. Kwan, on some level, must have sensed my inability to concentrate, because he looks in my direction and says in that smooth voice which makes me want to beg him to keep talking and at the same time, to tell him to shut the hell up.

“I feel like we don’t have your full attention, Yun. Perhaps it would be better if you and I talk in private. You know, have a quiet little meeting of our own. Hmmm?”

Damn him, and damn his voice—and damn his ability to sense my unease. Luckily, Young Soo instantly makes his displeasure at this idea known. “If

you're having a hard time focusing, Yun, we can always reschedule. I'd prefer for all of us to be at our sharpest, if this meeting and the upcoming concerts are going to be successful. Do you think you'll be more mentally prepared, if we reschedule the meeting for tomorrow?"

I'm willing to do anything to avoid being in here, with this man, for another moment. However, when I open my mouth to tell Young Soo that tomorrow might be a better time, and that I think it would be best to reschedule, words that are the complete opposite of what I'm thinking begin to pour out of my mouth.

"Actually, I think it would be a good idea if Kwan and I have some time to talk privately."

What is wrong with me?

Maybe last night's flight took more out of me than I'd originally thought.

I can tell that Young Soo is still uncomfortable with the idea of being left out of the meeting, and I notice that Absalom is staying quiet about the matter. But his silence, and the way he's looking at Kwan, leads me to believe that he isn't crazy about the idea of Kwan and me being left alone together either.

Kwan has absolutely no problems stating his case. It's obvious to me, that he knows exactly what to say in order to get what he wants.

"I understand your uncertainty, but if you will allow Yun and me to talk, it will take a lot less time for me to reassure him that working together will be beneficial to all of us."

I realize the exact moment when Young Soo finally concedes to Kwan's wishes, because he sighs heavily and gets up from the table. Absalom stands as well, but I can sense his reluctance to leave. After a brief glance in Kwan's direction, I get up and follow them to the door. Absalom lingers in the doorway for a moment. "Are you sure about this, Yun? You don't know this guy. I'd rather remain here with you, than risk something going wrong."

I look in Kwan's direction once again, and I notice that he's watching my exchange with Absalom very closely. What I say next is, in my opinion, a pathetic attempt to calm his worries as well as my own.

"It will be alright, Absalom, the quicker I get this over with, the quicker I can get the whole idea of my performing with someone else out of Young Soo's head—permanently. No worries, really... I will have this taken care of in no time."

Absalom knows me better than this, and I know he isn't convinced either, but he humors me anyway and softly closes the door behind himself as he leaves. When I turn to face Kwan that nervous feeling returns to my stomach. I'm alone with him, and suddenly I don't feel so confident anymore.

I return to my seat at the table, and I realize that I'm even more nervous now than I was before Kwan arrived. The tension in the room is thick, and the silence is overwhelming.

Thankfully, the suffocating silence is at last broken, when Kwan finally speaks.

"You don't need to be nervous around me, Yun. I really think that we can come to a better understanding about this whole situation if it is just the two of us. It's so much easier to be open and honest with each other when we're not having to worry about what others might think or say."

He leaves his place at the table and comes to sit next to me. I have to admit that up close he's even more gorgeous than I'd ever imagined him to be. Even though we share the same eye color, there are times when his eyes seem to be a darker, more intense shade of brown. His hair is also similar in color to mine, and I have this ridiculous thought, if someone didn't know any better, they might mistake us for brothers.

He looks absolutely breathtaking in his black, leg-hugging jeans and skin-tight, white tank top. His choice of clothing shows off every single inch of his body to its fullest advantage.

I've never been so eager to get away from anyone in my life; my attraction to Kwan is so irritatingly intriguing. I attempt to get the conversation going again, so I can put this meeting behind me once and for all.

"I did not expect you to show up alone. Young Soo gave me the impression that we were to meet with you *and* your manager."

Kwan smiles at me in a way that sends shivers racing along my spine. The look in his eyes is nothing short of appreciative, as he moves his gaze up and down my body. He focuses directly on my face as he says, "Something came up. I told my manager I'd be fine by myself. He wanted to reschedule, but I'm glad I was able to talk him out of it. I wouldn't have missed this meeting for anything."

I don't know how to respond, there seems to be a hidden meaning to his words that I just can't decipher. All I can think to say is, "How did you find out about me? Why did you decide that we should perform together?"

There's that smile again—damn that smile! It's full of confidence and something else... something I can't identify. Certainty, maybe?

That certainty, if that's what it truly is, becomes somewhat apparent when he says, "I saw a video of one of your concerts on the Internet—the energy that you exude on stage is quite amazing, Yun. Add in your talent and there's nothing that you can't do. I think we can mesh our styles and create something new and fresh that will blow the fans away."

His honesty knocks me off my feet, figuratively speaking of course, but I can't figure out what it is about this man that's threatening to drive me out of my mind.

I can't take much more of this. All I want to do is tell him, no, I don't want to perform with you, and beat a hasty retreat back to my room.

I pull in a deep breath and try to aim for both respect and tact. "I appreciate that you want us to perform together Kwan, but to be honest, I don't see how this is going to work. I've never collaborated with anyone before, and I just don't think I can—not right now, maybe not ever."

The look in his eyes is at best unreadable. He doesn't seem angry or offended, but I'm unable to get a lock on any of his emotions.

I can't remain this close to him anymore. I stand and move toward the window—just trying to find something to look at other than Kwan. Focusing my attention outside seems to calm me somewhat, and as I look back, to my surprise I see that Kwan is still seated at the table. The fact that he's allowing me this small concession begins to relieve some of the nervousness that I've been feeling.

"Yun, I understand your hesitation. You know nothing about me. However, I'd appreciate you hearing me out before you make any kind of decision."

I allow my gaze to return to the window, letting the images of the far-off buildings distract me once again. He really isn't asking for much; even though he makes me uncomfortable, I know that I should, at the very least, listen to what he has to say. I do my best to be respectful and look him in the eyes, but it's difficult because my eyes seem to have formed a permanent relationship with the floor. I'm not quite sure how, but I finally manage to meet his gaze. I want to let him know that I'm willing to give him a chance to explain his ideas, however, I barely manage to get out. "I'm listening."

His smile is different this time; it doesn't have that cocky, arrogant air to it. Perhaps this is why I'm not so intimidated anymore, but I still can't help but want to run from the room.

"I suggest, Yun, that we do two concerts together and see how everything goes. You have a lot of potential, just look at how well-known you are in Korea. If you let me, I can help you gain that same kind of recognition throughout the States."

He's starting with that cocky, arrogant attitude thing again. He says I have potential, but he seems so sure that I need help earning a name for myself here in the States. I can't seem to turn off my irritation with his previous statement, and he can probably hear it in my voice. "You might think I need help gaining recognition as a good performer here, but I don't—not from you—not from anyone. I did quite well by myself in Korea, and my concert in L.A. was successful, so I'm sure that I can do the same here."

His smile is gone now. I can't say he's angry exactly, but I'm beginning to feel like I may have pushed him a bit too far this time. At this point, I'm thinking that I should've continued with the *respectful* attitude, but it's too late for that now. Maybe if he believes I'm too stubborn to work with, he'll decide that we shouldn't work together after all. Maybe he'll think he's making a mistake.

Kwan stands up from his place at the table, and it looks like he's just going to leave the room without a word, and that's what I want. At least I think it is... but then why does some inner part of me want to stop him from going?

Instead, he comes to stand in front of me, and as we stare into each other's eyes, I can't be sure, but there seems to be a flash of determination, maybe even annoyance, reflected in his eyes. I can easily pick up both of those emotions in his voice as he says, "I'm going to say it again, Yun. I understand that you're not eager to work with me. Nevertheless, we *are* going to continue this meeting, and we *are* going to treat each other with respect."

I realize after he's finished speaking that I've been stubborn and antagonistic practically since we were left alone together. I instantly feel a generous amount of guilt settling in the center of my chest; this isn't like me at all, and I can't completely blame Kwan for my attitude. I'm sure this whole thing has gotten further under my skin than I wanted it to. I return to my seat, saying as I sit down, "I apologize for my behavior, Kwan, and I really am interested in hearing your ideas concerning our working together."

I am sure he can easily hear the resignation in my voice, but he doesn't seem to mind as he takes a seat as well right next to mine, and suddenly everything in me becomes tense again.

"I'm only asking for two concerts. Once they're over, if we feel we absolutely can't work together, then I'll inform Young Soo, and that will be that."

Here comes that feeling again... the feeling that's telling me that I want to spend more time with Kwan and try to make this collaboration work.

Even though I am leery of where my feelings are leading me, I can't seem to find it in myself to just walk away from the possibilities that could come from us performing together. Having to come to terms with my attraction for Kwan is, of course, another matter altogether.

The fact that I'm still here at this meeting makes me realize that I've already decided to hear what Kwan has to say, and that I'm actually considering his idea of us performing together. One thing is for sure, if we're going to do these two concerts together, then I can accept nothing less than our best efforts.

"What do you have in mind for the concerts?"

There's a brief moment of silence before he says, "As I said before, I'm amazed at your energy on stage. I want to make a few suggestions to develop your incredible stage presence. That is, if you're still willing to perform with me after you hear my ideas."

He lets this statement hang between us for a few moments; maybe giving it a chance to settle as well as giving me the appropriate amount of time to respond. Something inside of me decides to be negative, and it whispers in my ear, "*You already know you're not going to like what he is going to say, Yun.*"

Sometimes I hate my instincts because they're usually right. I hear myself sigh heavily, and it drives me crazy, knowing that having this meeting and possibly performing with Kwan feels more like something that I'm being pressured into, rather than a decision I'm making of my own free will.

Kwan must have picked up on my uncertainty again, because to my great surprise he reaches over to where my hand rests on the table top and places his hand on mine.

It's hard to understand or believe his forwardness, but the instant he places his hand over mine, I can feel myself start to relax, and the only thing I can

think to say at the moment is, "What kind of suggestions did you have in mind?"

This time his smile is warm and easy with just a hint of a smirk to it—that same smirk which both irritates and arouses me at the same time.

"It's clear from the shouting I heard on your last concert video that you're popular with the girls. I think if you play to that half of your audience, they'll appreciate you and your music even more."

His eyes once again catch and hold mine, and there seems to be quite a bit of heat reflecting in those brown orbs of his. I sense that there is more to him, and more to those looks, than meets the eye.

"I also think that we make your audience sweat a little by giving them a little bit of sexual tension between you and me. In my experience, women love to see two men who look like they're turned on by each other. It gives them a little extra excitement."

Damn, I hate it when my instincts are right!

That's when I start to see red. When I heard his comment about *sexual tension*, I was afraid that this was where he was going to go with his ideas. I'd been hoping that maybe I'd just been overreacting. Of course part of me understands what he is saying, but the other part of me is extremely annoyed that he would even suggest I use my sexuality to sell concert tickets.

I try very hard to speak calmly and respectfully, but I'm not very successful. My voice starts off strained, instead of calm, and I find myself moving my hand away from his. I sense his surprise when I do this. Maybe he feels we were finally making progress, and that's why my sudden distance surprises him so, but I don't have time to think on it anymore as I hear myself saying, "Kwan, I appreciate your insight, but what you're suggesting isn't the kind of entertainment I want to provide my audience with, or the type of excitement that I want to arouse. I prefer to give them what they want without making them secretly question my sexuality. If that's what you think will sell more tickets to my shows, then please leave me out of it. I refuse to turn my concerts into a sexual farce in order to be recognized as a great performer!"

I am shouting by now, and I don't give a damn if the other guests or even the hotel staff hear me. What Kwan is proposing is unacceptable.

The last thing I want is for my concerts to be turned into some kind of media-related circus. I personally don't care that I'm gay, but I'm not ready for the rest of the world to find out yet.

I don't realize that I'm heading for the door, until it's right in front of me.

However, I also don't see Kwan move, until I feel his hand wrapping around my wrist—not hard enough to bruise or injure me, but just tight enough to ensure that I'm not going to get away from him easily.

I feel my body tense up with the realization that he isn't going to let me go. The fact that he can so easily capture me emotionally and physically only irritates me more, and I know Kwan hears that irritation and determination as it reflects in my voice.

“Let me go—now!”

I don't sense any annoyance coming from him, but I can feel that he's just as determined to keep me here as I am to leave.

“I'm not letting go, yet—not until we discuss this matter civilly. I want you to understand that both our managers and record labels think that our performing together will be good for the both of us. I'm well known here. Us working together can only mean the beginning of even better things for your career.”

I hate that he's right, but if this is the only way for me to become better known in the States then I'd rather go back to Korea where the kinds of things he's suggesting would be frowned upon, and my secret attraction to men would be safe from the media.

Kwan probably has a pretty good idea about my sexual preferences. That is, if he's been paying attention either to the looks I've been giving him, or to the fact that I haven't been able to control my erection when I get too close to him. I shake my head trying to rid my mind of these distracting, ridiculous thoughts; all I want to do is free myself from his grip and run for the safety of my suite or better yet—Absalom's arms, which are probably much closer and more comforting. Even though I'm sure it is useless, I attempt to free myself again... as I thought, it is an exercise in futility. I'm not going to get free unless he decides to let me go. This fact only fuels my anger and irritation more.

“Fine then, I get to work with a fellow K-pop artist who's well known both in Korea and this part of the world. What exactly, may I ask, do *you* get out of us forming a working relationship?”

With no effort on his part whatsoever, Kwan pulls me closer to him. He's only an inch or two taller than me, so I have no problem looking directly into those beautiful, dark brown eyes. There's confidence and some other emotion I can't quite name reflected there.

As his eyes seem to suddenly darken, that's when I see what might be desire in those eyes. I am entranced by them again. As I continue to stare at him, I realize too late that he's maneuvering me away from the door. I feel myself struggling against his strength, but it's no use. Kwan has me positioned with my back against the solid wall.

For what seems like forever, Kwan is silent. When he finally answers, his voice is low, and he moves in even closer. With his lips so close to my ear that I can feel his warm breath caressing it, I have to strain to hear him when he whispers, "What do you think I get out of this professional relationship, Yun? What more could I want, than to work with an attractive fellow artist who's climbed through the ranks and become a star in his own right?"

I swear I can feel my eyes widen when he says this. Can this be what he has wanted the whole time—to be able to perform with me—or is there something more to it than that? He must have already known about me; our country is fairly small, so it's common for K-pop stars to know about one another, even if one performer starts their career earlier or later than the other.

I close my eyes, trying to get my mind to clear, but it's impossible with Kwan pressed in so close to me. I can't handle him being this near, my whole body is screaming—declaring its want and need for more. I can't figure out what is wrong with me. I want him to release me, but at the same time, I want to remain pressed between him and the wall. I'm sure my voice sounds weak and breathy, but I can't help it.

"Please... let me go Kwan, I can't take this—you barely know me, just let me go."

I sense him pulling his face away from my ear, but I can still feel his breath caress it. I can't be sure if he's doing it on purpose or if it's involuntary. Either way, it hasn't eased my attraction for him, if anything it has managed to further flame both my desire for him and my anger toward him.

As I turn my head to look at him, I can't identify the look on Kwan's face, and I don't get a chance to try to figure it out before he speaks, "Are you sure that's what you want, Yun? I can feel your response to me. You're hard aren't you? My holding you like this—it excites you, doesn't it?"

No! My mind shouts, but my heart and my cock know better. I've been drawn to him from the moment we met, and if I'm truthful with myself, I'll admit that I want him to hold me even tighter, to control my every sexual need.

However, my mind takes over once again, and I push against him, until he finally backs away, and I'm able to move from the wall. I practically run around to the other side of the table, foolishly thinking that it'll stop him from getting close to me again.

Kwan calmly returns to his original place at the table, saying as he does so, "Two concerts, that's all I ask. After that we'll see where fate takes us, agreed?"

That's all he asks? Liar!

I squash that thought as soon as it makes itself known, and I reply, "Agreed. However, I want to talk about what we are going to be doing on stage."

I let it end at that, afraid that if I say any more, he will notice how I'm still unnerved by his presence. He only nods his head, as he rises from his seat and begins to make his way to the door. Before he opens it, he turns toward me and manages to surprise me yet again. "I'd like to invite you to breakfast, so that we can further discuss the concerts as well as dissolve some of this tension between us. It won't do either one of us any good, if I feel like all you want to do, when we are trying to work together, is strangle me. I'll run the idea by your manager. I'm free any morning this coming week."

Damn him! I'd barely survived this encounter with Kwan, and he already wants to meet again in such a short amount of time? I feel my hands clench into fists at my sides, but I manage to answer him in a dignified, but very quiet manner as opposed to punching him in the face.

"Friday," I mumble. His eyebrows raise, and I'm sure that he's barely heard me, so I say it again.

"I said Friday. If that's good for you?"

He nods and smiles, but it still resembles that annoying smirk that seems to constantly grace his lips. "Then Friday it is—I'll see you then."

I thank god for the reprieve. Today is Saturday, so I've managed to get myself a few more days to prepare before spending more time with Kwan. I watch as he finally opens the door, and then he motions for me to precede him out. I succeed in composing myself before I exit the room first, but as I walk past him, I catch myself drawing in a deep breath and breathing in what is becoming known to me as his very unique scent. Having survived this meeting, I wonder how in the world I'm going to get through Friday without giving in to what I'm afraid is my very obvious sexual reaction to Kwan.

When we arrive outside the door, Absalom, who's casually leaning against the wall, comes over to meet us, followed by Young Soo, who looks like he's been pacing the whole time. Seeing the concerned look on his face, lets me know that even though we have our differences, Young Soo is the right manager for me; he's truly concerned about me and is always looking out for my best interests.

Young Soo is the first to speak, of course, "So, have we reached an agreement?"

Kwan speaks before I have a chance to answer Young Soo's question, "Yes, we have. We've decided to do two concerts together. We'll discuss the possibility of further collaborations after that."

Young Soo seems to instantly relax after hearing this news; to him this agreement means that things have gone well. Absalom, on the other hand, isn't fooled—he knows how uncomfortable I've been around Kwan. Thankfully, he says nothing for the time being. He does, however, move closer, and I am grateful for his quiet strength and support.

Young Soo is too busy making arrangements for Kwan and me to have breakfast together for him to notice how nervous I am around Kwan. Before I can say anything, Absalom is once again stepping in to take care of me.

"Excuse me, Young Soo, but it's been a long morning for all of us, Yun especially. If you and Kwan don't mind, I'm going to drive him back to the hotel, so that he can relax for a while."

"Hmmm? Oh yes, Absalom, that's fine. I'm just going to finish talking with Kwan here, and then when I return to the hotel, we can all three sit down and discuss the tour schedule."

I can't wait, I think sarcastically. I decide not to worry about that right now, so I start toward the lobby. Young Soo turns to Kwan, and they pick up the conversation again. When I look back, I notice that Kwan is watching me walk away, his eyes not missing a single detail. I can almost feel the heat of his stare on my back as I face forward and do my best to ignore it.

Absalom is immediately at my side as I reach the front door. I appreciate that he doesn't try to pull information out of me, in fact all he asks is, "How did it go?"

I want to be honest with him, but the meeting is the last thing that I want to talk about right now, so I reply, "I would rather talk about it later, Absalom."

In his ever understanding way, Absalom nods his head. "Alright, how about over dinner then?"

The question surprises me a little, but I'm glad for the invitation. Somehow, he knows I want to talk about what has happened, just not right now. I don't know how he knows, but I'm grateful that he always seems to be sure about how I'm feeling... I guess this is a sign of a true friend.

Ever thankful for such a friend, I feel a smile start to grow. "Okay, over dinner then. Thank you, Absalom."

He places his hand on my shoulder and squeezes it comfortably before he replies, "You're welcome. I'll take you to your hotel room, and then I'll be back for you in a few hours, okay?"

I smile again and nod as we head out the door to the limo. He really is the best friend.

A few hours later, Absalom and I are sitting at a table with a perfect view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The restaurant is surprisingly quiet for it being early evening on a Saturday. We've come here on a whim and find that it has a nice, intimate atmosphere. The lighting is low and romantic, and if we were a regular couple instead of just friends, this restaurant might've been the perfect place for a first date.

Absalom, being originally from Los Angeles and having only been to San Francisco once or twice before, has apparently not had a lot of time to sample the variety of foods available here. This being my first time in the city, we're both looking forward to the wide selection of dishes that this restaurant has to offer. I'm sure that it's going to be a treat for both of us. Since I have a deep appreciation for spicy foods, I order some Cajun chicken pasta, while Absalom satisfies his passion for great seafood with an order of seafood stew. When we order, I promise him a bite of my pasta in exchange for a little of his stew, which he happily agrees to, after pretending to pout.

We're both enjoying our food so much that I've nearly forgotten about the disastrous meeting with Kwan... that is until Absalom mentions it as a conversation opener.

"So, what's Kwan like? What did happen at that meeting?"

I knew the question was coming, but the thought of trying to explain what went on makes me wonder if I should take a break from my meal. I push my

plate away and mentally struggle to figure out how to tell Absalom the truth, while making sure he doesn't realize that I'm not telling him *everything*.

"He's arrogant, stubborn, and overconfident. He just has this *air* about him. He seems to think that I can't make it big here in the States without help from him. The whole time I was there, I felt like we were dancing around each other."

I sigh heavily and take a sip of my coke, cringing at the watery taste the ice-cubes have left behind. *I should have ordered ice tea*, I think to myself, but it can't be helped, and Absalom patiently waits for me to finish the rest of my story.

"I hate to admit it, but I kind of behaved like a spoiled child, Absalom. I barely let him get a word in edgewise. I think some sick part of me likes trying to get on his nerves, I do not think this collaboration's going to work, it just feels like it's too much, too soon. Yet, something inside of me is saying that this is a great idea. I just can't explain it."

Never once does Absalom interrupt me; he listens and understands, just like I knew he would. I must say that I'm surprised when he actually reaches across the table and covers my hand with his. The contact doesn't last long, because he knows that I'm uncomfortable with the fact that we're in public, and he's only attempting to comfort me.

"I know this is hard for you, Yun, but you have to try and think about this positively. You're a star in your own right, but if you hope to become even more well-known, then you're going to have to open yourself up to many different experiences like this."

He sounds just like Kwan. Even though I find it irritating, I know that he's right—they both are. I decide right then and there that I'm going to try and be more open-minded about this whole situation. I know that if I don't, it's going to be impossible for Kwan and I to perform together, and I would be missing an important opportunity for furthering my music career.

I discreetly turn my hand over and clasp Absalom's. "Thank you. I knew you would understand."

He smiles as he glances out the window we are seated next to; the view has only gotten better with the appearance of a spectacular sunset. The reflection of orange and pinks make the impressive status of the bridge pop even more.

I'm feeling so much better now, and it's all because of Absalom, I wish I could better express my gratitude and growing affection for him, but I'm not

sure how. I don't get any more time to think it over before our waiter comes over to check on us.

He's an attractive, dark haired, young man, and his Spanish accent is enough to make you want to melt. Fortunately or *unfortunately*, I find that the sound of Kwan's deeply resonating, but slightly Americanized, Asian accent really gets to me a lot more. Absalom, on the other hand, seems quite taken not only with the waiters accent, but with the waiter himself.

"Gentlemen, is there anything else I can get for you—dessert perhaps?"

Absalom and I quickly release each other's hands, but I'm sure that our waiter isn't fooled. He smiles at our nervousness and winks in my direction.

I'm actually surprised to find that I can speak without stammering, "Thank you, Lopez, but I think we're both fine here, am I right, Absalom?"

He nods his head in agreement then adds. "That's right... but if you could bring us some to-go boxes, we'd really appreciate it."

Lopez flashes us his bright, friendly smile. "Two to-go boxes coming right up. You'd like one for your rolls as well, right?"

Absalom and I nod at the same time, and Lopez seems to think it's cute. I refrain from telling him that Absalom and I aren't together as he probably wouldn't have believed me anyway.

As he walks away, Absalom turns to me once again. "I guess, once our boxes get here we should get going. Young Soo might be getting worried... I didn't exactly mention to him that we were going out."

I smile and think to myself, *god forbid!* I hadn't given any thought to the fact that Young Soo likes to be made aware of all my activities.

Leaning back in my chair, I send a grin Absalom's way. "He must not be too worried, or he would have called to check on us. He was so wrapped up in his conversation with Kwan that he probably didn't even give us a thought until after he had returned to the hotel. I really needed some down time, and I appreciate that you had the great idea to get away for a while. This is a great restaurant, and you can't beat the view. Thanks again."

"Anything to ease your mind. Oh, here comes Lopez with our boxes."

I turn around, and sure enough, there he is with two boxes in one hand and a Styrofoam soup container in the other. He sets them down, and with a wink he says, "I hope to see you two again real soon, take care now, Mr. Yun." He

quickly turns toward Absalom, and leans in close to say, "If you ever come in without your *friend*, I'd be more than willing to be your dinner companion."

He takes off for the kitchen doors, and I look back at Absalom, who actually seems to be a little embarrassed. I find myself wanting to tease him—I just can't help myself.

"I think he likes you. What do you think, Absalom: boxers, briefs, or commando?"

He smiles in a way that makes me think he either wants to kiss me or ruffle my hair, the way an older brother might do. In the end he just shakes his head. "Very funny, Yun." He glances back toward the kitchen doors, and his smile begins to change, like he is privy to a closely guarded secret.

"Besides, Lopez looks more like the *silk panties* type to me. Maybe someday I'll get to know for sure."

I glare at him playfully, as we gather our leftovers and head outside to Absalom's rented car. The air near the bay has cooled down a bit, but it isn't so cool as to be uncomfortably chilly, just enough to raise the hairs on your arm.

It's just a little after dark when he parks the car near the hotel. As Absalom and I enter the lobby, the manager nods to me and almost instantly picks up the phone on his desk—probably to call Young Soo. Knowing him the way I do, I'm pretty sure that I only have about fifteen, maybe twenty minutes tops before Young Soo arrives to ruin my pleasant evening with a lengthy discussion about my touring schedule and subtle inquiries about the meeting that Kwan and I had.

We immediately head for the elevators. I want just a little more time with Absalom before real life decides to intervene. This is one of the few times since arriving in San Francisco that I've been able to just be me, and I want it to be a moment that I can treasure.

It doesn't take long for us to enter the elevator and enjoy the smooth ride to my floor. However, there's a certain aspect to our relationship that's weighing on my mind, and I impatiently have to wait until we're alone again to get it sorted out.

The trip doesn't take anytime at all, and before I know it, the elevator's arrival tone sounds, and we're on our way to my room. I don't quite know how to broach the subject that I want to discuss with Absalom... hopefully something will come to me soon.

Since the time with Michael, when I first discovered my need to be controlled, I've wanted to find someone I could trust. Someone who cared for me, and wanted to be with me and teach me how to be a proper submissive. I had felt that Michael could have been that man, and even though the night we'd spent together would always be special to me, I've come to realize that he was only going to help me better understand the role I longed to play as a submissive.

After the way we had expressed our growing feelings for each other in my suite in Los Angeles, I've been trying to find a way to tell Absalom about the *other* part of me. My biggest concerns are about whether or not we can form a truly loving relationship, and most importantly, is he the man that could and would want to be my forever Dom.

We arrive at the door to my suite, which is at the very end of the hall. I want to keep my attitude casual, but when I ask Absalom if he wants to come in the words come out all wrong, and I sound shy, uncertain, and scared.

"Thanks for the offer, Yun, but Young Soo will probably show up any minute. So, I think it's best if I go back to my room. We can talk later if you'd like, okay?"

I sigh heavily, hoping it doesn't make me sound like a disappointed child. "Just for a few minutes Absalom, I—I really want to talk to you about something important... please?"

He looks to the left and then to the right in the empty hall. I suppose he's being careful, and on some level I appreciate it, but on another level I kind of wish that he would just open the door and take me inside. Not like a married couple, but in a way that would speak to my inner submissive. The fact that he doesn't, pretty much tells me everything that I need to know without asking, but I still want to be sure about our relationship.

I feel Absalom's hand on my arm, and it brings me back to the here and now. I take in his beautiful features, and when I see the uncertainty reflected in his chocolate-brown eyes, something inside of me begins to hurt just a little, because now I know that Absalom can never be the dominant lover that I so badly want and need.

I fish my key card out of my pocket, and when the door's unlocked, I walk inside first. I am half-tempted to turn around and see if he is still there, but I can't bring myself to do it. Even if we can never become anything more than friends, I don't want any moment from tonight to create an awkward strain between us, I really care about Absalom, and I want us to remain friends.

I'm so caught up in the painful realization that my dreams of us being together are never going to happen, that I don't even hear the door close. So, when I turn around and see Absalom is still standing there just inside the room, it startles me for a minute.

"You're still here. I'd thought that you would have—"

Absalom moves toward me, and when he's within touching distance, he strokes his knuckles against my cheek. I revel in the feel of his skin caressing mine. I only wish there didn't seem to be such a look of longing in his eyes as he looks at me. He seems to be going through the same inner struggle that I'm experiencing.

"Yun, I don't know how to say this but—I can't be what you need me to be. I need someone strong, like you do."

What he says causes my heart to skip a beat, and a barrage of questions to slam against my mind.

Am I really that transparent—has he known this whole time—

On and on my brain is bombarded. It is hard to fathom that strong, always-sure-of-himself Absalom has the same sexual needs and requires the same dominance as I do.

"How? How did you know, Absalom?"

He moves in even closer until he can rest his forehead against mine, and he remains silent for a long moment before he answers my question.

"I saw the way you were looking at Kwan. You may be uncomfortable around him, but I could read your body language, you were drawn to him. You don't realize how easy you are to read. If performing with him doesn't work out, at least think about exploring the attraction that you feel for him."

But I want you, Absalom.

I know I can't tell him that, it would just make things harder, so instead I press my lips to his. It was the only thing that felt right. He becomes tense for a second before putting his other hand on my face and deepening the kiss.

His kiss is strong, but it isn't what either of us needs. He pulls away from the kiss first, then wraps his arms around me. It feels good to have his arms holding me tightly. This is the feeling of security that I long for, but I understand now that Absalom needs the same thing, so we'll both have to find someone else.

I wrap my arms tightly around him, and we stay like this for a few minutes longer. I search my mind for a way to tell him that I will always care about him, and that we would always be close friends... I just can't seem to find the words. However, I don't get the chance because he beats me to it.

"Yun, I don't want anything to change between us. I'm going to be here for you throughout the whole tour and even beyond that, whenever and wherever you need me, okay? I hope you know that."

There is a sudden knock on the door, and we jump away from each other like two scared teenagers who have been caught making out.

"Yun? The hotel manager called and said you were back, we need to talk. You know I don't like not knowing where you are. Come on, Yun, open up!"

Absalom looks at me, and I can see the same fear and uncertainty in his eyes that I'm sure is reflected in mine. He moves toward me again, quickly this time, and kisses my forehead before moving to sit on the couch with a casual air to his movements that I would never have been able to pull off in the same situation. He grabs the remote and turns on the flat screen TV. I try to be as casual as he is, but it isn't easy. I head to the kitchen area, just off the living room space, to see if I can find us something to drink. I figure that if it looks like Absalom and I have just been hanging out, instead of being wrapped up in each other's arms, then Young Soo would give me his usual lecture, and then he'd take off.

That's what I was hoping for anyway, but once again Young Soo's impatience is evident as he begins to knock on my door, more persistently this time. I switch directions and head for my door, catching Absalom's eyes as I do so. He nods and says as I pass him, "It will be fine, Yun, we haven't done anything wrong. Just answer the door, and we'll explain everything... together. Don't worry."

The instant he says that, I feel better. How can just hearing him speak make me feel like everything will be okay? I decide to think about it later as I continue on my path to the door. I pull in a deep breath and mentally prepare myself for Young Soo's lecture, then reach out and open the door.

Young Soo is inside before I can even utter a "Hi, come on in." I ignore his lack of greeting and follow him back to where Absalom is relaxing on the couch. Young Soo stops in front of the TV, effectively blocking Absalom's view.

As Absalom lounges with his arms stretched out along the back of the couch, I don't know how he manages to sound so casual. "Hey, Young Soo, nice of you stop by. Would you like a drink or something?"

In my opinion, Young Soo looks like he is about to give Absalom a harsh dressing-down, even though when standing Absalom is easily a head taller than Young Soo. It's apparent that he isn't really bothered by the height difference, he just wants to make sure we both understand that he doesn't like being worried about me. I do appreciate his big brother type attitude but sometimes—like now—he takes it a little too far.

"No, I don't want a drink. What I want is to know why you took Yun out and didn't tell me where you were going or when you'd be back?"

Absalom stands without a word and walks around the small coffee table to come almost face to face with Young Soo. It's obvious that he's just a little irritated with my manager's attitude, but he also seems to understand his concern, and I hear that understanding in his voice when he answers Young Soo.

"Look, Young Soo, Yun was stressed after the meeting. I was thinking that if he got out for a little bit, he'd be able to relax, and then he would be more focused during your meeting about his touring schedule tomorrow. He's my friend, and I just want to make sure this whole idea of performing with someone else doesn't mess with him or his ability to perform."

I'm amazed when Young Soo actually drops his head, as he begins to realize how he has overreacted.

"I'm sorry, Yun. I didn't notice how upset you were. You just had me worried, that's all. So, just call me the next time that you need a break and let me know that you are safe, that's all I ask. I'll try and be more understanding in the future, okay?"

I nod in agreement. This is the first time I have ever seen Young Soo when he wasn't his usual driven, overprotective self. He starts toward me and stops when we're within touching distance. I'm unable to read all of the emotions flickering across his handsome face, but the one that's the most clear is fondness. He's looking at me, the way an older brother might look at his younger sibling. I half expect him to ruffle my hair, but he simply nods to me and leaves the room.

When he's gone, Absalom comes over to me, and he puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently.

"I'm sorry about that, Yun. I just wanted to give you a little downtime, not to cause more problems."

I cover his hand with mine, keeping it there for a moment, reveling in Absalom's presence.

"There's no need for you to apologize, Absalom, you gave me a great evening away from everything, and I appreciate it. I guess next time we should give Young Soo a quick call, he really seemed to be distressed. Well, I'm thinking that I had better call it a night, huh?"

"Sounds good, we don't want you falling asleep during Young Soo's review of your schedule itinerary, he might get *really* ticked off at you," Absalom teases with a grin on his face.

As he heads for the door, I call to him, "Thanks again for today and for being honest with me about—well, about us."

He nods and turns to leave the room.

"I will see you tomorrow. Sleep well."

He looks back and gives me that smile I like so much. "You too."

After he's gone, I turn off the TV and head to my bedroom. I now know that Absalom and I are the same in regards to our sexual preferences, but it's hard, wanting him so badly and knowing that I'm not what he needs—that we can never be together in the way that I'd so hoped we could, but I will always be thankful to be able to call him *friend*.

Deciding not to think about it anymore tonight, I climb into bed and hit the switch for the lamp on my side table. I sigh and pull the covers up to my chin and simply lie there in the dark.

Kwan—his image just pops uninvited into my head. I have no idea why he'd be haunting my thoughts now, of all times, but strangely enough, as soon as he enters them, I feel comforted and find myself drifting off to sleep. As my world begins to part, with dreams on one side and reality on the other, I find myself wishing that he was here... with me.

As I slip completely into sleep, Kwan is standing on the side where my dreams reside. He's holding his hand out to me, and before I realize it, I find myself moving toward him and taking his hand in mine. Kwan then pulls me close and gently kisses me... it is just a slight brushing of his lips, but with just that one *dream* kiss, it becomes clear to me, what I couldn't see while awake. He is the *ONE* that I have been looking for.

Chapter Six

The following week goes by so quickly that there's no time for me to prepare for my breakfast meeting with Kwan, and I'm even less prepared after having the strange dream about him. As I head to the shower to begin the nerve-racking process of getting ready for *the* breakfast, I keep telling myself that this is necessary in order for us to have a strong working relationship. But it would seem that throwing logic at my emotionally scattered mind isn't doing me a bit of good.

I take one last look in the full-length mirror that's positioned near my bathroom door. Hoping to present a casual feel, I'm going with a pair of black skinny jeans and a black button-up shirt, layered over a red undershirt. I'm thinking that this will give me the look that I'm aiming for, since we're only having breakfast.

I can only hope Kwan isn't going to take me to someplace upscale. It seems like he's the kind of guy who would do exactly that, just to throw me off balance—not that I don't already feel that way right now. Working with the man is going to be next to impossible if I don't get this attraction that I feel for him under some semblance of control.

My thoughts drift back to the odd dream that I had about Kwan. Before that night, my dreams had never held that much meaning for me, they just flickered here and there resembling an old-fashioned slide show. For some reason, this particular dream is determined to stay vivid in my mind.

The feeling of my phone vibrating against my thigh allows me to get back to the matter at hand. I manage to fish it out of my jeans pocket just in time to see that it's Absalom calling. He probably wants to check up on me. Kwan and I are meeting at the restaurant, and Absalom, naturally, is going to make sure I get there safely.

I slide my finger across the screen to answer the call and listen as he begins to speak. I know I've said it before, but I could listen to Absalom talk every day for a year, and I wouldn't get tired of hearing that beautiful, deep resonance of his voice.

“Yun? It's me. Young Soo just received a call from Kwan. He's on his way to the restaurant, and he'd like to meet you there, I hope you're ready. I'm on my way to your room now.”

When he says this, I take another quick look in the mirror. I'm content with the image that's reflected back at me. I'm a fairly attractive guy, I know that much. With my short, reddish-brown hair and brown eyes, I'm pretty sure it's not just my singing voice that drives my fans crazy.

I look around my suite with the phone still to my ear. It's apparent that I've zoned out again, because the next thing I know, Absalom is saying my name—repeatedly.

“Yes, I'm sorry, Absalom, what were you saying?”

Absalom doesn't sound annoyed or angry when he replies, just concerned.

“I was asking if you were ready. I know you're not crazy about having to attend this breakfast meeting, but you shouldn't keep Kwan waiting too long.”

I make a simple noise of agreement and do a mental checklist just to be sure I have everything. When I'm sure that I haven't forgotten anything, I say to Absalom, “Okay, I think I'm ready to go. Come on over.”

He replies, “Sounds good. I'll see you in a minute.”

I slip my phone back into my pocket and head for the door. I check my pockets, just to make sure I have my key card, and when I'm satisfied that it's safely tucked away, I open the door to Absalom's knock and join him in the hallway.

Once I have checked to make sure the door is locked securely behind me, we set off down the hall toward the elevator. We quickly ride down to the lobby, and I'm surprised to find Young Soo waiting there for us. I'm not sure why I'm surprised; it's not like this is something he wouldn't do. Still, I'm surprised just the same.

He comes to meet us just as we're exiting the elevator. “Good luck today, Yun. This will be good for both of you, you'll see.”

Once again, all I can do is nod. It is useless trying to explain to him that I still feel apprehensive about performing with Kwan. However, I tell myself right here and now that I'm not going to let my anxieties get in the way of something that could be a big step up for my career.

“I'm sure it will be alright, Young Soo. I'll call you after breakfast and let you know what went on, okay?”

He nods and then heads off in his own direction, while Absalom and I head for the lobby door. Even though he's dressed in his uniform, I can still see his

gorgeous muscles through the material, and that alone makes going to this breakfast easier on me.

Kwan calls me shortly after I get in the car in order to give me the name of the restaurant where we're going to eat. Somehow, I manage to stay calm while talking to him, especially when I notice that his voice sounds even sexier over the phone. It's not very hard to find the place, and the fact that the morning traffic is surprisingly pleasant makes getting there much easier than I thought it'd be.

Unfortunately, we arrive in no time, and my reprieve from Kwan quickly runs out. The thought, *the sooner I get inside and begin this meeting, the sooner I can leave*, pops into my head.

The thought, of course, is ridiculous, I know it isn't going to be that easy. However, if I'm honest with myself then I'll admit that I'm glad that Kwan and I are getting another chance to talk. Absalom temporarily parks the limo and then offers to come inside with me, but I politely decline his offer. If I'm going to work with Kwan, then I have to be able to be alone with him without being nervous.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come in with you? It's really no problem."

"Thanks, Absalom, but I think I'll be able to handle things better this time. Besides, working with him is going to be impossible if we don't ease this tension between us. I'll call you when I'm ready to leave."

He smiles and restarts the engine. I leave the car and head for the restaurant's doors. When I'm inside, I immediately find myself looking for Kwan. The inside of the restaurant is comfortable, well lit, and one can easily pick up on the quiet ambiance.

No one notices my entrance, and yet, I still feel like I'm being watched. I've only been standing here for a few moments when a friendly looking hostess comes over to help me.

"Is there something I can help you with, sir?"

I take a look around the restaurant one more time before answering her, "Yes, I'm actually supposed to be having breakfast with a friend. He said he would meet me here, but I can't seem to find him."

The hostess smiles warmly, and a look of recognition appears on her face.

"And, what's your friend's name?" she asks with a grin.

“Kwan, his name is Kwan,” I reply with a grin of my own.

The hostess gestures for me to follow her. She leads me up a short flight of stairs, and it's when we arrive at the upper balcony that I really understand how elegant this place truly is.

There are only a few tables situated on this floor, and I'm guessing that this area is specifically for the restaurant patrons who can afford it. Only one table is currently occupied, and by the very man I've been dreaming about.

When we reach the table, I finally find myself face to face with the object of my lust, irritation, and longing. He acknowledges me exactly the way I expected him to, with that smirk that seems to say *I was wondering when you'd get here*.

Kwan gestures for me to sit, and without question, I do. He smiles easily at the hostess and says, “Thank you, Mina, I knew if anyone could find him it would be you. Could you please find Yun a menu? I don't believe he's familiar with the food you serve here.”

Mina hurries off to do as Kwan has requested. Kwan turns to me and smiles that same smile, which I find both irritating and intriguing.

“I'm glad you didn't have any problems finding the restaurant, Yun. So what do you think of this place?”

I take a moment to further study my surroundings. The walls are a burgundy-red, and they match perfectly with the dark, wooden floor. All in all the place is quite elegant in a comfortable way, and I can see why it's so popular.

I want to tell Kwan this, but a thought that's been bugging me since I arrived pushes itself to the forefront of my mind, and I find myself quickly giving it a voice, “What kind of pull do you have with the owner, Kwan? This upstairs dining room is beautiful, and yet we're the only ones up here.”

He surprises me by being completely honest, instead of dancing around the question the way someone less secure about themselves might. “It isn't that I have any pull with the owner, it's really just the fact that I'm a loyal patron. The owner is a friend, and I helped him with some financial backing when he was first getting the restaurant started.”

The answer was simple, but I notice that even though Kwan is looking like he enjoys the perks, in actuality it seems as if he's somewhat uncomfortable with the special treatment.

The longer I sit here, the more comfortable I become around him, and that's not something I want—at least I don't think it is. I try to get the meeting officially started, telling myself that I don't want to be around Kwan any longer than necessary.

"I'm ready to start whenever you are, Kwan."

"Straight to the point I see. Well, I guess there's no reason to hold off on this conversation any longer."

The meeting starts off easy and with no trace of the tension that had appeared at the first meeting. I'm secretly glad that we have this part of the restaurant to ourselves, because the last thing I want to do is talk about creating sexual tension between two male performers during a concert with a bunch of people close by.

I get a brief respite from Kwan's penetrating gaze when Mina reappears with a menu for me. I find to my surprise that even though I'm not very hungry, everything on the menu looks delicious. I decide on a simple meal of scrambled eggs, sausage, and hot tea.

I wonder what Kwan's going to order, but of course, he doesn't even glance at the menu. Instead he sends Mina away with a wave of his hand, saying, "The usual for me please, Mina."

Kwan refocuses his attention on me and says, "Now, let's continue, shall we?"

I can only stare as I watch him take a sip of his water. I'm almost ashamed to admit that even something as mundane as Kwan taking a drink is a turn on for me. He immediately picks up where we had left off, and I find myself trying to pay attention.

"I suggest that at the beginning of the concert you go on stage by yourself. After a short period of time, we'll have the lights go off. We'll have your sound and light man create a wide array of bright strobe lights, and that's when I will appear on stage."

I don't want to admit it, but it actually sounds like a great idea. My traitorous mind wants to go even further with the idea, and before I can stop myself, the words begin to fly one after the other.

"What if we find a way to create sparks for your entrance as well, it will give them an even greater thrill. Also, if I pretend that I was not expecting you, it may create a nice twist for the audience."

Kwan smiles approvingly at me. "It's good to know that you're finally getting into this idea, Yun."

I can't figure out why, but just hearing him say this makes me want to smile, which I refuse to do. It's becoming impossible for me to keep disliking this guy. I can't figure out why I don't want this partnership to work, but the need to disillusion Kwan, to make sure he knows that I'm still against working with him, outweighs the need I have to smile and revel in his praise.

"Just because I'm helping you come up with ideas that we can use in our concerts together, it doesn't mean that I like the idea of performing with you."

Kwan's smile morphs into a narrow line across his lips. That simple movement of his mouth seems to quickly spread throughout his entire body, and I can feel the anger rolling off him in waves. Still, he remains calm and collected. He looks as if he wants to say something, but the arrival of our breakfast stops him.

I can't stop myself from staring at the amount of food he's ordered. I'm instantly amazed at how healthy he looks, especially if he eats this heartily all the time.

We eat in silence for a few minutes. I can hear the occasional sounds coming from the downstairs dining room, but beyond that our meal is peaceful. The fact that Kwan and I still haven't settled our concert arrangements keeps me from being able to truly enjoy my meal, so I push my plate away and quietly wait for Kwan to finish.

Kwan glances up, and seeing that I've stopped eating, does the same. Placing his elbows where his plate had been, he steeples his fingers under his chin as he stares straight at me. I find myself buckling under his scrutiny. He must be tiring of my attitude, and I have to admit that I don't like being so childish and stubborn, but something in me demands that I not let Kwan befriend me too easily. He seems to pull these thoughts directly from my head as he speaks his next words.

"Yun, this tension between us, I don't know where it came from, but we need to find a way to ease it. I no longer wish for us to dance around each other. It was amusing at first, but now I've had my fill of both your stubbornness and your inability to make up your mind as to whether or not you want to perform with me."

I can tell by the tone of his voice that he is serious, and I want to say something to him, maybe something that will explain my behavior, but he doesn't give me a chance as he begins to speak again.

“You probably feel obligated to perform with me, but I don’t share that feeling. I was telling the truth when I said that I thought we’d work well together. I still feel, along with my manager and yours, that if we perform together, it will be a positive thing. Before we discuss the concert any further, I want you to make a choice. If you say yes, we’ll make definitive concert plans, something that we can both live with... no more dancing around each other. Now that I’ve made that clear—will you perform with me? Make the decision, yes or no?”

I can’t help but feel that as he asks the question, underneath it he’s really seeking the answer to an entirely different question—and if my answer is yes, then we’ll come together and form a very different kind of partnership other than our musical one. I fear performing with this man, but my greatest fear is that after we’ve finished our concerts together, I’ll crave something more from him, and that he won’t be able to give it to me.

I pull in a deep breath and prepare to give him my answer. Absalom’s words from a few nights ago give me the strength to say what I desperately want to say to Kwan. I feel the urge to keep my gaze lowered, but I manage to focus and stare directly into his eyes.

“First of all, I want to apologize for my bad behavior. I have been acting childish, and I’m truly sorry for that. Next, I want to be honest and say that the idea of performing with you, or anyone for that matter, terrifies me, but as you said this collaboration will be good for both of us. Finally, I want to tell you, that yes, I will perform with you, and I will cease acting like a brat who can’t always get his way.”

Kwan smiles, and although I can sense that he’s pleased with my response, I also sense that he’s amused with the way I answered his question, and for some reason the fact that he seems to be laughing at me doesn’t seem to bother me right now. Kwan only nods in a silent reply before he says, “I’m glad that we finally have everything cleared up, Yun. I promise that performing with me will be an enjoyable experience for you so try not to be afraid of it. If you have any other concerns about our ideas for the concert or working with me in general, please don’t hesitate to let me know. Now, let me just say that I don’t mind if you sometimes act like a brat. Just don’t go overboard or I might have to punish you.”

If I’d been eating or drinking something, I probably would’ve choked on it. Thankfully, the only way you can tell that his words affected me at all is if you

are looking closely at my face and see the red tinge to my cheeks, or if you happen to look down at my lap and notice the large bulge in my jeans.

I attempt, without much success, to get my facial color to return to normal, and as for the other visible sign of both my embarrassment and arousal, right now there seems to be no help for it. I can only hope and pray that it's gone by the time I'm ready to leave.

When I look in Kwan's direction, he seems to be enjoying my discomfort, but I manage not to show my irritation with him. We continue on with the meeting, spending the rest of the morning bouncing concert ideas off of each other. I feel that the meeting is starting to draw to an end, and there's still one more issue that's troubling me that hasn't been addressed yet.

"Kwan, I only have one other concern about performing with you that we have not discussed. I'm willing to fake the sexual tension onstage, but all I ask is that we not make it too obvious."

At first, I thought I saw something in Kwan's eyes that looked like disappointment when I said this, but just as quickly the look is gone, and I'm left wondering if it was just my imagination. I can tell that he really wants us to work well together, and I can easily sense that he's trying to put my fears to rest when he says, "I understand your concerns, Yun. Rest assured that I won't do anything with you onstage that we haven't discussed beforehand."

Kwan's reassurance goes a long way to making me feel more comfortable with our plans, and it gives me hope that this whole thing may work out better than I had thought.

As Kwan signs the bill for our meal, I offer to split the cost with him, but he won't hear of it. I'm glad we had breakfast together. I feel like I can finally relax around Kwan. After he hands the booklet back to our waitress, I realize that it's already after noon, but I feel it has been time well spent as Kwan and I have discussed so many concert ideas that you could probably fill a book with them.

He focuses his beautiful brown eyes on me, and without saying a word, leaves his seat and comes around to meet me. He stands in place while I move from my own chair. As we make our way back to the downstairs dining area, I notice how busy the place has gotten. It doesn't take us long to make our way outside and take a seat on one of the benches placed in front of the restaurant. The morning has been surprisingly productive—that is, after I decided to give performing with Kwan a chance.

I pull out my cell phone and call Absalom, telling him I'm ready to head back to the hotel.

As I slip my phone back into the pocket of my jeans, Kwan turns to me and says, "I assume the man that accompanied you to our first meeting is coming now to pick you up?"

I nod without looking in his direction. Neither of us says anything after that, we just continue to stare at nothing in particular. Then out of nowhere, Kwan asks, "This man, is he your lover?"

I immediately turn to face him. Absalom had said that I was easy to read, and I'm beginning to think he is right. Still, it's hard for me to fathom that Kwan's instincts about my sexual preferences could be so spot-on that he'd ask such a direct question. God knows I want to answer yes, but the fact that I care about Absalom, and that I'm beginning to like Kwan, prevents me from being dishonest.

"Lover? No, Kwan, Absalom is my driver and closest friend. Sadly, that's all we can ever be to each other. Now I have a question for you, how could you have possibly known that I'm—?"

"*Byuntae?*" Kwan shrugs casually, before he continues.

"Yun, I've always considered myself to be quite observant. I wasn't completely sure until today, but when I saw how comfortable you and Absalom are around each other, it was a natural conclusion."

I let my eyes drift, begging them to look anywhere but at Kwan's face, but stopping my next comment was not so easy. "What if you had been wrong? What would you have done then?"

He places two fingers under my chin and gently lifts it, forcing me to look at him, and even though part of me disapproves of the action, the submissive part of me soars from the controlling action.

"My instincts are very rarely wrong, Yun, but if this had been one of those unlikely moments, then I'd have apologized for my assumptions. However, since my instincts turned out to be right, I'd like to ask you another question."

I find myself curious about the question he is going to ask, but nothing could have prepared me for when he says, "Yun, I haven't forgotten the way you reacted to me when we were together in the meeting room. I had you pinned against the wall and I could feel your arousal against me. I know you

denied it then, and you can deny it all you want now, but it was obvious that being held tightly like that turns you on as much as it did me. Your reaction leads me to believe that you may be a natural submissive, someone who needs to be controlled, but also needs to be cared for. I think this is something that we should explore, and I believe that we would feel more comfortable somewhere private, and my home would probably be the best place for that.”

All I can do is sit here and try to take in all that Kwan is saying to me. He is right about how aroused I had been when he held me, but I am not sure that I would be able to admit this to him. As my mind races, trying to find something, anything to say in response to his comments, he continues.

“You have such great potential, and my reaction to you leads me to believe that what we feel for each other could lead to a very enlightening and fulfilling relationship. So, what I want to know... do you want to see where these feelings will take us?”

His question is making me confront my many unfulfilled needs, but now I have to find the courage to admit that I have these needs to someone else. I know he's right. I can deny my attraction to him for as long as I want, but it doesn't change the fact that everything he's just said is true—I'd been harder than a rock when he had practically held me captive against that wall, and if I'm honest with myself now, I'll admit that I still long to have him hold me like that again.

Coming to this conclusion, I know that there's only one answer I can give him. I continue to look into his eyes—I don't have any choice considering Kwan still has a gentle hold on my chin. Before I can say anything, though, a loud piercing honk breaks the moment. I see the limo pull up in front of the restaurant, and it's only a matter of time before Absalom actually spots me. So, I make my answer quick but clear.

“Yes, I feel like this is something that I can't deny anymore. Even though I have only explored this need to be dominated once before, I want to be with you, I just don't want Young Soo or Absalom to know about it for now.”

My answer must have pleased him, because his face lights up with a bright smile. It was the first time I'd ever seen true joy on Kwan's face, and it's a look that I hope to be the cause of many more times in the future.

“Can you come over late tomorrow night? Don't worry, no one has to know but us. I'll call your room late tomorrow evening, so we can make plans.”

Tomorrow night sounds so soon, but I'm unable to ask him if he can pick another night, and I find myself nodding yes. Kwan finally releases me and stands to head toward the parking lot, but not before saying just loud enough for me to hear, "Until tomorrow night, Yun. I'm really looking forward to it."

I continue to watch him until he's out of sight. Another loud honk captures my attention, and I quickly leave the bench to get into the limo.

As I close the door, Absalom looks at me through the rearview mirror and asks, "So, did everything go better this time?"

I try, and just barely succeed, in keeping a straight face as I answer, "It went much better this time, I think it will be just fine."

Absalom smiles at me and doesn't say anything else after that. I stare out my window during the ride back to the hotel, there's this feeling of excitement deep in the pit of my stomach, and I find myself thinking, *I can't wait until tomorrow night!*

Chapter Seven

It's about five till eleven the next evening when Kwan calls my room just as he said he would. The conversation is somewhat brief with Kwan giving me directions to his house and telling me to arrive no later than midnight. I agree and we say our good-byes. I had attempted to do some subtle checking with Absalom and Young Soo earlier in the evening in order to find out what their plans were for the rest of the night.

I learned that they both planned to remain in their respective rooms for the remainder of the evening. Absalom was waiting on an important phone call that would most likely keep him occupied at least until around midnight. He sounded kind of mysterious about the whole thing but I promised myself that I wouldn't pry, because Absalom had shown me the same courtesy on numerous occasions in the past. Young Soo had much the same plans, but he chose not to elaborate.

I told them both that I planned to take in some fresh air, Young Soo suggested that I take one of the hotel's security staff with me just to be on the safe side. I assured Young Soo that I would be fine on my own and that he shouldn't worry. He sighed heavily and only asked that I try not to be out too late. Now that the time to leave has arrived, I grab a light jacket, after making sure my key card is tucked safely in my pocket, along with my cell phone, wallet and the scrap of paper that I had written Kwan's address on. I make my way down to the lobby via the elevator.

A few short minutes later the tone sounds and I step out and head for the door, a tiny nudge of guilt comes over me for lying to Absalom and Young Soo about just going for a walk. I know Absalom would understand, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth. Telling Young Soo was absolutely out of the question, granted my sex life is none of his business, but I'm sure he'd ask questions if I'd told him that I was going to see Kwan.

I walk past the manager's desk and I'm surprised to find that I don't see anyone there. As I step outside I pull out my cell phone and scroll through my contacts list; which at the moment is not very extensive. I quickly come to the number of the only cab company listed there. I don't like the idea of calling a cab but after doing some research, and convincing Young Soo that it'd be a good idea to have the number of at least one company just in case Absalom

couldn't drive me around for one reason or another, I managed to get the number for one of San Francisco's most reliable cab companies.

I call the number and surprisingly, someone answers on the first ring. The man who answers is friendly, but I keep the conversation short, telling him where I am and where I wish to go. I quickly express my thanks and hang up.

It's barely ten minutes later when a car with the company logo detailed on the passenger door pulls up to the curb where I'm standing. The idea of being in a cab by myself is a little nerve-racking but the idea of being alone with Kwan bolsters my courage, so I get into the car. Before I can think more carefully about my decision, we're off.

On the ride over, I come to the realization that Kwan's home is in a popular, fairly high-end neighborhood, where there's a strong possibility that I could be recognized. After exiting the cab and paying my fare, I make my way to the front door. Standing there, the thought of someone actually recognizing me nearly has me reaching for my phone to call a cab to return me to the safety of my hotel room, but I can't bring myself to make the call. I just have to see this through, so I ring the doorbell.

As I wait for Kwan to answer the door, I'm trying to figure out how he has managed to talk me into coming. The lonely, frustrated half of me knows exactly why I've agreed to this. I'm curious to see where my attraction to Kwan will take me, but my logical, uncertain half is still questioning the wisdom of my decision to come here in the first place.

I know I'm still not being totally honest with myself. It isn't just my curiosity that's brought me to this place, it is my overwhelming desire to be with someone who can fulfill my need to be dominated. I haven't been with another Dom since my encounter with Michael, and there have been many nights when I've found comfort with those memories.

The strong attraction that I felt for Kwan, the first time we met, has been a constant problem for me. I can't even be in the same room with him without having to mentally fight to keep my physical attraction from becoming very obvious. It isn't just his gorgeous body—although, those muscles alone are enough to make my mouth water and those dark brown eyes—I just can't help but want to fall into them. However, the thing that attracts me the most is his forceful personality.

There's a strength about him that I can't help but notice. It was the same strength that I'd felt drawn to when I'd been with Michael, but there's a difference in my attraction for Kwan—I just haven't been able to identify exactly what it is. All I know is that my feelings this time are stronger, more poignant than they ever were when I was with Michael.

The sound of the door opening catches my attention. There stands Kwan, dressed in a burgundy hoodie with the zipper positioned in such a way that I'm able to catch a glimpse of his perfectly muscled chest. The only other thing he has on is a pair of white jeans that barely hang on his hips, like they're ready to fall off at any second. It really doesn't seem fair that he can look so gorgeous without even trying.

He greets me with that smirk of his that I love to hate and a gesture to come inside, the cocky bastard probably knows that I won't be able to resist. As I step inside and remove my shoes, I have to admit his taste in decorating surprises me. I'd expected his furniture to match his outgoing personality, maybe crazy, mismatched pieces along with an overpowering wall color, but this room feels surprisingly comfortable with its walls painted a chocolate-brown color which went very well with the light brown coffee-table, the dark blue sofa and the light blue arm-chair.

The sound of the front door closing has me quickly spinning around to face Kwan. The smartass grins knowingly when he sees me take a quick step back from him. The way he's looking at me makes me feel like I'm his prey, and that feeling becomes even stronger as his eyes slowly devour me. Without me realizing which one of us has moved, I find that we're standing face to face. I can feel the heat from his eyes as Kwan sweeps his gaze up and down my body one last time.

That look alone has me both aroused and nervous. There's a heated promise in it, a promise that I'm not going to walk out of this house the same person as I was when I walked in. Still, I find the strength not to run when he at last starts to reach for me.

His gaze never strays from mine as he cups my cheek in his left hand. It never even occurs to me to pull away, the touch of his hand on my face makes me feel so safe. When he brings his face closer, I feel my heart slam inside my chest. I'm not only ready for him to kiss me, but I actually crave it. However, I find that what I'm not prepared for is the astounding emotions that overtake me when he presses his lips to mine. I'm completely overwhelmed by the feelings of arousal that starts in my chest and makes their way south toward my cock.

The kiss is slow and lingering, and I feel myself drift even closer to Kwan. It's like I have no control over my own body or even my own mind, for that matter. As he gently pulls away from me, he captures my lower lip with his teeth, just nipping it slightly. It doesn't hurt, but the feeling it leaves behind sends another wave of arousal racing through my body.

As I'm trying to catch my breath, Kwan lightly runs his thumb across the lip he's just nipped. He seems so calm and in control, but as I look up through my lashes, I see that he's just as affected by our kiss as I am, and the feel of his hard length pressing against my thigh only reinforces that knowledge.

As he leans in close, I have to strain to hear him when he says in a hushed voice, "Are you ready to begin, Yun?"

There—that's the same sensual promise from before, only this time I pick it up in his voice. I'm certain my voice would shake with desire if I try to speak, so all I can do is nod, but of course it's not enough for Kwan.

"Say it, Yun. You have to tell me you're ready for this."

I swallow hard, trying to ensure my voice doesn't crack. I can't remember a time when my mouth has ever been this dry, but I know this is the one time that I can't hide from what I want. Gathering all the courage I can find, I softly say, "I'm ready to begin... Sir."

Kwan looks pleased when I add the *Sir*. I don't even know why I said it, because we've never discussed how I should address him when we're together, yet saying it just feels right, somehow. I can see the approval in his gaze when Kwan raises my head, so that he can look into my eyes.

I wonder briefly where all of this might lead, but I don't have any more time to dwell on it because Kwan moves away and starts toward the entrance of the hall. When he notices I'm not following him, he turns toward me and says in a voice that makes little shivers of anticipation and uncertainty dance up and down my spine, "Come with me now—or you may choose to leave."

As Kwan turns to continue walking away, he looks over his shoulder toward me. "You are the only one who can decide."

Even after all of this, he's giving me a chance to walk away, just like Michael had. I know that I have no desire to leave now, just as I hadn't then. Yet, something's different this time. Walking away from Michael would've

been hard, but I know that I could've done it. The difference in taking this journey with Kwan is that some part of me is already determined to see it through, no matter where it leads. I desperately want to submit to him, even if it's just for tonight.

Having made up my mind that I'm making the right choice, I move to stand next to him. I'm not sure that I can look him directly in the eyes, as it would seem that it's not in my nature to do so, but he makes the decision for me by taking my chin in his hand and forcing me to look up.

"It'll be alright." I can hear the warmth and caring in his voice that comes with his reassurance.

"I promise you that we will take this slowly, and any time you're unsure or have a question, I will stop, and we'll decide together what will happen."

Hearing Kwan's reassurance lifts a weight off of me I wasn't even aware that I was carrying. Being able to let go and not have to make all the decisions is what I truly need. I'm constantly trying to make the right choices for my career, so the feeling of release that I have, knowing that Kwan will be the one to make the decisions, even if it's only when we're alone, gives me a sense of freedom like I've never felt before.

Licking my dry lips, I speak the words that were impossible to stop.

"I know that this is something I must do. I've been searching for something or someone for a very long time now. I knew when we first met, that you were what I had been searching for. Perhaps that is why I fought so hard against my attraction to you."

My answer apparently pleases him because he leans in again. With his hand still holding my chin, he takes my lips in another slow, scorching kiss. Pulling me to his side, we start walking down the hall together.

At the end of the hall there is a beautifully arched wooden door made of what appears to me to be cherry wood. Kwan quietly swings open the door to reveal a room with dark blue carpeting and walls the color of dark whiskey. As we walk through this room, I take notice of a smaller, more closed off area without a door. It appears to be an office or work-space, but from my point of view there isn't much about it that really holds my attention, although there is a beautiful fireplace decked out on the back wall with a few books arranged on the mantle.

Kwan leads me to yet another door on the left side of the room, this door is of a lighter wooden color than the walls, but it still has that beautiful polished

look to it. There's a simple lock on the dark-colored handle, which he unlocks with a key that he's taken from around his neck. I find myself wondering how I hadn't noticed the key before. I shrug it off and watch as Kwan promptly opens the door, and he hits a light switch positioned on the wall.

A light comes on, illuminating a white staircase with dark wooden edges and a wooden railing to match. Kwan starts down the stairs, not waiting to see if I'm following him. I must say it's quite the view, with the soft light showcasing Kwan's ass as he continues to the bottom of the stairs. Not wanting to let him know I've been watching, I sigh and quickly follow behind him.

When I reach the bottom, I find that the floor in this room is carpeted as well, and my feet sink right into the light blue material. I can tell at a glance that this room has to be the largest one in the house. As I move further into the room, two more lights are switched on, one positioned on the far right and another on the far left.

Kwan is standing on the left side of the room with his hand on yet another light switch. When the last switch is hit, the three lights bathe the room in a warm, comfortable glow.

That's when I notice that there's a massive wooden bed in the corner. The frame is round, but at the far end, towards the wall, something catches and reflects the light.

As Kwan makes his way toward me, there's an easy smile on his face. Just seeing that confident smile, that shows all of the authority that his demeanor demands, calms my nerves and reignites my longing for his domination. When he is close enough that he can touch me, he raises his hand to my face, and I feel his knuckles just barely glide across my skin. This feather-light touch causes a shiver of desire to chase through my body.

Kwan unexpectedly turns away, leaving me alone in the center of the room.

"Look around if you'd like, I'll be back shortly."

Deciding to take this time to examine the bed more closely, I walk toward it. I notice that the glint is coming from the silver buckles on strips of worn leather that have been attached to the wood—the sight both arouses and scares me. I jump when I feel a hand on my shoulder, and I turn to find Kwan's warm, dark brown eyes staring into mine.

He smiles, and it's actually comforting to me, as opposed to irritating me as it normally has in the past. He gently leads me away from the bed, saying as he

does so, "Since you've only done this once before, we'll save the bed for next time when you're more comfortable."

He sounds so sure that there'll be a next time—that I'll be here again. He really seems too sure of himself, but for some reason I don't find that irritating either. Instead it calms me, while further igniting the fire burning in my groin. At that point I know that this is something we both want to explore further, and it's not just for the night.

He leads me over to where I see a long, thick chain hanging from the ceiling, and he positions me near it. Suddenly, I feel his warm breath softly caress my left ear.

"You're doing fine, Yun. Now, take off your shirt, then undo your pants."

The thrill I get from his breathy voice near my ear only serves to arouse me further. I do as he says without question.

When I have my shirt off, and my pants are undone, I stand there waiting, and let my mind wander. Kwan surprises me again when I feel his hands stroking up and down the length of my arms. Then I feel him trail his lips from my ear to my neck, nibbling lightly as he goes. He stops at the point where my neck meets my shoulder, but the arousal I'm feeling doesn't stop when he does, it continues to move lower—to the part of me that really doesn't need any more stimulation at all.

I'm so lost in the sensations he's awakening in me, that I don't even notice him tying my wrists together with something soft and silky. It isn't until I feel my arms being stretched above my head and the cool feeling of the chain in my hands that I realize what he's doing.

"Hold on tightly to the chain, Yun. If you release the chain, then I will stop and this will end... so think very carefully before you let go."

At first I tense at the strange new feeling, but a warm hand sliding down my chest, moving toward the entrance of my briefs, quickly has me focused on what that hand is going to do when it reaches my painfully aroused cock.

Before I can find out, I feel something with the same soft, silky texture being tied loosely over my eyes. Now I'm blind, very aroused, and just a little nervous, but Kwan's voice near my ear immediately puts me at ease... although I can't comprehend why just hearing his voice can calm me so.

We haven't discussed any rules or safe words, hell, we haven't even discussed how far I'm willing to go, or how far he's willing to take me. Still, he seems so sure that I'll be here again.

“Remember, Yun, this is just us getting to know each other better, finding out your wants and needs. For tonight, if you feel apprehensive or uncomfortable about anything, tell me, and I’ll stop. Later, we’ll discuss *your* safe words, but for now we’ll just use the standard, red for stop, yellow for when you need to talk about something that’s making you uncomfortable, and green for... well, I’m sure you get the idea what green is all about.” I can hear the smirk in his voice as he finishes.

How the hell does he do that? Knowing my thoughts before I can even voice them?

“Don’t focus on being unable to see, just concentrate on what you are feeling.”

I attempt to do what he says, trying to understand what my other senses are telling me. A soft movement of air tells me that Kwan’s position has changed, but I can’t figure out where he has moved to. Then the feel of a warm, wet tongue on my chest gives me the answer. The feeling of his lips and then his teeth on first my right, then my left nipple has me gripping the chain tightly with both of my hands. I need something to keep me grounded while I’m being overwhelmed by these incredible feelings.

Sure, I’ve been with other guys since Michael, but none of them has ever gotten me this aroused or awakened feelings like this in me. I can’t be sure if it’s the fact that it’s Kwan doing this to me that makes this experience so much more, or if it’s the fact that I can’t see him doing it that’s arousing me so—I suspect it’s a combination of both. The gentle feeling of his teeth nibbling, and then a soothing swipe from his tongue across a nipple, almost has me jumping out of my skin.

Strong hands on my shoulders keep me from flying apart, and it leaves me wondering, how feeling someone’s lips and teeth can get me so close to the edge, when he hasn’t even made a move toward my erection yet.

“Easy, Yun, stay with me. I only want you to come apart when I have my hand on that gorgeous cock of yours. Then, and only then, do I want to feel you come.”

At this point, I’m shaking uncontrollably against him.

We both know that the only true control I have is the ability to decide whether or not we keep going. I can’t control what he’s making me feel, and I can honestly say that I don’t want to. I want him to decide when I will come; I want him to make *every* decision about what goes on between us tonight.

My breathing sounds rough and ragged in the sudden quiet that follows his statement, but I don't care. I have to tell him what is going through my mind. "Please, don't stop! Whatever you do—please don't stop touching me. I don't think I could stand it if you quit touching me."

The next thing I feel is his lips pressing hard against mine. I know then that I've pleased him with my admission. At that moment, I wish I had the use of my hands, because all I want to do is pull him closer to me and wrap my arms around him.

His kisses seems to go on forever, raising my desire to a fever pitch, but then he pulls away. I feel myself drifting forward blindly, searching for those amazing lips that have aroused me so. The touch of his hands on my shoulders pulling me backward startles me slightly, but the feel of my back being pressed against his chest reassures me that he's as invested in this moment as I am. I find myself wondering what he's going to do next. My cock's in a state of perpetual need now, and I've no idea when relief will be made available to me. Just a soft stroke from his hand would give me the release I desire, but I know that he'll be the one to decide when or if I will be finding my release tonight.

Imagine my elation, when he doesn't leave me writhing for his touch for long. I feel his hand sliding down my chest, and I know exactly where that hand is going. I can only pray he doesn't stop.

The moment his fingers wrap around my cock, my hips thrust forward of their own accord, sending it further into his hand. The sound of my heavy breathing resonates incredibly loud in the quiet of the room, but my breathing's all I can hear.

I find it slightly disturbing that Kwan doesn't seem as aroused as I am by what we're doing. When he wraps his other arm around my waist, pulling my bottom closer to his crotch, I feel his long, hard erection pressing against the crease of my ass. The realization that I've been wrong sends a thrill coursing through my body. He wants me, just as much as I want him.

His grip on my cock tightens just enough to have me groaning low in my throat. I can feel his breath by my ear again. The tone of his voice is rougher now when he says, "You're easy enough to read, Yun. When we're together, do not doubt the effect that your body has on mine. You do arouse me more than you seem to comprehend. Understand?"

He emphasizes his point by quickly nipping at my neck. At the same time he's sliding his thumb over the very tip of my cock, dipping his nail gently into the slit.

My response comes out as a shouted groan as he nips me a second time. At this point I can barely think, much less speak, but I know he's demanding an answer. "Yes! I—understand. More—please more."

As my head falls back against his chest, I can't believe that he's brought me to the point of begging with so little effort on his part. Thankfully, Kwan quickly obliges me, and I feel his hand begin to move on me in that way that any gay or straight man would appreciate. To keep myself from crying out, I bite my bottom lip between my teeth. I'm so far gone that I don't even realize that he's moved, until I feel his lips by my ear again.

"Careful, your lip will bleed."

His other hand, which has been wrapped around my waist, is suddenly by my mouth. He runs his thumb along the seam of my lips, coaxing me to open for him. The stroking motion of his hand on my cock increases in speed, causing the cry that I've been trying to hold back to break free. The minute I release my lower lip, he takes the opportunity to massage it once again before taking my mouth in another explosive kiss.

He pulls his lips away, but continues to move his hand faster and harder on my cock, only now he's thrusting his own hardness against my ass. I can't be sure how close he is to coming, but I know that if he keeps up this pace with his hand, I'm going lose it.

"I can't, Kwan—I can't take it, I'm going to—"

"Then do it, Yun, come for me. Now!"

He moves his hand faster and grips my cock a little tighter, but it's the sudden feeling of fingernails scraping down my back that causes the mixture of pleasure and pain to finally push me over the edge. I call Kwan's name as I reach a climax more intense than anything I've ever experienced before. The force of this release makes my sexual experience with Michael seem quite tame and less commanding.

It seems like forever before I can breathe normally again. Kwan's breathing sounds even rougher to my ears, and I think for a minute that he hasn't been able to hold himself back either, and that maybe he's joined me in release. Although, as I slowly come down, I can still feel his erection gliding along the crack of my ass, which quickly dispels that thought. Of course, Kwan is always in control.

Still, he sounds content when he says, “I don’t want you holding back from me next time. I like hearing all those sounds of satisfaction you make when you come, and I want to hear them again and again.”

The certainty in his voice when he says *next time* reassures me. I feel a shiver of anticipation race through my body from the thought of being in this room with him again, with him once more making me feel like this.

My thoughts drift as I feel his hand reach up and pull away the blindfold, his hand lingering in a way that makes me think that he isn’t ready to let me go just yet. As he wraps his arm around my waist, I’m glad for the comfort and support that it is giving me.

To my astonishment, I watch Kwan move around to my front and slowly lean down to begin licking up the cum that has shot up onto my chest. I think it’s the most erotic thing that I’ve ever seen, and I can feel my cock beginning to try to fill again.

“Do you think you’ll be able to move without falling?”

The sound of Kwan’s voice is unexpected. Truthfully, I just want to keep letting the chain take my weight while the rest of me leans against his chest. I wiggle my fingers and my wrists the best I can while they’re tied, checking to make sure they haven’t fallen asleep, and then I attempt to put my full weight on my legs. When they don’t buckle under me, I nod in Kwan’s direction, letting him know that it’s okay for me to release the chain.

However, the sudden weight of my arms dropping heavily back to my sides causes me to stumble a little, but Kwan quickly wraps his arms back around me, so he’s able to keep me from falling.

Kwan then leads me to the bed. Once again my eyes are drawn to the leather straps hanging limply from the wooden frame, but I’m too exhausted to give them any more than a passing glance. I appreciate Kwan’s help with getting to the bed and sitting down, because my legs are still quivering. I can’t be sure if it’s because my body is still recovering from the best orgasm of my life, or if it’s because of Kwan himself. I’ve come to see that this man sure knows how to handle a submissive, even one as inexperienced as I am. Kwan quickly removes the soft strip that holds my wrists together.

“Stay here, Yun. I’ll be right back.”

I can only nod, as speaking at this point would have been impossible. He walks into the bathroom that I can see off to the side of the room, only to return

a few moments later with a warm, wet cloth in hand. He gently begins to wipe the remaining cum from my chest, and though the warm water helps, it gets me thinking again about how good Kwan's hand had felt wrapped around my cock, and I'm sure that I'll need a shower when I return to my hotel.

As he finishes removing the last traces of my release, I catch a glimpse of Kwan's erection, and I immediately feel my mouth begin to water just from imagining what his long, thick cock would taste like in my mouth. I gently grasp his arm as he looks down at me, and Kwan must have noticed what I was staring at so intently, because he places his hand under my chin and gently attempts to raise my head. I grudgingly look up from his erection to his face, and I ask in a voice that sounds too much like I'm begging, even to my own ears.

"Kwan, may I? Would you please let me?"

I inwardly curse my inability to tell him what I want, but he's already read the hungry look in my eyes. He removes my hand from his arm and slowly pulls me up, his eyes radiating his desire for me. I'm sure that he is going to say yes to my request.

"I'm tempted, Yun. I'd like nothing more, than to feel the heat of your mouth wrapped around my cock, but I want to make sure we're both ready for that step, before I let you pleasure me in that way."

He kisses me then. It's a slow and lingering kiss, but I can still feel the passion behind it. Even though he's turned down my request to give him release, it makes me feel better knowing that this is something for us to look forward to in the near future.

Kwan reaches down and picks up my discarded shirt. Handing it to me, he gives me a quick kiss on my forehead.

"Would you like something cold to drink... some water or juice?"

Looking down at my clothes, I realize two things—as I'd stood there bound and naked, Kwan had remained fully clothed—and that I was dying of thirst.

"Yes, some water would be great."

Kwan walks over to the bar that runs along the far wall and opens the small mini fridge to grab two bottles of water. Handing me one of them, he says, "Why don't you get dressed. I'll be back in just a few minutes."

Kwan quickly disappears upstairs for a few minutes, and I can only assume that he's gone to relieve some of the pressure from what has to be a painful erection.

He returns shortly after in a pair of loose-fitting, black sports pants, looking only slightly more comfortable than before. Sitting down beside me on the bed, Kwan gently pulls me into a cuddle. Yes, I said a cuddle. That's the only word that I can think of to describe the comfortable warmth that is spreading through my body as he continues to hold me. So, here we sit, as I occasionally sip my water, and he moves from kissing my cheek, to my forehead, and then to the back of my neck. I must admit, that I've never in my whole life felt this loved and cared for. Reaching over to set the bottle of water on the matching nightstand, I place my head gently on Kwan's shoulder and just take a deep breath; a feeling of absolute contentment consumes me.

Although I hate the thought of this ending, even if it's just for this time, I know that I need to head back to my hotel. I give Kwan one last hug and then stand when I feel like my legs can support me again. Kwan leads me back up the stairs and to his front door. Before I leave, he turns me to face him, and I can once again see that same spark of desire as before.

He kisses me hard, and it takes everything I have in me not to beg to stay the night with him. It feels strange thinking like this when we've barely had a chance to explore each other or our desires.

He pulls away, and I can easily hear our harsh breathing in the quiet of the room. Kwan rests his forehead against mine and says in a voice rough with barely leashed desire, "I need to get you back to your hotel before I decide to lock us both downstairs for the remainder of the night."

Oh how I wish that could come true!

He unlocks the door and leads me to his car. The ride back is over far too quickly. It's fairly quiet when we walk into the lobby of my hotel. I really want to invite Kwan to come up with me to my suite, but the idea that I might ask him to stay for the rest of the night keeps me silent.

Instead, I enter the elevator alone, and the last thing I see as the doors close is that warm, easy smirk that I'm really beginning to love.

After returning from taking Yun back to his hotel, Kwan takes a cold shower to rid himself of his newly raging erection. As he towel-dries his short

hair, he makes his way back to the basement door. He'd seriously considered granting Yun's request, but tonight was only supposed to be about Yun and his needs and wants, although he'd found it very hard to stick with that plan. Yun was far more tempting than he'd thought he would be.

Kwan closes and locks the door to his *playroom* and heads to the nondescript little room he'd seen Yun eying before. It isn't an overly large room, it's just big enough to comfortably house his computer desk and his office chair, which he now sits down in.

Booting up his laptop and entering the password, he scrolls through page after page of personal research that he's been working on. An *alert* tone sounds from the lower right side of his computer, signaling that someone has sent him a message.

He clicks on the upper right-hand corner to bring up the chat window and briefly skims the message. It's from a close friend that he'd been chatting with earlier in the evening before Yun had arrived. His friend had been the one to introduce Kwan into the BDSM lifestyle, and he's frequently offered to take Kwan to some of his favorite spots in the city and let him meet others who are in the lifestyle as well. Kwan has always politely declined, because even though he's comfortable with being in the D/s lifestyle, he has been unsure about taking his need to control someone outside of his own playroom.

The message window sounds again, and Kwan glances at his friend's message, smiling as he does so at his friend's user-name.

Teacher: *So how did it go tonight?*

Kwan quickly responds, his fingers flying effortlessly across the keyboard.

Dom K: *Even better than I'd hoped for. He responds so beautifully to me. I never felt at any time that he doubted my abilities to know what he needed, and I could feel the trust that he had in me to take care of those needs.*

Kwan didn't have to wait for long to get a response; if anything, Teacher is prompt.

Teacher: *Glad to hear it. It sounds like you've finally found the sub you've been looking for. Congratulations.*

Kwan smiles at the response. Yes, at last it would seem that he's finally found the one person that he'd been waiting so long for... someone to fulfill his need to be dominant and to bring passion and happiness into his life.

Chapter Eight

Over the past three weeks, since Kwan first invited me to his home, he's reintroduced me to the joys of being a submissive, or to be more specific, he's been teaching me the joys of being *his* submissive. I admit that I'm never happier or more content than when I'm in a scene with Kwan. I feel like I need him and his dominance like I need the air that I breathe; he's becoming my addiction.

However, between Kwan's personal schedule, all of my meetings with Young Soo and various promoters regarding the rest of my touring schedule, and the continuing preparations and rehearsals for our upcoming concert, Kwan and I haven't had much time to spend alone.

I try to be content with just talking and spending a few private moments with him either in his dressing room or mine, but there just never seems to be enough time for *us*.

Even though he hasn't been my Dom for very long, Kwan always seems to know when I need him. Sometimes, all it takes is one of his smirky smiles, the one that I used to despise, to get me going. We've nearly been caught once or twice when I was unable control my need for him, so we make sure to lock the dressing room door every time we enter one, just to be on the safe side.

I was so sure Kwan and I would never be able to collaborate musically, let alone perform a concert together, but now I can't seem to get enough of the man. However, this past week I've felt like some kind of disaster might be on the horizon, and I'm not sure where the feeling is coming from.

Last week Kwan and I were giving a press conference to announce our upcoming concert together, and there was a very persistent and annoying reporter who, even after Kwan or myself had finished answering his question to the best of our ability, would push forward and ask still yet another question. Each time his questions seemed to become more and more personal.

After the conference was over, I got the strangest feeling that someone was following us. Absalom has been acting more like my bodyguard than my limo driver ever since then, and on more than one occasion he has spotted the reporter following us.

Even though things have more or less gone back to normal, I still can't shake the feeling that something is going to go wrong. I have yet to discuss my

suspicious with Kwan, as we both have many other important things to worry about right now.

As we finish the last rehearsal for our first concert together, which is just three days away, I'm really getting excited about performing with Kwan.

Walking back to our respective dressing rooms, we part ways to clean up. Kwan has invited me to have lunch with him in order to celebrate the success of the rehearsals. I'm more excited than I've ever been in my entire life, this whole thing is turning out so much better than I'd originally thought it would, both professionally and personally.

A solid knock suddenly sounds at my door, and I find myself calling, *come in*, without any sort of hesitation. As I turn to face my visitor, my eyes are caught and held by a pair of dark brown eyes; eyes that could've been a mirror image of my own, had they been just a shade lighter.

I instantly feel myself smile as Kwan steps inside and turns to close and lock the door. I rise from my seat in front of my mirror to go meet him, but he signals me to stop and stay where I am. He moves toward me without a word, and when he's within touching distance, he brings his hand to my cheek and simply caresses it.

I find myself almost immediately leaning into his touch, I can't help myself. I've really been missing him today, it's torture having to fake the sexual tension during the rehearsal, because every part of me craves to respond in earnest to everything we do on stage.

He continues to stroke my cheek for another moment, before finally bringing up his other hand to my face and pulling me even closer, so that we're at last tasting each other's lips. What starts out as a simple kiss, quickly transforms into something hot and passionate. Before long, I find myself sliding my hands under his shirt and running them up and down his strong, well-muscled back.

I can feel those same muscles bunch and flex under my hands as I move closer to him. Just as I'm about to pull away and make him even more aware of how much I need him, he beats me to it and pulls back. We're staring into each other's eyes again, and the reassurance I see eases my desire for him, but only a little.

Soon enough, Yun, then I can have you all to myself. Just be patient.

I find myself nodding to his unspoken statement. It's strange that I'm beginning to understand what he's saying to me just by looking into his eyes.

Kwan steps close again and leans in to simply kiss me on the forehead. I'm unable to fathom how such a simple action has come to mean so much to me.

I must have been lost in my thoughts for a brief moment, because I barely hear him when he asks, "Will you be ready to leave soon?"

I look in the direction of my backpack, which I'd placed on a nearby chair when I first arrived and notice that it's packed and ready to go. All I need to do now is zip the bag and grab my jacket, which I do quickly and eagerly.

Kwan gives me a smile of approval and unlocks the door. I hit the light as I exit the room. This time I make sure to tell Young Soo that I'll be having lunch with Kwan, and before I know it, we're in Kwan's car and headed to the restaurant.

A few pleasant hours later finds Kwan and me getting ready to leave the restaurant and start on our way to his home. It was decided over lunch that we needed to spend more *alone* time together. We both know that with our first concert just a couple of days away, things are going to just get crazier. So this time with Kwan is going to be even more special for me, especially since we've had to be so careful over these past few weeks.

I truly wish that I could overcome my fear of being with Kwan out in the open. He's never said so, but I've often sensed that Kwan has wanted to openly express his feelings for me, the way any man might want to show his feelings for someone he truly cares about. I'm finding, that putting aside the fears that I have from years of seeing how hard it is for gay couples in Korea is not something that I can do overnight. I want to be able to let him show his feelings for me so badly, to let them shine brightly for the world to see. And I'd love to allow my feelings for Kwan to be seen by one and all, but the fear—it remains in the back of my mind at all times.

I know that I'll have plenty of time after the first concert to figure these things out—right now, I just want to spend the rest of my afternoon and possibly the evening with my Dom.

As we exit the restaurant, that strange feeling that has been hounding me for the last few weeks returns and with a vengeance. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I should've mentioned it to Kwan earlier, but something inside is telling me that it's too late for that.

I try to push the feeling away, because I don't want it to ruin my time with Kwan, but it's not so easy. I finally decide to tell him about my suspicions,

feeling that the only way I can get this odd feeling to disappear is by seeking assurance from my Dom.

“Kwan, ever since the press conference I have been having this odd feeling. I feel like something or someone is going to wreck what we have, and I just can’t get the feeling to go away.”

As he turns to face me, I can instantly pick up on how calm he is. It has me wondering why I hadn’t come to him with my problem before now.

Kwan’s eyes are warm and sincere when he says to me, “It’ll be alright, Yun, you’re probably just rattled from the encounter with that reporter. There are many more like him, and you’ll just have to learn how to react to them. Just remember, I’ll be around to help you get used to how things work here in the States—I’ll always be here for you.”

For some reason, hearing these words seems to immediately make me feel better. But some nagging feeling inside won’t let go of the idea that something is still going to try and mess with our relationship.

Kwan shocks me by leaning in and gently brushing his lips against mine. I instinctively begin to kiss him back, and it isn’t until a bright flash of light practically blinds the both of us, that I realize someone has taken our picture.

I stumble backwards, knowing it’s already too late. As I turn in the direction that I thought the flash had come from, I see the reporter from the conference. He’s holding a full-size digital camera with a zoom lens and is staring at me with a look of triumph on his smarmy, disgusting face.

I feel like I’m far away—just watching it all happen, unable to stop it. I can see myself backing away, and I can see Kwan reaching out to me. His lips are moving, but I can’t hear anything he is saying. It feels like the world is still spinning around, and people are continuing on their way, but it all seems to be happening while on mute. Everything is eerily quiet, and then my hearing suddenly comes back full force. Without warning, other reporters seem to be almost climbing out of the sidewalk and sticking their microphones in our faces.

Question after question is being thrown at us, and I feel as if I’m being barraged by cannon-fire.

“How long have you been a couple?”

“Did you always know you were gay?”

“When did you start dating one of San Francisco’s most well-known musicians?”

I can no longer take it. Without thinking, I quickly start running down the street, on the look-out for a cab to hail. As I spot one on the next corner, I throw up my hand and make a mad dash for the vehicle. Ripping open the rear door, I practically throw myself inside. I call out to the driver to *just drive*, without even giving him any kind of clear direction. All I can think about is getting as far away as possible from everything that has gone terribly wrong—including the man that I’m sure I’m falling in love with.

I only look back once before the cab speeds away. The last thing I see is Kwan being swarmed by the media. As he stares directly at me, I can almost hear him say, *“Please don’t go, Yun, I’m so sorry this happened. Please come back to me.”*

It’s been over three hours since that disastrous moment when he and Yun had been photographed kissing in broad daylight. For the fifth time, Kwan pulls out his cell and dials Yun’s number.

One ring, two, three, four, five and then, *“I apologize but I’m not able to get to my phone right now. Please leave your name and number, and I will call you back shortly, thank you.”*

He wonders if he should leave yet another message. Deciding against it, Kwan hangs up. *How could I have been so damn careless? Yun’s privacy and his career mean everything to him. It can’t be ruined. I have to find a way to fix this. I won’t accept that I’ve lost him, just as we’re beginning to discover each other.*

Suddenly, his cell begins to go off. Kwan quickly glances at the screen, mentally praying that it isn’t another reporter wanting the inside scoop on his relationship with Yun. Seeing the number for Yun’s friend and driver Absalom, Kwan quickly slides his finger across the screen to answer the call.

“Kwan, I need to know what happened. The story has been aired at least three times on six different channels, and Yun isn’t answering my calls. What in the world happened today?”

Under normal circumstances Kwan might have told him to back off and that what happened wasn’t really any of his business, but since Absalom is Yun’s closest, if not only friend, Kwan feels that he deserves to know the truth.

“I messed up, Absalom. I did something very stupid, and now he’s running scared. He won’t take my calls either. I have no idea where he is.”

Kwan thought for sure that Absalom was going to give him hell, at the very least, he figures he’ll call him an ass and hang up on him, but all he does is sigh heavily, before saying, “He hasn’t been back to the hotel. Young Soo is pacing like a mad man. He’s convinced that the photo has been altered in some way to make it look like the two of you were kissing. I’m worried, because Yun doesn’t know this city at all, and I’ve been trying to keep Young Soo calm, so I haven’t been able to leave and go look for him. You’re going to have to start the search for him alone. San Francisco can be a maze if you don’t know it well, and since you’ve lived here for some time now, you will have a better chance of finding him than I would. So go find him—then call me. Even if he’s angry with you, Kwan, you’re still the only person, besides Young Soo and myself, that Yun trusts.”

Kwan wants to argue, but he knows that Yun had come to trust him, and he’s willing to do whatever it takes to get that trust back, even if it takes him a lifetime to do it. He promises Absalom that when he finds Yun he’ll call him, and then he quickly hangs up. Grabbing his umbrella and his car keys, Kwan heads out to find his precious submissive.

Chapter Nine

It's after seven when I find shelter from the storm in the form of a bar. I probably look like a drowned rat, but right now I couldn't care less about my appearance. Dragging myself up onto a barstool, I order a whiskey. Normally, whiskey isn't my beverage of choice, but I just want something to help me forget. Forget about those bastard reporters, but mostly to help me forget about Kwan... at least for a moment or two.

As I sit here nursing my second drink, having gulped my first one down, the door is blown open by a particularly fierce gust of wind. A tall, well-muscled, long-haired man walks in, acting as if this weather is perfectly normal for him. It probably is if he was born in San Francisco, or he has lived here long enough to be familiar with all its varying weather patterns. I'm not sure why I'm giving this so much thought; probably because *anything* is better than what's constantly running through my head. I don't want to even think about what happened outside of the restaurant, much less try to figure out what I'm going to do about Kwan.

To my surprise, the man seems to hone directly in on the empty stool next to me, and with a grace I wouldn't have expected from a man his size, he quickly and efficiently lifts himself up onto the seat.

I don't really want to talk to anyone right now, so I try my best to appear busy, looking into my drink. My efforts are apparently useless, because he immediately turns to me and says, "I guess you weren't prepared for today's downpour, huh?"

Not only was I brought up to be polite and show respect to everyone I meet, but it's simply not in my nature to be rude, so I answer quietly and with a one word answer, praying that he would pick up on the fact that I want to be by myself right now.

"No."

The man only nods and continues, "You're not from around here, are you? Not to be rude, but the way you speak is a little odd. Let me guess—you're probably not from anywhere in the States, huh?"

I try not to be surprised that he's picked up on my accent with just hearing my one-word reply. In a last effort to get him to see that I'm not in the mood for idle conversation, I simply say, "Korea."

He actually smiles when I say this, and it seems to light up his whole face. He's quite attractive with his long hair, dark eyes, and warm smile. Almost instantly, a smile just like his appears in my mind's eye—Kwan. Damn, I'm not going there right now. Even though I tell myself that there can't be an *us*, I'm crushed by how much I miss and need him.

The man sitting next to me seems completely oblivious to my inner struggle and continues to ask me questions.

"Korea, huh? I have a close friend who's Korean. He's a popular musician here in the States. Maybe you've heard of hi—"

"I don't mean to be rude, but I really don't want to talk to anyone right now. Please understand, I'm having a rough day, and I just want to finish my drink and be left alone."

Instead of taking offense, the way I thought he might, he simply smiles. "I understand. I can sometimes be a chatterbox. I keep talking when anyone else might leave you alone. My boyfriend says it's one of my faults, but he also says that sometimes, people appreciate having someone who'll just listen even if they don't want to admit it. I guess I'll just leave you to your drink, but if you want to talk, I can be a really good listener too."

I find myself smiling, even though that's the last thing that I can imagine doing. I also find myself asking, "What's your name?"

He holds his hand out for me to shake. "It's Lance. I'm glad to meet you."

I take his hand without hesitation. "My name is Yun."

My smile doesn't last long, because I once again find my thoughts drifting to Kwan. I pull my drink close and stare into it, as if all the answers are in my tiny shot glass. How am I going to find it in myself to forgive him? Logically, I know that he didn't out me on purpose, but my heart is so full of anger, that it's not quite ready to see the logic in the situation... at least, not yet.

The only thing that I do know at this moment in time is that I *need* him. I need to be near him, even though I'd rather stay in this bar and drown my sorrows in drinks, which by the way, isn't working very well. I find myself staring into Lance's gentle, dark eyes. "Your musician friend, his name wouldn't happen to be Kwan, would it?"

Damn, why did I ask that? Not going there, remember?

Lance seems to be surprised by my question.

“Yeah, I was talking about Kwan. Do you know him too?”

I don't mean for it to happen, but I can feel the tears as they start to roll down my face. As I try to nonchalantly wipe them away before Lance catches sight of them, I realize that I'm not fast enough. I'm amazed that he doesn't get up and run away, but instead he lays his hand on my shoulder and gives it a light squeeze.

“Hey, man, I didn't mean to upset you. Are you OK? I get the feeling that you do know Kwan, maybe very well. I can call him, if you want.”

Should I let him call Kwan for me? No, it would be too hard to hear his voice over the phone. I desperately want to see him and feel his arms around me. I barely know Lance, but since he's a friend of Kwan's, I decide to take a chance and ask him for a favor. “Kwan is—well, we're kind of together. I really need to see him, could you take me to his house? It's—it's important that I see him.”

It takes him all of two seconds to answer my question, which he does by slipping a ten dollar bill onto the bar and easily sliding down from his stool. He pulls his long coat tightly around himself and heads for the door.

He turns to me just as he's opening the door. “Are you coming, Yun?”

I smile and quickly follow him. I have no idea what I'm going to say or do when I see Kwan again, but right now all I want is to be wrapped up in his arms.

The storm is just as fierce now, as it had been when it had started over three hours ago. Kwan is glad he'd decided to search for Yun by car or else he'd be soaked. Even though he's still dry, he would have gladly run blindly through the rain just to find Yun and be sure that he's okay. He's running out of places to look, because he'd only taken Yun to a few different places around the city.

There's still so much of San Francisco that he wants Yun to see. Now, because he's angry with Kwan, he's afraid that Yun will never get to know the San Francisco that Kwan knows and loves so well.

There must to be a way for me to make up for my mistake. Please, just let him be alright. Let me find him, so I can apologize and tell him how much he means to me.

He's startled out of his worried thoughts by the vibration and tone of his cell phone. Praying that it's Yun, he attempts and fails to fish the device out of the

front pocket of his jeans. Actually, he almost drops the phone twice, before he can finally answer it.

“Yun? Is that you? Are you alright?”

The long silence, following his questions gives him cause for concern.

“Kwan, it’s Lance. I guess Yun wasn’t lying when he said you two were sort of together.”

“Yun’s with you?” Kwan asks hurriedly. “Is he alright?”

“Yeah, look, I hope you don’t mind, but I gave him a ride to your house and let him in. He seems really upset.”

Kwan swallows audibly. “Yeah, I know,” he admits.

Lance pauses before he continues. “He wanted to be alone, but I can stay outside the house until you get here, okay? But don’t be too long. Cyrus will worry about me if I don’t get home soon.”

He’s safe!

Kwan has never been more thankful for Lance’s friendship, than he is right now. He can actually feel some of the tension slowly fade away, just at hearing the news that Yun is safe and that he’s waiting for him. “Thank you for looking after him for me Lance. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes or so.”

He can practically hear the smile in Lance’s voice when he replies, “That’s what friends are for, Kwan. Just be careful in this weather. I’ll see you in twenty.”

Kwan thanks Lance one last time before hanging up. Remembering his promise to let Absalom know when Yun was found, he quickly makes the call as he turns his car in the direction of his house. Kwan can’t wait to see Yun—to hold him close and to apologize to him for what had happened outside the restaurant.

As he turned his car down a side street, taking one of his many shortcuts to return to his house, he only keeps thinking one thing. *I hope he forgives me. Please, let him be able to forgive me.*

Chapter Ten

Exactly eighteen minutes later, after stopping to talk with Lance and thanking him one final time for taking care of Yun, Kwan walks through his front door—into total darkness. Not even the hall light has been turned on. He maneuvers himself toward the kitchen, glad that he knows his home so well. After turning on the light over the sink, he heads back out into the hallway to see if he can figure out where Yun is.

Kwan tries to never worry too much about anything, but he has to admit, that not hearing from Yun following the incident with the slimy reporter has bothered him greatly.

The incident may possibly have wrecked the relationship he and Yun have been working so hard to build, and he can't even begin to figure out how to make things right again. Kwan knows he needs to take responsibility for everything that's happened—but he has no idea where to start.

Everything he's ever done or has attempted to do in his life that's gone wrong has always started with the best intentions. He'd only kissed Yun in public because he'd wanted to ease Yun's mind about his odd suspicions. But, if he was honest with himself, he would admit that his other reason for doing so had been a little more selfish.

Kwan was tired of only having Yun when no one else was around—of only having him at night, or in the warm glow of his playroom. Even when they turned their practice performances into a game of *are they really together or not*, everyone always assumed that it's just a game, never realizing how much they truly care for each other.

His thoughts collide and crash to a sudden stop when he sees a lone flickering light coming from the master bedroom. Kwan hurries down the remainder of the hallway, only to stop when he makes it to the doorway.

There on the bed, surrounded by darkness except for the flickering light of the TV, sits his lover. He is positioned so that his legs are now tucked up close to Yun's body with his head resting on top of them.

Yun is intently focusing on the TV, and Kwan has a sneaking suspicion of what has his eyes drawn so completely to the screen. The television isn't overly loud, but the sound is at a level where he can pick up most of what's being said.

It has to be the fourth or fifth time the story has been covered today. Surely, there must be other more important stories that need both the attention of the public and the local reporters.

Kwan moves into the room and toward the nightstand, turning on the lamp. Its black shade reduces the light, but provides just enough that he can see his love. Yun continues to stare at the TV, having not moved or spoken since Kwan has entered the room. Kwan moves around in front to block Yun's view of the news report, and still he doesn't acknowledge Kwan's presence.

Kwan reaches over and turns off the TV, then kneels before Yun. The fact that his lover has yet to acknowledge him is beginning to irritate him, but he manages to keep it in check. After all, if anyone deserves to be angry, it's Yun. Kwan takes his lover's chin in his hand and gently forces Yun to look at him, but stubbornly his lover keeps his gaze on some invisible spot just over Kwan's shoulder.

Sighing heavily, he knows that he'll just have to start talking and hope that Yun will try to understand and that maybe he can forgive him.

"Yun, I understand you'd rather look at the wall or the floor, than look at me... I get that. But, at least hear me out. I was—I am proud to call you my lover. I care about you, and I don't want you to feel like you have to hide when you're with me... when you tell me about your feelings. Also, I just wanted to ease your mind. When we walked out of that restaurant, I was just so glad to have you there with me that I let my emotions override my better judgment. I knew that you weren't ready to have our relationship out in the open, and I made a mistake. One that I'm truly sorry for. It should've been your decision to make, and through my thoughtlessness, I took that choice away from you. I hope that you can find a way to forgive me."

Finally, Yun looks at him, and Kwan releases the breath that he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. For the longest moment after Kwan's apology, Yun says nothing. Then suddenly, he moves from his place on the bed. Kwan stands from his kneeling position and gives Yun room to move away. Yun chooses to move out into the hall, and Kwan follows him.

Yun still doesn't say anything—not a *I forgive you* or even a *fuck off*. Kwan isn't even sure that Yun would be candid enough to say that last one. The fact that he remains silent worries Kwan. It's when they're back in the hallway that Yun turns, so that he's face to face with Kwan—and then he slaps Kwan *hard* across the face.

Kwan feels himself stumble backward, not from the force of the blow, but from the unexpected attack. Recovering quickly, he follows Yun down the remaining length of the hall. Just before they reach the end, he manages to grab hold of Yun's wrist and pull him in close. Kwan feels his lover's body tense almost instantly, and he just barely manages to catch Yun's other wrist, which had been coming full speed toward his face, in the shape of a fist.

Still Yun says nothing, but he continues to struggle and fight with Kwan, so he moves so that Yun is backed up against the closest wall. For a moment, Kwan has forgotten just how irritatingly strong his lover can be when he's ticked off, but Kwan figures that Yun can be mad at him for as long as he wants, if it means that he isn't going to ignore him anymore.

They were going to have a talk, even if it meant that Kwan had to keep doing all the talking. He maneuvers Yun's arms up above his head and against the wall, so that he can grip them with just one hand. Oddly enough, as soon as he does this, Yun's struggles seem to lessen. Of course, Kwan is in control, and he knows that even though Yun is angry, he isn't going to struggle... at least not against being held tightly.

Yun is finally looking at him now and no longer struggling, but he can still feel his lover shaking with unreleased anger. Kwan doesn't know what to say to Yun to make this right. His attempt to apologize had only gotten him a sore mouth, but he really doesn't want Yun to walk away from him angry—who is he kidding? He doesn't want Yun to walk away at all.

They are just beginning to figure out this relationship, and Kwan can only hope that he hasn't killed it before it even had a chance to thrive; not because of his stupid, selfish mistake. He only wishes he could somehow explain that to Yun. He wishes he could find the words to make Yun understand. Kwan loosens his grip a little and leans forward to kiss him, secretly hoping that Yun won't try to bite him.

He keeps it brief, just trying to once again tell Yun how sorry he is about possibly wrecking his career and his life. When he pulls away, Yun's eyes are closed. Kwan raises his free hand to gently stroke his thumb along his lover's cheek. Finally, this gets Yun's attention and causes him to open his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I truly didn't mean for this to happen. If you want, I can take you back to your hotel. I just need you to understand why I did it."

He moves his other hand away and starts for the kitchen, where he picks up his keys. He intends to do exactly what he said he would, even though it kills

him a little inside to make the offer. As Kwan turns for the door, he feels Yun's arms wrap around his waist from behind, and the feelings the gesture brings forth almost sends him to his knees. Gathering all of his control, Kwan unwraps Yun's arms and turns around, before wrapping his arms back around Yun's waist.

Like this they're front to front, with Yun's cheek resting against his chest. Yun still hasn't said the words, but Kwan is sure that he's been forgiven. Since Yun still hasn't said whether or not he wants to be taken home, Kwan asks again, knowing that the answer might break something inside of him.

"What do you want to do, Yun? Do you want to go back to your hotel?"

Yun lifts his face, so Kwan can gaze into his eyes—the eyes that he's truly starting to love. As Yun shakes his head from side to side, the gesture makes Kwan feel somewhat better, but he needs to hear him say it. He raises his hand to Yun's cheek and strokes it once before saying, "Say it, Yun. Tell me that you want to stay. I need to hear it."

Yun's eyes never stray from Kwan's, and there's a certainty in his voice.

"I want to stay with you. More than that, I need to be here—I need you."

Yun barely gets out the last word before Kwan takes his lips in a nearly bruising kiss. Instantly, he feels Yun's arms wrap around his neck, returning the kiss just as fervently.

Kwan maneuvers Yun up against the wall again, and that only seems to turn Yun on more. Kwan manages to pull away long enough to give them both some air. Yun still has his arms locked around him, and their harsh breathing is the loudest thing in the house.

Kwan rests his forehead against Yun's for a brief moment, his desire for Yun is overruling his usual dominating control. Kwan is sure that he doesn't have the patience or restraint to enact a full scene with his submissive. Right now, all he wants is *Yun*—sweating and groaning as he thrusts his cock deep inside Yun's body.

He can feel Yun's harsh breathing against his neck, and he's sure that his submissive wants and needs the same thing he does, but he doesn't want to assume anything.

"Yun, I want—I want to fuck you. I can't wait anymore, I need to be inside you—tonight. Please, just tell me what you need, and it's yours. Just be honest, and I'll give you all I have to give."

He feels Yun pushing at his chest. At first he fears that his lover is still angry about what had happened that afternoon. When Yun speaks though, his words makes something inside of Kwan soar.

“Kwan, I need you too. I want to feel you moving hard and fast inside me. I want that just as badly as you, maybe even more.”

Kwan once again barely gives Yun time to finish his sentence, before taking his lips in another hard, hungry kiss.

He can feel his submissive's rock-hard arousal against his thigh, and Kwan is finally convinced that this is what Yun wants also. He pulls away quickly, grabbing Yun's hand and leading him back to his bedroom. It takes everything he has not to slam Yun up against the bedroom wall and take him hard and fast right there with no build-up or preparations. Which, if he's honest with himself, is exactly what he wants to do.

He kisses Yun again and again, but as he feels his lover's arms wrapping around him, he realizes that he can wait no longer to have Yun. Before he can stop himself, he pushes Yun even harder against the wall, tearing his shirt from his body as he goes. Yun seems a bit surprised by the abrupt destruction of his shirt, but he doesn't push his Dom away. Yun attempts to be patient as Kwan moves away one more time to grab something from his nightstand.

He returns with a condom and a tube of lube in his hand. He moves in close to Yun and ravages his mouth again. Nipping Yun's lips as he goes, Kwan works his way down Yun's chest to his nipples which he nips too. First the left and then the right, before using his tongue to soothe the bites—by now both of them are near their breaking point.

“Kwan, please... I can't take it anymore. Please, fuck—me—now!”

The begging note in his lover's voice finally breaks what tiny bit of control Kwan has been able to hold on to. He knows neither of them are thinking clearly anymore, and he couldn't care less.

He quickly unbuttons Yun's pants and then just as quickly undoes his own. His lover's breathing is labored, and now Kwan's desire has fully taken over. He pushes Yun's jeans down to his ankles, watching with heated interest as Yun's cock is quickly revealed to him.

He pops the top of the lube open and squeezes a generous amount into his hand. He takes Yun's mouth ravenously, while at the same time he begins to ready both his cock and Yun's entrance.

Kwan is striving to be gentle, even though he wants to take Yun—now! He swirls one finger and then a second around Yun's hole and then gently moves one finger inside.

“Ah! Kwan, god, please don't tease me!”

While still getting Yun ready for him, Kwan says in a voice that's rough from his desire, “I'm not teasing you, Yun. I don't want to hurt you when I come inside, this is hard for me too. I'd like nothing more than to just slam into you, and if you keep begging me like this, that's exactly what I'm going to do.”

Yun is shaking from head to toe when he finally says, “Oh please, your finger—keep moving it inside me—I need it, please!”

Kwan can't take it anymore, he removes his finger. Yun begins to protest but quiets when Kwan once again slams his mouth against Yun's. Kwan pulls away just long enough to roll on the condom and slather it with the lube. “Yun, do you trust me? If so, wrap your arms around me and let me lean you against the wall.”

Without hesitation, Yun comes close and loosely wraps his arms around Kwan's shoulder. Kwan then pushes Yun back up against the wall. When he's sure they're both steady, he slides his cock along Yun's once, which gets both of them groaning, before he at long last pushes his aching erection all the way into his lover's tight hole.

“Ahhh—Kwan, I can feel you—god, you're huge!”

He can feel Yun involuntarily tightening around his cock. He wants his submissive to tell him he's ready. If Yun doesn't say it soon, then Kwan can't guarantee how long he'll be able to hold back.

Suddenly, Yun deliberately tightens around him and wiggles just a bit. Kwan takes that as a signal that it is okay for him to start moving. He lifts Yun's legs up and around his waist and slowly pulls back, which causes Yun to cry out, “Oh god, Kwan! Please keep going—don't stop!”

Kwan has no intention of stopping until they're both exhausted. He quickly readjusts himself and then surges his cock back into Yun's body. The feeling of finally being inside the man he's falling in love with is intense and incredible.

He's sure neither of them will last long, and he intends to come along with his lover. Kwan pulls back again and then returns, again and again, with the same ferocity each time. Kwan feels himself cringe as Yun tightens around him.

I'm going too slow—faster, I need to move faster—and harder!

He forces himself to stop moving for a moment. Yun tries to get him to keep going, but Kwan manages to hold him still long enough to whisper roughly into his lover's ear, "Believe me when I say that I'm not going to stop until you're screaming my name. I need to move faster, but I don't want to hurt you. Can you handle it? I need to hear it, Yun—say it!"

His lover's gaze never leaves Kwan's as he whispers back, "I can take it, Kwan—please, take me now—don't stop until we explode together."

That's all Kwan needs to hear, and he pulls out and then just as quickly surges back into Yun. The force of his thrusts causes them both to groan out loud, breaking the quiet that had settled in the room.

The incredible intensity from the first moment he entered Yun only increases with Kwan's speed. He continues to fuck his lover, enjoying every sound that Yun makes.

"Please! Faster—I'm—almost there!"

So am I! Kwan thinks as he continues to thrust into Yun. He can feel his body preparing itself for climax.

Yun pulls him closer, as he moves in for another thrust. Kwan can hear how breathless Yun is when he says, "Now, Kwan! I can feel it, I'm going to—ahhhh!"

Yes, now. Now!

He grips Yun tighter, pulling out and surging back, harder than ever before, and that's when he explodes. Taking his lover with him as he comes.

"Kwan—ahhh! I'm coming—ahhh!"

There's an intensity now that rivals the first time that Yun climaxed with him, and this time he gets to fully experience what his lover did that first night.

Their breathing is now the loudest thing in the room, as they slowly come down from their incredible high. Kwan slowly and carefully pulls out of Yun and disposes of the condom.

Kwan repositions his lover, so he has his legs wrapped around him again, and then he carefully carries him over to the bed. He makes sure Yun is alright and then makes his way to the bathroom where he grabs a washcloth and runs it under the warm water, before returning to the room.

Yun is lying on his side, and Kwan begins to worry when he barely stirs as he wipes the cum from Yun's stomach. "Yun? Are you okay?" Kwan moves further onto the bed and notices how Yun is trying to fall asleep. At first he feels guilty—the last thing he wanted to do was take Yun to the point of complete exhaustion—but then Yun moves closer to him. When Kwan starts cleaning him up, his lover pulls the cloth out of his hand and throws it to the floor, then snuggles in close to him. "Can we clean up later? I just want to fall asleep in your arms."

"Yun, I'm sorry if I was too rough. I just—"

His sentence is cut off when Yun somehow manages to sit up and kiss his lips before he pulls Kwan down next to him and says, "I'm fine, Kwan. I have never been so happy and content in my whole life. I needed you so much, and you felt so good. Please don't worry, right now I just want to feel your arms wrapped around me while I sleep."

It's such a simple request, so he grants it readily. He's now sure that Yun has forgiven him, even though he hasn't said the words.

I can't give him up; I need to find a way to show him that I want to keep him.

Suddenly, an idea comes to him. He knows exactly how to let Yun know that he wants to keep him as both his submissive and his lover. It doesn't take long for the idea to take root, and Kwan falls asleep with his arms wrapped around his sweet lover—he can't wait until their first concert. That is when he's going to prove to Yun that he loves him.

Chapter Eleven

Tonight is the night. At last, the night of our first concert together is finally here. The fact that Kwan and I still want to perform together after the media incident, which unfortunately Young Soo is still trying to fix, only proves that our relationship is strong enough to endure any possible rough patches that appear.

Young Soo was surprisingly understanding when we told him that the photo was real. I was so sure that both he and the record company would want to replace me as one of their top singers, but somehow my manager convinced them not to drop me. Perhaps, explaining to them that the incident hadn't been my fault, and that it would be hard to find someone to replace me played a big part in swaying their decision. Also, the fact that I'm quickly gaining an American following had probably helped Young Soo get them to see his point.

I'll be going on stage shortly, and while I am a little nervous, I know Kwan will keep me grounded like he has ever since that first night in his playroom. I can't be sure, but I feel like Kwan is still trying to make up for what happened between us even though I've told him several times since then that I've forgiven him.

The time for the concert draws near, so I need to head for Kwan's dressing room shortly. He'd told me to come see him fifteen minutes before my part of the concert is scheduled to begin. I've no idea why he wants to see me so close to performance time, but I don't question it, as he always has his reasons—and because he's my Dom—and because I genuinely care about him, I'm going to respect and honor his command.

I still have a little time before the concert, and before I need to go see Kwan. Since I'm not used to having free time, I don't really know what to do with myself. I look around my dressing room, just trying to focus on something other than my performance, or the fact that I really did not want to wait to see my Dom.

I decide to take a short walk to ease some of my restlessness. Before leaving, I take one last look in my mirror to make sure that everything is in order.

I especially like the dark blue pants and matching jacket that I'm wearing tonight. The jacket is accented with silver sequins on the lapels and the belt,

and they reflected perfectly under the stage lights during rehearsal. The outfit was chosen for me specifically for this concert, and I'm very lucky to have such a gifted wardrobe manager. When Kwan had first seen me in it, he quickly made his opinion about my outfit known. The only thing that had kept him from getting me out of my clothes was the fact that we still had thirty more minutes of rehearsal time left.

I let myself smile at the memory as I leave my dressing room and head toward the stage curtains. This isn't something I usually do shortly before a show, but with no other preparations to make or questions to ask, I wander over to the seam in the dark blue curtains that lead to the stage. Even though this concert has been sold out, as I look through the curtain's subtle opening, I allow the worry that has been in the back of my mind to slowly slip away. It would appear the fact that Kwan and I have been briefly flashed in the negative light of the media has in no way harmed our careers—I find myself smiling, yet again, as I look out over the crowd... the theater is packed.

It's over and done with, and now Kwan and I have better things to focus on—like a possible future as partners both in the music business and in our personal lives.

We haven't talked it over, but I really want to pursue a permanent relationship with Kwan. I need and want a strong Dom, but not just any strong Dom—I want Kwan.

A hand on my shoulder startles me from my thoughts of Kwan, and I turn to see Absalom standing behind me. He has that beautiful smile on his face, but I notice that it doesn't quite reach his dark chocolate-brown eyes. I never like beating around the bush when it comes to understanding something, so I simply ask, "Is there a reason you're smiling at me like that?"

His smile doesn't waver when he says, "I'm just happy for you, Yun. You've come a long way from wanting nothing to do with Kwan to being in both a professional and personal relationship with him. I'm glad you found someone who can be what you need."

I believe Absalom when he says he's happy for me, but I can also sense a sadness behind his kind words. He nods to me once, before turning to walk away. I place a hand on his arm to stop him, and when he turns back to face me, I do the only thing that I think will make him feel better. I hug him. It's only a few seconds before he returns my hug.

Just before I pull away, I find myself saying, "You're a good man, Absalom, and an even better friend. Someday, you will find someone who will see in you, what I see. Someone strong enough to give you what you need and strong enough to love you the way you deserve to be loved."

This time his smile seems to spread out across his face and into his eyes. What I said probably sounds a little *corny*, as an American might say, but I didn't really care because I'd meant every word of it.

"Thank you, Yun. I'll be looking forward to that day. Right now, though, I'm just happy that you found the right person. Good luck with tonight's show."

I look down at my watch to see that it's nearly time for the concert to begin, which means that I have to go see Kwan. I look up and notice that Absalom is heading toward the stage exit. I really want him to stay for the show, but if he has other plans then I understand that he needs to leave.

Despite telling myself this, I still find myself quickly moving after him.

"Absalom, wait!"

He stops, but he doesn't turn to face me. Some part of me is afraid that he's starting to distance himself from me. We're now standing close enough that we don't have to shout to each other over the din.

"You're not going to stay for the show?"

Absalom still doesn't say anything, and something inside of me feels that maybe this is the only answer I'm going to receive. I start to head in the direction of Kwan's dressing room when I hear him say, "I'd like to stay, Yun, but I'm expecting an important phone call from a relative of mine. You'll see me at your next concert, I promise."

This makes me both happy and curious. Even though I consider Absalom my closest friend, it isn't until this moment that I realize that I don't know all that much about him. I don't know about his family or if he had any jobs prior to becoming my driver or anything of that nature.

Granted, he doesn't know much about my personal life either, and in a sense I'm okay with that. Still, I can't help but wonder about this mysterious relative. I decide not to pry, because Absalom has on more than one occasion offered me the same courtesy. I figure that if he wants to share anything about his life that I don't already know, then I'll be ready to listen when that time comes.

“Until the next concert then—thank you for everything, Absalom.”

He then does something I'm not expecting at all; he walks up to me and pulls me into his arms. The embrace is brief, and I barely get to return it before he pulls away.

He starts to head for the exit again, but not before saying, “I'd like to get together with you and Kwan sometime soon for lunch or dinner. That is, if you have some free time in between concerts during the rest of your tour.”

“I would love that. I'll run the idea by Kwan and let you know when would be a good time for the three of us to hang out. You had better go, before you miss your phone call. I guess I'll see you after the concert then?”

He nods and finally makes his way out the exit door. After he leaves, I casually glance at my watch, and I find myself in a bit of panic. The concert needs to start shortly, and I still haven't seen Kwan. Luckily, I'm already dressed. I can only hope that Kwan doesn't mind me being a little late.

I quickly make my way to his dressing room and knock on the door. It opens to reveal my lover, wearing white pants that hang low on his slender hips—hips that I can't believe are capable of keeping me anchored to his body while he's slamming his wonderful cock into me.

I push away the mental image, because I know that if I don't, then I won't be able to focus on the concert ahead. Kwan's eyes capture my own, and he must see something there that amuses him, because his lips instantly begin to form into that smirk—the one that not so long ago would have irritated me to no end. Now I crave it. I crave how hot it makes me feel, and I crave the man behind it even more.

He moves from the entrance to let me further into the room, but as I close and lock the door, I hear him clear his throat. I don't understand why he does this until I turn to look at him again, and we lock gazes.

“You're late, Yun. Now we don't have much time before you have to be on stage.”

He doesn't sound angry, just disappointed, and I find myself providing an explanation, “I apologize for being late. Absalom could not stay for the concert, and I just wanted to be able to say good-bye to him.”

Kwan nods, saying as he does so, “He's going to continue to be your driver, right?”

I begin to move in closer to him. “Yes, as far as I know, at least until this tour is over. He’s expecting an important phone call. That was the only reason he gave for why he could not stay.”

There must be something in my voice that conveys to Kwan that I need comforting, because he moves closer to me and pulls me into his strong arms. Having him hold me like this makes me feel better about Absalom’s sudden departure, even though I know I’ll see him again later tonight.

He pulls back and then kisses me. It starts off gentle and easy, but then, very quickly, he’s ravaging my mouth, and I find myself struggling to keep up with his movements. Things might have heated up even further if it wasn’t for the sudden knock on Kwan’s door.

“Kwan? Have you seen Yun? Everything’s set up. He’s got to go on in five minutes, and I can’t find him anywhere!”

Brilliant timing, Young Soo. I think irritably as Kwan and I separate. I rest my forehead against his chest, trying my best to get my breathing back to normal. I hear Kwan’s heart beating somewhat rapidly, and I take comfort in the fact that I’m not the only one affected by our kiss.

Immediately, Kwan answers, “I’m sure he’s around, Young Soo, he won’t be late for his concert. He may have gone to get some air, try looking outside. I’ll be out in a minute to help you look for him.”

“Maybe you’re right, Kwan. Okay, I’ll see you in a minute.”

We stay close together until we’re sure he’s gone, and my breathing is at last returning to normal. I pull away and look at my watch. When I realize that Young Soo is right, I turn to Kwan.

“He’s right, I have to be on stage soon. The concert can’t be delayed.”

Kwan nods and kisses me again. I feel the same passion as from our last kiss. He pulls away first and directs me toward the door, saying as he does so, “You can’t keep your fans waiting, and if Young Soo doesn’t see you soon, he may send out a search party. I’ll see you onstage. You remember everything we’re going to do right?”

I nod, but the thought of doing some of the things we’d talked about on stage in front of thousands of people both arouses and unnerves me.

“I remember. I’m nervous though. What if the audience reacts badly, Kwan?”

He strokes his knuckles gently along my cheek. "Everything will be alright, Yun, imagine it's just the two of us. No one else around, it'll just be us. You singing to me and me singing to you, can you do that?"

"Yes, Kwan, just you and me together... on stage."

The image immediately settles into my head, and I find myself craving the moment when he appears on stage with me.

I continue to make my way to the door, but when I unlock and open it, Kwan surprises me by closing it again with one hand. Before I know it, he has me pushed up against the door and is kissing the breath out of me.

I wrap my arms around him, and he runs his hands down my back, then digs his fingers into my backside. I barely manage to suppress my groan as he rubs his cock hard against mine.

"Kwan—ohhh—the concert."

He pulls away, but not before brushing my now painfully erect cock with his fingers. It takes everything in me not to cry out and risk someone hearing us. After my breathing settles, I open the door again and check to make sure Young Soo is nowhere around. There are people milling about, making sure everything is as it should be, but thankfully, no one seems to be paying any attention to me.

I step back out into the backstage area but turn to Kwan and say, "I hope I can walk onstage without everyone noticing how aroused I am. Just what was that all about anyways, Kwan?"

He only smirks at me. "I just wanted to give you something to look forward to... after the concert."

I swear that I can feel my cock swell even more, and my heart rate speeds up from his statement. I can only shake my head at him as I make my way to the backstage curtains.

"Yun, there you are! Come on everything's ready. You can't keep your fans waiting."

I instantly snap around when Young Soo calls to me. I make sure my clothes aren't wrinkled from my encounter with Kwan, and then I head behind the curtains. The lights begin to dim, and the announcement is being made in both English and Korean as it comes on over the PA system.

I pull in a deep breath, but thoughts of my performance with Kwan have me both craving and dreading the time when he appears on stage. I manage to push my excitement down to a manageable level.

The announcement finishes, and wild shouts of my name and screams of appreciation greet me as I pull back the curtain stepping onto the stage and begin what I'm sure will be one of the greatest performances of my life.

The screams coming from my fans are almost deafening, but over the years I've learned to block them out. Tonight is no different. The pulse-pounding lights along with the heart-pounding music reminds me that I'm in my element. Being onstage surrounded by my fans. This is my life—and I love it.

I play to the crowd and allow myself to get lost in the music just as I always have. Although I crave the joy I feel from the music and the thousands of fans calling to me, I crave the appearance of my Dom even more.

As I finish my first song, and the lead into the next one begins, the feeling of anticipation is building inside of me to the point that I'm finding it hard to concentrate on the job at hand.

How will the crowd react when Kwan joins me on stage?

The stage is set up with a short walkway extending from each side of the main stage that ends at a small circular stage, and it has a long walkway that runs down the center. As I reach the end of the long walkway, I drop to my knees, facing the crowd when the song comes to the end.

All of a sudden, the stage behind me becomes absolutely dark and silent. As I jump up and turn to see what is going on, I hear the crowd go quiet also. Then, with a loud boom and bright flashes of light, the silhouette of a man appears on the top step at the center of the stage.

At this time, I begin to slowly make my way back up the walkway. As the music for the next song begins to play, small flares of white light begin to appear behind the man as he draws nearer to me on the stage. The flares behind him are beginning to grow in size and brightness. First there is white, then red, then blue—the colors just keep coming, and the flares just keep getting taller. As the music reaches the end of the loud intro, the man begins to sing.

The crowd goes crazy. The cheering and clapping and foot stomping is so loud that I can barely hear the music as it comes in through my earpiece. The

anticipation of seeing me and Kwan on stage together was reaching a fever pitch.

As Kwan's silhouette nears me, I stop and allow my head to slowly drop forward. He takes one more step toward me, then reaches up to tenderly grasp the hair at the back of my head. Standing directly in front of me, he pulls my hair gently, just enough to raise my head, so that he can look straight into my eyes.

Through all of this, he has continued to sing to me. Finishing the last line of his part of the song, Kwan lays his forehead against mine. It's now time for me to begin; I raise the mic and start to sing the words that come straight from my heart. We have chosen this song carefully and worked for many hours to make sure that the timing is perfect. It's hard to stare into Kwan's eyes as I sing—the fact that he's only wearing skin-tight, very low-riding white jeans is a huge distraction, as well as all of those beautiful tattoos that I love to admire and kiss—but I'm nothing if not professional.

So, as I continue to sing my lines, I hear the crowd behind me stomping their feet and screaming at the top of their lungs—it's a madhouse. Kwan had been right, they're eating this up. The sexual tension that's pouring off of the two of us sends the crowd into a frenzy. As my last line is completed, I drop the mic to my side and lay my head on Kwan's chest as he finishes the song with the final two lines—then he gently rubs his cheek on mine and pulls me close into his body.

As the stage goes black and silent I feel the quick brush of his lips on mine.

Then bright lights are once again flaring as the music begins blasting over and over, and we move on to the next song with the two of us breaking apart, and each of us running for one of the two smaller stages.

The concert speeds by so quickly that I'm totally surprised to hear the soft chords that introduces our final song. As the music progresses, I head for the long runway, and the crowd begins to quiet down as I softly begin to sing. It's a song of a newfound love, and how hard it was to find, and how I feel so unsure about how long it will last.

At this point, Kwan is supposed to slowly walk toward me as I turn my back to the crowd. Only this time, there's a slight difference from all of the other times that we've rehearsed this part of the show. Hanging from Kwan's left arm is a pair of bright, shiny silver handcuffs.

My heart just stops.

I know that he can't see the confusion displayed on my face, but I'm sure that he knows it's there.

As he begins to sing of a newfound love, and of how hard and long he has searched to find it, I know that every word is meant for me and for me alone. We're slowly nearing each other, and as I raise the mic to my lips, I begin the final stanza of the song. Kwan once again reaches for me and pulls our heads together until his forehead is resting on mine.

Softly, we sing the final line of the beautiful love song together, then I feel a gentle tug on my right wrist and then a snap. Looking down, I see that Kwan has secured our wrists together with the handcuffs. As he turns us to face the crowd, he raises our arms above our heads for all to see how we are connected. Then he looks straight into my eyes and says, "Only to you."

Epilogue

Kwan takes my hand as he introduces me to some of his friends in the lifestyle. I really try my best to act like a proper little sub and keep my eyes on the floor, but that is just so hard to do while I am trying to see everything that is going on around me. This is mine and Kwan's first time out as a D/s couple, and even though he explained all the *rules* to me, I have to keep reminding myself that this is one of the many things that I am supposed to do to show respect to Kwan when we are at the club. I can't even begin to imagine how anyone did this on a daily basis—I am quickly coming to realize that the D/s part of our relationship is a very casual one compared to many of the couples that I am seeing tonight.

As we walk around the crowded room, Kwan wraps his arm tightly around my waist in a possessive manner. Having him hold me so close helps me to remain calm during this—our first foray into the world of D/s together—and then there's the fact that it keeps me from running into other people. I catch myself furtively glancing here and there, trying not to miss a thing, when suddenly, I hear Kwan's voice in my ear. "Stay right here, there's a very special person that I want you to meet."

I do as he says, keeping my eyes on the floor while making sure that I'm not in the way of the other guests. Before long, I see two pairs of shoes appear in my line of vision, and Kwan's voice captures my attention once more.

"Yun, it's okay to look up. I'm sure he'd rather look into your beautiful brown eyes than at the top of your head." I can hear the amusement in his voice as he says this.

I let my gaze drift upward, so that I can get a look at Kwan's friend.

"Yun, this is one of my best friends, who also happens to be the man that helped me to realize that I was a Dom and introduced me to the D/s lifestyle."

I can hear Kwan as he is speaking to me, but as I realize who it is he is introducing me to, all of my breath leaves me in a quiet gasp. I know those eyes! They are the same sparkling green eyes from all those months ago.

"Michael?"

His eyes are reflecting the same shock and recognition as mine.

This is Kwan's friend?

“Yun, is it really you?”

His voice is the same voice that I'd taken commands from on the night that I acknowledged my desire to be a submissive.

An awkward silence follows Michael's question. Kwan is silent, and I'm unable to tell what he is feeling at this moment. He slowly looks back and forth between Michael and me. Finally, he says in that steady, calm voice that always manages to make me feel safe and wanted.

“So, how do you two know each other?”

The End

Author Bio

Gabrielle has always been an avid reader, probably a trait she inherited from her mother. She has spent and continues to spend most of her time reading, and when it came time for high school, she divided her time between trying to graduate and working on her writing skills.

After changing her career path so many times during those four years, she realized that writing professionally was a dream she wanted to follow.

Her favorite genre is paranormal romance, but she realized early on that there were all kinds of love, and it didn't matter if it's between two men, two women, a man and a woman, or even three men. Only To You is her first foray into the world of gay contemporary romance.

Her dream of writing is being constantly bolstered by the love and support of her family, immediate and extended alike. When she's not writing or reading, she plays the role of right hand to her mother and helps care for her two younger brothers. Although she originally hails from Massachusetts, she is currently residing in the great state of Ohio.

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