

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 14

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes	3
A Sonnet for His Vaquero by N.D. Wylders (contemporary, cowboys, bears, May-Dec, sweet romance)	6
Sorry is the Magic Word by MA Jackson (contemporary, established couples, hurt/comfort, BDSM lite)	63
Spell Bound by Pelaam (paranormal, action/adventure, BDSM, demons, soulmates/bonded, male witch)	91
Stranded By Lies by Finn Marlowe (alternate universe, light BDSM, friends to lovers, soulmates/bonded, HFN)	143
Strange Charm by A. Phallus Si (fantasy, science fiction, spacemen/aliens, humorous, littermate-cest, mmmm, soulmates/bonded)	265
Sugar and Sawdust by Debbie McGowan (contemporary, humorous, age gap, pornography) ..	308
Taken From Him by Jackie Nacht (paranormal, vampires, abduction, captivity, hurt/comfort, soulmates, graphic violence, torture)	351
Taking a Risk on Love by K. Mason (historical, student/tutor, duel, masquerade, wig abandonment)	384
That Day in Spring by BJ Sheppard (contemporary, established couples, hurt/comfort, amnesia, tearjerker)	431
This Hour I Lost by Indra Vaughn (contemporary, action/adventure, suspense, enemies to lovers, violence, dub-con due to amnesia)	498
This Too by Isla James (contemporary, college students, coming out, friends to lovers)	564
A Thoreau Affair by Hunter Frost (contemporary, teaching, age gap, friends to lovers, reunited) ..	591
Want more?	622

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 14

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 14.

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.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook is distributed freely by the Goodreads M/M Romance Group and should not be offered for sale. Each story appears courtesy of its respective author and may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

M/M Romance Group Publication © 2014

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group
Photographs from Pixabay.com

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.

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

A SONNET FOR HIS VAQUERO

By N.D. Wylders

Photo Description

A shirtless cowboy with a bale of hay on his shoulder. Medium build and looks like he's bit sweaty from his work.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

A cowboy poet in modern times:

This old wattle & daub house! Think what stories it is releasing as it dissolves and decays in its journey back to the earth it came from. The deepest memories might be the earliest, since they were embedded while the house was young and impressionable. Perhaps the most recent events were so strong as to permeate everything from the clay and straw plaster down to its hardwood core. In a few protected spots the blue whitewash still shows the hand-patterned trim, inspired by the love and pride of its residents. How many were there? How many lives and how many eras does it remember? The lines of public record name the owners and the amount of time each had to care for this house and the land around it. To know their stories is to read between the lines of the records and read the scripts of texture left in the whitewash, in the clay and straw and in the wooden bones of this two room haven:

Alex was raised by a sage, slightly sad, single woman, as she made a go of it on her prairie ranch. He easily learned his academics at school, as well as the music lessons his Mama insisted on. He was naturally articulate, and yet able to converse colloquially enough to fit in with his 4H and hockey buddies, or so he thought. Perhaps they didn't quite believe him.

His father led a solitary life on a quarter section of land on the distant side of the county. His small cabin (see photo) was perched on a hill, windows & doors facing south like any sensibly built, Ukrainian home. Alex's Great (and single) Uncle Oleksa, on his Mama's side, built that cabin the first summer he and his brothers homesteaded on this rolling prairie, back in 1910. However, he knew little of either Great Uncle or father, his mother being very circumspect on family gossip and his place in it. Alex had been to his father's cabin a few times and then only when he was quite young.

Alex went off to university and completed a couple of degrees in agriculture with a side in music (is that even possible!?). While there he realizes his

homosexual nature but only scratches it, like an itch, when it distracts him from his studies.

Alex returns home in a funk after his masters is complete to contemplate his future, when both his Mama and father's health start to fail. His Mom rented her ranch out and moved to town a year or so ago, but his father spent his last mid-spring days on the land he loved. Alex inherits his father's homestead complete with farm dog and horses. When he moves in to his the tiny, well designed, and surprisingly orderly but ancient cabin he discovers a box of letters that show his inconvenient sexual orientation seems to have run in both sides of the family, for at least two generations. He also realizes that neither his father nor his Great Uncle Oleksa were solitary men for much of their lives.

As usual, Alex is playing his guitar, & singing lonesome, country, blues on the porch, in the setting summer sun when a man a several years his senior bicycles into the small farm yard. Alex remembers noticing him around town back when he was in high school. Now he's looking for a job that will put him back in the saddle, or at least on some farm implement. What brought that potential hired hand (pronounced "hard" hand of course), to Alex on this of all evenings! Was it fate? Was it the sunset, his music and current emotional vulnerability? Or did the entire community conspire to set up this life changing connection to keep them both in their lives.

I know this is a fairly long prompt, so I'm open to interpretations that change the above prequel. I enjoy HEA stories where relationship building and romance are primary. It doesn't matter when the sex kicks in, but I find that frequent and long descriptions of sex get boring. Of course we know most men fall in love with those they find attractive rather than vice versa so I'd like some sex in there. Also, I'm partial to mature men, but feel free to adjust the timelines if it works better. I'm curious how you would deal with the power differential between an older hired man and a younger man with relatively more money and power but less experience.

My inspirations for this prompt were several and include the attached photo of a disintegrating cabin, and the tune (not the lyrics) from Oceanman, by www.BlakeBerglund.com. The music is my perfect sunset song. Feel free to let yourself wax poetic as well as prosaic. Let your inner cowboy poet come out if you like. You might include Dada's &/or Uncle Oleksa's story in flashbacks or as ghosts if you like.

Sincerely,

Mateo

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, bears, May-Dec, sweet romance, family drama

Content Warnings: graphic language

Word Count: 20,135

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

A SONNET FOR HIS VAQUERO

By N.D. Wylders

Prologue

“What are you doing here? I asked you to stay away from Alejandro!” Elizaveta Melnyk’s voice rose, echoing across the lawn, and drew the attention of the other graduates’ family members who’d also come to watch Oklahoma State’s Class of 2012 graduate. Alejandro Delgado winced at the volume, as several heads turned toward them. For a woman who prided herself on decorum, his mother could raise a ruckus with the best of them. Clad in his graduation gown and cardboard hat with tassel, the last thing he wanted or needed was a confrontation between his parents. This was supposed to be a happy day. He’d only graduate from college once.

“He’s my son, too, Eliza.” Standing less than ten feet from her, Kemen Delgado, his no good father, crossed his arms over his chest and locked wills with her. “Did you honestly expect me to ignore his graduation?”

Alejandro couldn’t help but stare. It’d been years since he’d actually *seen* his father. While the elder Delgado’s shoulders were still straight and his body physically fit, his father’s hair was no longer dark under the all-too-familiar black Stetson. Now silver, it gave his father a distinguished look. But what the hell was he doing here? His mother had moved them halfway across the county just to get away from his father.

“Of course I did. You didn’t show up for his high school—” Eliza’s dark eyes were hostile as she clenched her small clutch in one hand. Wearing her best navy blue dress and her mother’s pearls, his mother appeared to be the perfect Ukrainian lady. Only those close to her recognized the potential danger in those chocolate eyes.

“He was homeschooled and you didn’t bother to inform me when he completed his studies. It wasn’t until your foreman called me and told me about his going off to school that I realized he’d finished a full year early.” Kemen seemed to be speaking through gritted teeth.

“If you hadn’t forced me to take Alejandro and move so far away, you’d have known.” Eliza propped her hands on her hips. “And who invited you today? I’m surprised you don’t have your lover with you? Or did—”

“Mom! Enough!” Alejandro stepped between his parents. “This isn’t the time or the place for you to rehash your problems with Dad. Why don’t you find Jase and head back to the car?”

As if the mention of his name had summoned him, his mother's foreman appeared at her side. The grizzled old man had been on the Bar M as long as Alejandro could remember. "Come on, Miss Elizaveta. The missus and I aren't as young as we used to be. Sitting out in this hot sun has sure done us in." He pushed back his white felt hat and nodded toward Kemen. "Give the boy a chance to talk to his pa."

Eliza stiffened. "But—"

"Stop worrying, Mom. I'm a grown man now. I think I can handle talking to my dad." He handed her his leather diploma cover. "Why don't you hang on to this for safekeeping? I'll be there in a few minutes. I'd planned on taking you to Di'Vinci's for dinner. I hear they have pasta to die for."

Eliza's face softened. Her weakness for Italian food was nearly as great as her growing resentment of his father. She narrowed her eyes at his father. "Fine, I'll go. But remember your promise, Kemen."

"I will." Kemen shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

"See that you do." Eliza turned to her son. "Five minutes, Alejandro. I'm hungry."

He nodded as Jase led his mother away. Waiting until she disappeared into the crowd of bodies, he was determined to make this meeting as short as possible.

"Why are you here, Dad?"

Amber eyes, so similar to his own, searched his face. "Can't a man want to see his only son...?"

"If you wanted to see me, you knew where I was. It was your own choice to stay away."

Kemen actually looked uncomfortable. "In a way. Your mom and I—"

Alejandro made a slashing motion with his hand. "I know. You and Mom came to an agreement that it would be better if you weren't a part of my daily life. A decision you both made without consulting me."

"You were only ten at the time, son. Not old enough to understand..."

Alejandro crossed his arms over his chest. "What? To understand my father was picking his lover over me?" Anger that had been buried deep tried to spill out, but he forced it back down. He wasn't going to let this happen. He was

twenty-three, not thirteen. Hell, he'd even completed a double major. So why did his dad's presence bother him so much? He'd long ago accepted the fact his dad had other priorities. Nothing good would come from this. "Forget it. It doesn't matter. All water under the bridge, as they say."

Kemen sighed. "It is, but it still doesn't change the fact I'm proud of you. A double degree in agriculture and music? Quite an accomplishment. I remember the times I used to listen to you play. It was always my favorite memory—of you sitting on the porch with my old battered guitar and singing to Bojangles." A wistful smile crossed his face. "I still have him. He's getting old, but aren't we all?"

Alejandro shifted uncomfortably at the memory. He also remembered those clear summer nights where the stars had shone so bright it was like a painter had thrown white paint into the black sky. The smell of hay on the breeze competed with the feel of the strings under his fingertips. He hadn't been very good, but it hadn't stopped his dad from sitting on the front porch swing and humming along. It was probably one of the things he'd missed the most when he returned home in the fall. Those quiet times just before bed, where there were no chores left to do, and his belly was full of the spicy Mexican food his dad always made for him. It had been just his dad, their hound dog, and him under the stars without a care in the world.

But times had changed. His dad had changed. "Look, I still don't know what you want from me."

A sad smile twisted Kemen's features. "A visit. Nothing more. Jase tells me you planned to take a few weeks off before you start to work at the Bar M. Spend them on the *Rancho de la Luna*. Let me get to know the man you've become."

Anger at his old man's audacity warred with the little boy he used to be. Part of him wanted to tell Kemen to go straight to hell, while the other part urged him to spend time with the man who'd sired him. Perhaps he could find out why he'd shoved Alejandro out of his life all those years ago.

"I should tell you to take a long walk off a short pier." Alejandro watched as his dad's shoulders slumped and felt horrible. No matter what the man had or hadn't done, he was still his father. "I'll think about it, okay? I have packing and stuff to get done on campus, so I wouldn't be able to come out right away, even if I wanted to."

“But you’ll think about it?” Kemen rubbed the back of his neck, before sweeping his hat off his head. His expression was earnest. “All I want is a chance, Alejandro. To be the dad I should’ve been.”

Alejandro sighed. His dad had swallowed a lot of pride to come here, knowing he wasn’t going to be welcomed with open arms. Part of him respected that. Or perhaps his mother was right when she’d claimed he was too softhearted for his own good. “You’ll get your chance, Dad. Just don’t fuck it up this time.”

Then Alejandro found himself swept up in a huge bear hug. Even though he held himself stiffly, his dad was smiling when he released him. “I won’t. I promise.”

“See to it you don’t.” Alejandro stepped back. “Mom’s waiting on me. I’ll see you the beginning of next week.”

“I’ll have your old room all aired out and ready.” Kemen’s smile was radiant as Alejandro walked away. Unfortunately, it was the last time Alejandro would see his father alive.

Chapter One

Eighteen Months Later

Alejandro stared in dismay at the fading paint and dilapidated state of the farmhouse in front of him. Even in the fading light of the day, the home looked horrible. Had his dad not done *any* maintenance to the place? But as fast as that thought crossed his mind, he felt horrible. *Of course not, you idiot. It's hard enough to do chores when you're sick from chemo, let alone repair your home.* He shoved his hands into his pockets, before moving around to the tailgate of his truck. The pang of his father's sudden death less than a month after his graduation had barely registered as he dealt with caring for his now invalid mother. A freak car accident on the I-70 had left his mother paralyzed from the chest down and her only son struggling under the weight of the family farm and his mother's physical needs.

So other than paying for a modest flower arrangement and taking the afternoon off to attend the small funeral, he had been left to grieve in silence as he struggled to not only keep his family home, but to find a way to pay for his mother's around-the-clock care. Eventually though it hadn't mattered. His mother had to sell the Bar M to pay the mounting medical bills. *Which is why I'm not going to lose the Rancho de la Luna.* It had damn near killed him to move into town, but his mother had needed to be closer to her doctors. Not that it mattered in the end. A staph infection took her from him a few months ago. Now however, with both parents gone, he needed to get back to his roots. To feel the sunshine on his face, the wind through his hair, and the rhythm of honest to God chores as he worked his body to exhaustion.

Grabbing the two duffle bags that held all of his worldly possessions in one hand and his battered old guitar case in the other, he hauled the items up the rickety steps and to the front door. Setting down the guitar, he was just getting ready to open the screen door when a woman appeared in the opening. With her graying hair pulled back in a braid, and wearing a Metallica T-shirt and a pair of tight faded blue jeans her sudden appearance caused Alejandro to jump in surprise.

"About time you got here," she snapped. "Damned lawyer said you were going to be here this morning. I don't appreciate waiting nearly all day in a hot house while you take your sweet ass time showing up."

“Suzette. You startled me.” He tried to calm his racing heart. He’d briefly met his father’s lover at the reading of his father’s will a little over a year ago. The hostility in her gaze hadn’t lessened during that time. Like it was his fault his dad had left him the *Rancho de la Luna* instead of her. Or the fact that traffic on the interstate had been murder. “Look, I got here as soon as I could. Traffic was a bitch.”

“It took you over a year to get here?”

He flushed. “My mother was ill and just passed away six weeks ago.”

Suzette harrumphed and he suddenly felt like an insect under a magnifying glass as her cool blue eyes studied him. “If I hadn’t promised Kemen to be nice to you, I’d be ripping a strip off your hide a mile wide, boy.”

He blinked at the open hostility in her tone. What the hell had he ever done to her to warrant such a reaction. “Excuse me?”

“You should’ve made the time to come see your old man. Do you realize how hard it was for him to go sniveling to your graduation like a dog with his tail tucked between his knees? Especially when he knew he was dying?”

He stiffened, finally fed up with the heat and the bitchy woman in front of him. Lover or not, he wasn’t going to let her accuse him of lord knew what just because she was pissed she had to wait for him. “I know my relationship with Dad was distant, but don’t for a second accuse me of not caring about what happened to him. If I’d known he had cancer, I’d have been here. But he never even breathed a word about his illness to me when I called to tell him about Mom’s accident. He just told me he understood and insisted I take care of Mom.”

She grumbled then her face softened. “Sounds just like the stubborn bastard. Family first always, no matter the cost.”

He wanted to protest. His dad had never chosen *his* family first. EVER. He’d chosen the woman in front of him over his only son. But it wouldn’t do any good to shatter the poor woman’s illusions of his father. “So they say.”

She shifted and pushed open the screen door. The click of nails on wood behind her distracted him. His frustration vanished as a blur of white, black and tan almost knocked Suzette over in an effort to get to him. With a speed belying his age, the hound dog rushed him. “Bojangles?”

The old basset hound slid to a stop, his long floppy ears swaying as he cocked his head. Sad liquid brown eyes seemed to ask “Do I know you?” as

Alejandro squatted down in front of him. Holding his fingers out, he spoke softly, "It's me, boy." He had to swallow hard against the tears in his throat when Bojangles nudged his fingers with his head in an obvious plea to be petted. His tail thumped against the porch as Alejandro scratched him behind one ear.

"Damn, you must have the magic touch. That damned dog hates everyone." Suzette leaned against the door frame.

Alejandro looked up. Despite her grumbling he could hear the affection in her voice. He patted the dog's head once more, before straightening. "This sweetie? I can't believe he's been giving you guff."

She sighed. "That sweetie? He misses your Dad and isn't shy about showing it." She fished her keys out of her pocket, before removing one. "But judging by his reception, you won't have any issues." She handed him the key. "Here's the key. I've made sure the fridge is stocked with the basics and your utilities are on. The air's on the fritz so it's hotter than hell inside." A soft smile crossed her face. "It'll be nice to have a Delgado on the *Rancho de la Luna* again. The ranch wouldn't be the same if someone else took over."

Confused at her abrupt three-sixty, he took the key. "Thanks, I guess. Is there anything else I need to know?"

She shrugged. "Other than the fact that I hired you a cowhand? No." Then she was stomping down the steps.

He gaped after her. "Wait! You did what?" He didn't have the money to pay for a hired hand. At least not until his birthday next month. Then the trust fund his father had set up for him would finally be his.

She disappeared round the corner of the house. Following after her, with the dog at his heels, he caught up with her just as she swung herself up into a dusty silver Jeep that had been hidden from sight. "Got you some help. You have nearly a hundred head of cattle that are ready to be taken to market, plus a chicken coop and two horses. Do you honestly think you can handle all that by yourself? Especially with the way things are falling down around your ears?"

"But..." He frantically searched for something to say.

"Look, boy. I'm getting up in age and so are my ranch hands. We've barely managed to keep the place running until you arrived. Lucky for you, last year Kemen had already hired a couple of hands from Idabel to bring the calves to market. But they took nearly half the profit. You can't afford to do that again

and keep the *Rancho* from going under. The new hand I hired for you understands the situation and isn't expecting pay until after you take the cows to market."

He squeezed the bridge of his nose. "So let me get this right? You hired a hand for me that is not only aware of my financial situation but is still willing to work for peanuts?"

She shrugged. "Yes. And he's also expecting room and board." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "Look, I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Alejandro. Even with Benji's help you may still sink."

"Benji?"

She nodded. "Yeah Benji Coleman. I've known him for years. Honest worker for honest pay. Used to live around these parts until he had a falling out with his dad. He should be here by tomorrow night. He had a few things to wrap up before heading north." She twisted the key in the ignition. "He's a good hand—and," she eyed him thoughtfully, "I don't think you can afford to be picky at this point."

He stared after her as she pulled out in a cloud of red dust. He was at a loss for words. Not only had he inherited his father's falling apart ranch, he now had a hired hand he'd never met, and a dog. "Well, hell." He glanced skyward. "You left me a fine mess, Dad."

Benjamin Coleman IV, or Benji, as he preferred his friends to call him, downshifted and throttled back his motorcycle as he approached the turnoff to the Delgado ranch. Under him the Harley rumbled its protest as he turned off the paved highway and onto gravel. The trip from El Paso had been a long and dusty ride but had flown by faster than he'd expected. Navigating up the lane, he took in the barbed wire fences and scattering of cows. He frowned as he passed a sagging section of fencing, but had to remind himself that the new owner had been absent for nearly a year according to the Widow Ranson. So he mentally jotted it down on his to do list. Hopefully Delgado's son knew his ass from a hole in the ground, or it was going to be a long couple of months as they brought the herd to market.

The sun was just setting when he caught sight of the house. Perched at the top of a small incline and facing south, the fading streaks of sunlight threw a good portion of the home into the shadows—including the porch. Pulling up next to a battered old pickup truck, he lowered the kickstand and turned the

key. The purr of the motor died, leaving the yard almost silent. He swung off the bike, stretching out the kinks the twelve-hour drive had caused. That's when he heard it. The faint sound of a guitar and the most earth-shattering baritone he'd ever heard. Low and sultry, it made him think of smoky bars and a primitive lust, followed by desperate kisses and groping hands.

Drawn to the sound, he lowered the bandana he'd worn over his mouth and slapped his hat against his leather covered thigh before settling it back on his head. As he moved toward temptation, he hoped it wasn't coming from his new boss, but knew his luck wasn't that good. Suzette had told him that the young man had no one and could use the guidance of an experienced man. He'd jumped at the idea. Anything was better than staying with his folks. As the song rose in its intensity, his parents, even the idea of the singer being off limits, faded from his mind. Like rats to the Pied Piper, he was drawn irrevocably closer. Every note wrapped around him. Every softly sung word lured him until he found himself at the foot of the stairs leading to the porch.

The music died and the voice faded when he moved to climb the steps. He wanted to beg the man to not stop. To finish the song, but he froze—one foot on the first step and his hand wrapped around the weathered rail. He could barely force himself to speak. "Please, continue."

The stir of the shadows as a dog got to his feet barely registered as the thud of a chair's legs being lowered back to the floor drew his attention. "Heel, Bojangles." The softly spoken command had no less impact on Benji, than the song. Then the man stepped into the fading light holding a battered old guitar crosswise across his body. Shirtless and barefoot, wearing nothing more than a faded pair of Levi's, he was beyond tempting with his blond hair burnished a dark gold.

At least that's what Benji thought as the man lifted the guitar over his head, before leaning it up against the railing. "You must be Benji Coleman. Suzette said you'd be here sometime this evening. So I saved some stew and homemade cornbread for you, in case you were hungry."

He nodded, surprise at the man's generosity warring with stirring lust inside him as the taut muscles which had been hidden by the instrument came into view. He broke out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the summer heat and everything to do with unwanted desire. His body hungered for more than the offered food.

Then the man stuck his hand out. "I'm Alejandro Delgado. I've been told I'm your new boss."

He licked his lower lip and pushed down his disappointment before taking the offered hand. Even if the other man was interested in a summer fling, as his boss, Mr. Sexy Crooner was definitely off the menu. “Yeah, I reckon so.”

Chapter Two

"Damn," Alejandro muttered softly as he watched his new hand walk back toward the dust-covered motorcycle parked next to his truck. Black leather chaps accented thick thighs, while his fit torso stretched the light blue wifebeater which showed off the man's well-defined arms. The hint of body hair at Benji's neckline had been nothing more than a tease. Even the salt-n-pepper hair half hidden under the cowboy hat did little to deter Alejandro's attraction. He'd always loved bears. Those sexy older men who were delightfully furred always drove his libido crazy. In fact, his first lover at school had been the divorced father of a fellow student.

Next to him, Bojangles bumped his head against his fingers, begging for attention. "That man is more tempting than my mama's homemade apple pie." He scratched the dog's head. "Think he'll let me have a bite, boy?"

Bojangles whined softly.

He sighed. "Yeah, I know. A hopeless fantasy. There's no way that hunk of man is even remotely interested in guys." He raked his hand through his hair as Benji bent over the saddlebags on the side of the bike causing the leather to frame his ass. "But man... what a waste."

Turning away from the temptation, Alejandro picked up his guitar and opened the screen door. "Come on, boy. Let's see about getting our new hand some food."

Instead of following him inside the house, the dog plopped down on the porch, his sad eyes drifting shut. He shook his head. The dog was no fool. Stepping inside, he swore softly as the intense heat washed over him.

"First thing tomorrow, I'm calling the A.C. guy. I don't care if I have to hock my truck. I'm not spending another miserable night trying to sleep in here." Moving over to the Crock-Pot, the only way he was cooking in this freaking heat wave, he lifted the lid off the stew. Taking the wooden spoon, he stirred it, savoring the smells of beef, baby carrots, new potatoes and barley. It didn't take him long to ladle up a good sized bowl for his new hand. He was just cutting a few pieces of homemade bread, when Benji joined him.

"Son of a bitch. It's hotter than hell in here." Benji paused just inside the door, before inhaling deeply. "But damned if that stew doesn't smell great. Did you make it?"

“Yeah.” Alejandro popped a small piece of bread into his mouth to distract himself from the tantalizing scent of Stetson and male musk emanating from Benji.

“Homemade?” Benji leaned in closer, lifting the cover off the Crock-Pot.

“Yeah...” He trailed off when Benji groaned softly and licked his lips.

“Can’t wait to taste it.” Then he wiped his finger around the rim, gathering up the gravy.

Alejandro nearly swallowed his tongue when he popped his finger into his mouth and sucked it clean. His cock thickened in a rush that was only compounded by the pleasurable sigh and the hunger in Benji’s gaze. The thought of his hand being that... passionate about food had him wondering what he’d be like when it came to sex. *Whoa, hold up partner. Get your frickin’ mind out of the gutter.*

“Tastes better than any canned shit I’ve eaten.” Benji straightened and put the lid back on the Crock-Pot. “But, then again, it’s better than starving.”

“True.” Alejandro fumbled with the lid on the butter. It took him several tries before he managed to get it off. Trying to ignore the presence of the man next to him, he slathered butter on the thick slices of bread before setting them on the lip of the bowl. “There you go. You can eat out on the porch if you want.”

“I think I will. Don’t feel like melting in here.” Benji whistled as he picked up the stew and bread. “And fresh bread and butter. How lucky can a guy get? If it’s as good as the stew, I’ll be back for seconds. I’m a growing boy after all.”

Alejandro chuckled, but refrained from disputing Benji’s claim. Instead he kept himself busy by covering the bread back up and putting the butter back in the fridge. “Not to worry, there’s plenty. Spoons are in the second drawer to the left. Help yourself.”

“I will.” The scrape of the drawer was followed shortly by the slap of the screen door as his new hand carried his food out to the porch.

“Shit.” He braced his arms against the counter as he waited for his dick to soften a bit. Because despite the heat of the house, his frickin’ libido was stuck on high. The last thing he needed was to run off the only hand he had because of his unruly dick.

“Boss, those were some damned fine vittles.” Sitting with his booted feet propped against the railing, while sopping up the last of the gravy with a hunk of bread from the bowl resting on his stomach, Benji sighed contentedly. The boy could cook. For once he’d lucked out when he’d agreed for room and board to be part of his salary. Unlike the last time on the Triple J—where the foreman’s idea of food had been cold cereal for breakfast, jerky for lunch, and canned soup, cold cereal or frozen pizza for dinner.

Alejandro shrugged as he stared off into the night. From the darkened shadows of the porch, the bright moon shed just enough light for Benji to see what he was eating. Above them, the stars glittered against the dark backdrop and for the first time in a long while Benji felt... comfortable, for a lack of a better word.

“It’s just stew—nothing out of the ordinary.” His boss seemed determined to slough his cooking skills off. “Mom insisted I know how to take care of myself when I went off to college.”

Benji studied Alejandro’s relaxed pose against the railing of the porch. The faint glow of the moon threw one side of his face in the shadows, while highlighting the other side. For a younger guy, he was attractive—but still off-limits. So instead, Benji turned his attention back to the conversation at hand. “A college man, huh?”

“Yeah.” He wrapped his arm around the support beam. “Are you going to give me crap about it?”

“Should I?” He kept his tone even.

Alejandro shrugged. “When I came home some of the older hands scoffed at my suggestions. Called them nothing but new fan-dangled ideas.” He brushed his hair back from his face. “As if getting a degree in agriculture makes me lower than cow dung.”

Benji set aside his bowl. He recognized the defensive tone, the stiff set of those wide shoulders, and even understood the reasoning behind it. A lot of the older hands were resistant to change, but instead of taking offense, he wanted to put his new boss at ease. “Cow dung, huh? Or is that your way of saying I’m old?” He rubbed his hand over his closely clipped goatee. “I mean, I know I’ve got these gray hairs going on, but I swear I’m thirty-eight years young.”

A low chuckle rolled free of the younger man. “Thirty-eight years young? That’s a new one.” He gave Benji a thorough going-over with his gaze.

Resisting the urge to fidget was hard, but he managed. With his feet propped on the railing, he leaned the chair further back. “Yep. Don’t let the rugged visage and wear and tear fool you. I can hold my own. And unlike some, I don’t have an issue with book learning. If I could’ve convinced my old man to pay for a degree in agriculture instead of law, perhaps I’d have turned out different. Maybe had a ranch like this to call my own.”

Alejandro relaxed against the post. “So no guff?”

Benji shook his head. “Nope. I don’t give guff. You’re the boss.” He let the chair fall back on all four legs. “But if you fuck up, and you probably will—I’ll give it to you straight. Not to be mean, but to help.”

Alejandro nodded. “I’d expect no less.”

“Good, because Suzette said you needed an experienced cowhand. And most cowhands with my experience won’t work under your terms.”

“Then why did you agree to them?”

Benji sighed. “Personal reasons. My ma is sick. She lives in Idabel and I promised my sister I would come and see her. But Pa and I? We don’t get along none too well.”

“So you hooked up with me.” A wealth of understanding filled Alejandro’s voice. “Family can be a bitch at times.”

Benji nodded. “But don’t think for a second I won’t pull my weight around here. Other than a few evenings off to visit, and perhaps an occasional Sunday morning, I’ll be stuck to this place like a bur.”

“Do what you have to do. I know how it is to have a sick mother. As long as you can teach me the ins and outs of bringing in a herd like this, we’ll call it even.”

Refusing to think about what he would like to teach Alejandro, he nodded. “Yeah, I’ll show you what I know. Twenty years of experience has to be good for something.” He stood. “But first things first. Before we can even think about moving the herd, we need to inspect every inch of fencing you have on the place. I noticed several breaks just along the lane leading up here that are prime areas for Houdini cows.”

A grin tugged at the corner of Alejandro’s mouth. “Houdini cows?”

He grabbed his bowl. “Yep. Them rascals only need six inches of open wire and they are gone. You’ll be lucky if you haven’t lost a few head already.”

Alejandro shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Then I guess we should turn in if we want any chance of riding the fences before the damned heat sends us looking for some place cool."

Benji didn't comment on the "we" but followed his new boss into the still warm house. The setting of the sun did little to cool off the home, despite the open windows. "And it won't be in here. It's still hotter than hell in this place."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Suzette told me when I arrived yesterday that the air was on the fritz, but I thought she meant it was only working half-assed. Until I turned it on this afternoon. By then it was too late to call the A.C. repair guy. Bitch is blowing nothing but hot air." Alejandro sank into the chair at the table to toe off his boots. "I'll get ahold of him tomorrow. See if he'll take payments."

After setting his bowl in the sink, Benji reached for the buckle on his riding leathers, determined to get out of the hot material. He knew exactly where the boy was coming from. Money on ranches was usually tight before roundup, but they had to have a cool house to come home to at the end of the day. "Before you do that, boss, let me take a look at it in the morning."

"You think you can fix it?"

He shrugged as he unzipped the leathers that protected him during his ride out, down his thighs. "Maybe. It might just be out of coolant."

"That'd be appreciated. I may know how to fix a tractor, or combine, but I know jack about cooling systems."

"No problem." Bracing himself on the counter, he leaned down to strip the leathers over his boots. "Consider it my first chore." He glanced up and damned near swallowed his tongue. Now standing in the middle of the kitchen, Alejandro wiped the sweat slickened muscles of his chest with a hand towel. The flex of said muscles as he dried his face with the towel had Benji wanting to touch. It was then that he knew sleep would be a long time in coming. It would take an act of God to drive out the memory of his boss standing half-naked while he rubbed the sweat off his face.

Chapter Three

The creak of the barn door opening drew Alejandro's attention away from the stall he'd been mucking out. Nearing noon, he'd been up for hours. First feeding the livestock, and now cleaning the pens where his dad's horses were kept. Stardust, a gelding his father had used in the past to cull the herd, lifted his head and snorted, before returning to the ration of oats and alfalfa Alejandro offered to get him out of the stall. Heaving one last fork full of straw and manure into the wheelbarrow, he straightened. *Halfway done*. All that was left was to spread out the fresh bedding. The rap of knuckles against the wooden stall door made him look up from the bale he was cutting the twine on.

"Hey, Benji."

In a battered black hat, a thin white T-shirt and faded blue jeans that cupped a bulge Alejandro wanted to explore, Benji was as tempting as a cool glass of sweet tea on a hot summer day.

It just isn't fair. Here I am soaked through and he's barely broke a sweat. Resting one arm on the top of the pitchfork, Alejandro wiped his forehead with a folded handkerchief from his back pocket. It felt like it was already over ninety inside the barn. "So what's the verdict? Are we gonna have a cool house tonight?"

"Unfortunately, no." Benji pushed back his hat, exposing several damp silver curls. With the streak of grease across his right cheekbone, he almost looked adorable.

"Well hell. Guess I'm gonna be calling that A.C. guy." He'd really hoped that it would be something simple to fix. But instead it looked like they'd be coming back to a steaming hot house after checking the fences.

"No need to do that." Benji picked up the curry brush off the shelf and moved closer to Stardust. "I just needed to order the part. Guy at the hardware store told me it should be in next week."

Alejandro nearly sagged with relief. "Thank God. I thought I was going to have to sell off my truck to fix it."

Benji chuckled, then swept the brush over Stardust's hindquarters. "Now don't go doing that. How are we gonna eat? The bike won't hold much in the way of supplies. At least not enough to satisfy a man with my appetites."

Alejandro swallowed hard, turned back to the straw bale, and tried to not wonder if the man's appetites in bed were as voracious as those for food. But he kept his reply light. "Well, if last night was any indication, I may end up slaughtering a cow and putting it up. That might last us 'til the end of the summer. I don't think I've ever seen anyone put away as much as you did last night."

"Might be a good idea." Benji just smiled. "Save you a fortune on meat alone."

Breaking open the bale, Alejandro nodded. "I'm all for saving money." He forked some straw on to the floor. "Probably the same reason you rode your bike instead of driving."

Benji worked his way over to Stardust's other side. Then glanced up at him, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Yep. Besides I love the wind in my hair. Which is why I love to ride."

Tightening his fingers around the handle, Alejandro forced himself to breath, to not throw himself at Benji's feet and beg to be the next thing the man rode. What the hell was wrong with him? Even during his first carefree days at college he hadn't been this damned horny. It was as if Benji was his catnip. All Alejandro wanted to do was rub all over the other man. Instead of acting on the compulsion, he continued to spread the straw. He was suddenly glad that the closed stall door stood between his aching cock and his new hand's sharp gaze. "Still I can't believe you rode all the way from San Antonio? That had to be a long haul."

"Not as long as a sixteen-hour day on the back of a horse during roundup." Benji shrugged, and gave Stardust one last pat. "Which reminds me, times a-wasting. If you point me in the right direction, I'll get the horses ready, while you finish taking care of..."

"Stardust." Alejandro supplied.

"Stardust." He ran his palm over the horse's dappled nose, before offering the gelding a carrot he must've snatched from the kitchen. Neighing softly, Stardust snuffled it out of his hand. "And while he's a beaut, I'd think this boy would be happier with you on his back than my heavy ass."

Straightening, he gave Benji a thorough going over. The man was delusional. If there was an ounce of fat on his frame, Alejandro would eat his hat. "Whatever." He nodded to the back of the barn. "You'll find the tack hanging on the far wall. Geronimo, the tan quarter horse, is in the second to last

stall. He should be a good ride for you. But be careful. He may seem docile at first, but he likes to bite.”

“Will do.” Then he was gone and Alejandro gave a sigh of relief. Maybe a dowsing in the horse trough was in order. Anything to keep from jumping his new hand.

“Damn it. Get your fucking head in the game, you idiot. You are not going to touch that boy.” Muttering to himself as he pulled the saddle off its rack, Benji tried to ignore his aching cock. The look on his boss’s face when he mentioned loving to ride had prompted a vision of Alejandro, writhing on top of him as he gave his boss a slow, long ride. One that had nothing to do with horses or motorcycles, but everything to do with sating the fire raging inside of him.

The nicker from a nearby stall jerked him free of the amorous thoughts. He lugged the saddle toward the stall. Perhaps it would be best if he kept his distance from Alejandro. But how the hell was he going to do that?

Cautiously opening the door, he approached the sixteen-hand quarter horse. As Geronimo stomped his feet, he tried to focus on gentling the horse, but found himself thinking about his boss. Everything about Alejandro, from his music, to his infectious laugh, to his incredible cooking and trim physique, reminded Benji of how long it had been since he’d had a lover. While never a promiscuous man, Benji had his share of lovers. But over the years, he’d become more selective. It took more than an itch needing to be scratched for him to park his boots under a man’s bed. He honestly had to like the guy.

“Shit,” he cursed, and barely managed to avoid being nipped as the quarter horse lunged at him—teeth first. If he wasn’t careful, the damned horse was going to take a chunk out of his hide. “Whoa, there, sweetheart. I’m not gonna hurt you.” He pivoted, never taking his eyes off the horse, and tugged the saddle blanket free. The horse eyed him and stamped its foot again. “Aw come on, baby. Don’t be like that. We both know you want to go for a nice, long ride.”

Continuing to croon in a soft voice, he barely managed to get the blanket and saddle over its broad back and was cinching up the buckle when Alejandro appeared in the opening of the stall.

“Better press up with your knee and drive the air out of his lungs. I think he finds it quite humorous to have both his rider and saddle hanging upside-down under him.”

Benji drew back and looked at the horse. "Now you wouldn't do that to unsuspecting me would you, boy?"

The horse actually flattened its ears and tried to nip at him again. Benji glared at the horse. "You sure this horse is the right one for me to be riding, boss man? He's a bit more than skittish, if you know what I mean."

Alejandro draped his arms over the top of the stall gate. "Don't take it personal-like. He has a thing about his stall. Doesn't like others in it with him. Well other than that three-legged calico cat that's been around forever." He handed Benji the bridle. "But once you get him saddled up and out of it, he's the best horse around."

"If that's the case, why not wait to tack him up until you bring him out of the stall?"

Alejandro chuckled, before straightening. "Ever had to chase a quarter horse? I remember Dad chasing his ass halfway to town before he caught him. Don't think I've ever seen the old man that mad in my life."

Benji bit back a laugh as a memory tugged at him. A slender Hispanic man chewing out a horse in the middle of the road leading to town. The Spanish curses flying out of his mouth would've made the sinner blush. "It was *this* horse? I remember when that happened. It was just before I left town for good." He shook his head. "Some of the things that came out of your pa's mouth. Haven't heard language like that since. Your dad was a helluva man."

Alejandro's smile fell. "I wouldn't know. Once I turned ten, he forgot I existed."

He eased the bridle over Geronimo's head. He had a hard time imagining the same man who'd chased a horse for nearly ten miles had abandoned his only child. But considering his own relationship with his dad, it was probably best if he didn't speculate. "Well, even good men can be assholes at times." Lord knew his was. "Sorry I said anything."

"Don't worry about it. I've made my peace with it. It's in the past anyway." Alejandro moved back from the door. "Ham or roast beef sandwiches for the ride?"

"Ah, roast beef, I guess." Benji couldn't believe his ears. Had the boy just switched from talking about his dad to food?

"Roast beef it is." Then he disappeared, but not before tossing over his shoulder an order to meet him in the front yard in ten minutes.

Staring after him, Benji sighed. “So, that’s not the way to earn brownie points with the new boss.”

Chapter Four

Riding along as the sun beat down on his face, Alejandro sighed. Despite the heat and the various aches from mending the fences, this is what he'd missed while he'd been away at school. Sure the ice time with the guys had been great. He'd enjoyed the hell out of pitting his strength and speed against other men, while playing hockey for the Oklahoma State Cowboys, but the scholarship had merely been a means to an end. It'd helped pay for his coveted agriculture degree. But nothing compared to riding a horse across the rolling fields and smelling nothing but fresh air and... cow manure. He wrinkled his nose. Well, he could do without the last thing, but to feel free, he'd put up with a lot of things, including the smell of shit.

"Only a few hundred yards more. If we're lucky, we won't find any more breaks, and we can head back to the homestead," Benji called out from where he rode a few paces ahead of him. Since the incident in the barn, the man hadn't stopped razzing him. All an effort, he assumed, to pull him out of his funk.

"Well, shit—guess I spoke too soon."

Alejandro sighed as he looked to where Benji was pointing. A huge section of the fence sagged a good eight inches. It would have to be repaired before one of the fifteen hundred pound steers decided it wanted the succulent grass on the other side and simply pushed the fence over to get to it. This was like the third major break in the fencing they'd found. "Christ, I'm surprised Dad had any cattle left with the fences like this."

Benji shrugged as he pulled the carpenter's hammer from his saddlebag. "I don't think they were this bad before the last roundup. It was probably the guys the estate hired to bring in the cattle. They probably weren't paid for anything more than getting the stock to market. Mending fences is something that only the owner or foreman would worry about." He glanced over his shoulder at Alejandro. "Well, get moving boss-man. Surely a youngin' like you can keep up. Unless you're planning on cryin' uncle and heading back to the ranch house with your tail tucked between your legs?"

Had Benji just called him out? He pushed his hat back to study the other man. The smirk on Benji's face said that he had. "Not a chance." He wiped his brow with the back of his arm, before swinging his leg over the cantle. "But for that insult, I just might not share the location of a lovely little pond that's great for skinny-dipping."

“Hmmm—we’ll see about that.” Benji eyed him thoughtfully, before turning back to the fence. “Let’s get this fixed. Then we’re gonna have a little talk about this here pond.”

Alejandro pulled the wire cutter out of his saddle bag. “We can talk all you want, but I’m still not telling you.” He joined Benji at the fence and couldn’t resist poking at his cowhand. “At least not until you ask me real nice and give me a ride on that bike of yours.”

Benji frowned. “You want to drive my bike?”

The mischievous imp inside him grinned. “Nope. I want to wrap my arms around you while you take me for the ride of my life through town.”

For a full second Benji looked like he’d been hit upside the head, before he cleared his throat. “Excuse me?”

Batting his eyelashes at the man, he pursed his lips. “Think of what all the little old ladies would say. There goes that fast Delgado boy, corrupting that silver-haired fox. We better lock up the rest of our men before he takes a fancy to them and seduces them away from us God-fearing women.” As Benji’s eyes widened and his mouth gaped open like a fish out of water, Alejandro couldn’t hold his laughter any longer. It spilled free. “Gotcha.”

Benji shook his head, but a reluctant smile crossed his face. “You had me going there for a second, boy.”

“So here it is. The greatest wonder ever known to many a hot, tired cowboy.” Alejandro bowed and swept his arm out as if he were presenting the little pond to the Queen of England. “Cool luscious relief awaits, my Sir Cowhand.” He whipped his hat off. “Last one in is a rotten, toad-sucking egg.”

Benji was ready to throttle the fool. He’d acted like a clown for the past hour as they’d rode the rest of the fence-line. Now his boss was acting like he was twelve. “Exactly how old are you?”

“Almost twenty-five, last time I checked.” Alejandro grinned over his shoulder at him as he shed his boots. “Come on, pops. Or you’re gonna end up being—”

“What? A toad-sucking egg?” He asked dryly as he dismounted Geronimo and led the horse over to a nearby shrub to wrap the reins around a branch.

“No... worse. A big, fat chicken!” He tossed his shirt to the ground, before reaching for the fly on his jean.

Benji froze as Alejandro shoved the jeans down his legs, boxers and all. His mouth went dry as the plump balls and semi-erect cock came into view. "For fuck's sake." He spun around before he did something stupid, like pin his boss to the soft ground next to the pond to find out if Alejandro tasted as good as he looked.

"Aw come on, Benji. It's not like we don't have the same parts."

Which is exactly the problem. "Are you in the water yet?"

A splash was his answer. Benji waited two long minutes before cautiously turning around. The rumpled clothing on the ground mocked his control. After listening through the paper-thin walls as his boss's bed creaked, his imagination had been stretched to the limit. Especially when he'd heard what sounded like a low groan of pleasure. The idea that Alejandro had been stroking his cock less than six inches from him had Benji reaching for his own dick. Who'd ever thought to put the beds in both rooms against the same wall had either been a voyeur or hadn't thought of what the sound of another's pleasure would do to the person trying to sleep on the other side of the wall.

His dick hardened behind his zipper. His body's reaction assured him that entering the water would be a disaster. He stalked over to his horse and swung up into the saddle, wincing as the leather saddle horn butted up against his erection. "I'll see you back at the house later." He'd use the shower at the house, then head into town. A cold beer away from temptation was safer than going with his first idea.

"But... where are you going?" Alejandro asked, an almost dumbfounded look on his face as he stood alone in waist deep water.

"Out. For some adult fun, junior." He almost wished the words back when Alejandro sank back into the water. *It has to be this way.* Then he kicked the quarter horse into a trot—telling himself he was merely riding back to the house, not running away from Alejandro.

Pacing the kitchen, Alejandro glared at the clock over the stove. The luminous dial read almost midnight. On the scarred Formica table top, the ranch records mocked him. He'd been trying for hours to balance the books, but his dad's idea of bookkeeping was like nothing he'd ever seen in his life. It was even more foreign than the college calculus class he'd taken his senior year at OSU. Frustrated with both the arcane number crunching and his absent

cowhand, his temper was frayed. So when he heard the growl of the Harley Davison as it pulled into the yard, he stalked over to the window.

In the moonlight, he could make out Benji's roughly hewn profile as he shut off the bike. He'd half expected some slinky bimbo to crawl out from behind his hand, but couldn't deny the relief he felt that Benji was alone. When Benji pushed the bike on to its main stand and threw a leg over the machine, Alejandro moved back from the window. *Never let it be said that I'm invading his privacy.* He'd just sunk back into his chair and was once again trying to decipher the damned ledger when Bojangles gave a soft woof.

Standing in the doorway, Benji froze, taking in the scene before him. Alejandro could only imagine what he was thinking. Papers strewn over every available surface, a cup of half cold coffee and his boss sitting in a pair of boxer shorts with his hair standing up in every direction from the number of times he'd run his hands through it.

"I wasn't expecting you to be up." Benji's voice came out like gravel.

"Working on the ranch books. Or at least trying." He amended. "Dad wrote it in some kind of short hand I've never seen before." He pushed the thick yellow papered ledger away from him.

He was surprised when Benji stalked closer, then spun the book around to face him. His fingers traced over several lines. "This here," he pointed out a figure with a two-letter combo behind it, followed by another set of numbers, "means he got paid a stud fee. The first number is the stud number, the second is probably a client's initials, while the last is agreed upon servicing. For instance... this six means that he was paid for six draws." He scanned down several rows. "Your dad had a helluva stud service going on."

"You can read it?" He couldn't keep the relief from his voice.

Benji glanced up. "Yeah, it's similar to the code I learned on the Flying J. A lot of old-school guys use this type of bookkeeping. It's not hard to learn, once you learn the basics. If you want, I'll teach you."

Alejandro jumped up and wrapped his arms around Benji. The scent of beer teased his nose, but was so faint the man had maybe had a few several hours ago. "Thank you, thank you." It took a few seconds to realize that Benji was stiff as a board. Drawing back, he stared at the man. "What..."

Benji pushed him away. "Look, I..." He raked his hand through his hair. A look of disgust crossed his face. "I don't think this is going to work. I'll see if I can put a few calls in and find you another hand."

“What? No! I don’t want another hand.” Panic built in Alejandro’s stomach. Even in the short time Benji had been at the ranch he’d enjoyed the man’s company. And today had proved how well they could work together. He didn’t want to start over with another hand. “Look, I swear being gay isn’t contagious—and I’ll keep my hands to myself. Just don’t leave. You have so much experience to share with me.”

Benji scowled at him. “I’m not your fucking father.”

Alejandro pulled back, stung. “I had a father, thank you very much. And I don’t want another.”

Benji began to pace. “Fine, older brother, or whatever relation you want to stamp on me. I can’t be what you need.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “And what exactly do you think I want?”

“Fuck, I don’t know! At times you treat me like an older brother, like fucking around at the pond today. At other times, like this morning when you fed me and commiserated about my mom having cancer, I swear you were feeling sorry for me.” Benji growled, and tossed his hat on the table. “But what just confuses the hell out of me is the instances when I can *see* the lust rising off you. Like you want to rip off my clothes and do mean things to me.”

Alejandro sank back into his chair. “So? You’re an attractive man and I happen to love older men. There’s no crime in looking.”

“Exactly! You’re thinking with your dick! The youth of today is confusing. Nothing like what I was like when I was sowing my oats.” He placed his hands on his hips. “You found a potential lover, then got to know them more than just a few hours or days before deciding to jump in the sack together. Unlike you, I didn’t go to college and screw an obscene amount of lovers. So if you’re looking to use the down-on-his-luck cowhand as another notch in your damn bedpost—forget it!”

Alejandro clenched his jaw at the accusation. Anger, only rivaled by the pure frustration he felt at his father’s abandonment, rose in him. “Fine, let me lay this out for you in simple terms.” He held up his hand and began counting. “One—I’ve had exactly two lovers in my life. Both I happened to care about deeply before we made love. I’ve never been promiscuous.”

He surged out of the chair. “Two—I happen to find your company enjoyable, so forgive me for acting like a goof. I tend to do that when I’m

having fun. Three—I don't feel sorry for you. I remember what it was like to lose a mother, and did what I wished someone had done for me. Besides, I enjoy taking care of people. It brings me pleasure. And four—I do happen to find you attractive and would jump at the chance to be your lover."

He got right up in Benji's face. "But I will *never* force myself on another man. You've drawn the line in the sand. So if you decide to stay on, your virtue is safe. The fag won't touch you. But don't for a second use my sexuality as an excuse to leave." He slammed the ledger shut. "I'm going to bed. If you're here in the morning, great. If not, I hope your mom gets better fast."

Slipping out of the room, he let the tears he'd been holding at bay flow. Why the fuck was he so screwed up in the head over Benji? Twenty-four hours shouldn't be enough time to make this kind of connection.

Chapter Five

The slam of a screen door sounded like a gunshot, waking Benji from slumber. He winced as the bright sunlight streamed through his open window. Judging from the angle of the sun, it had to be at least ten or eleven o'clock in the morning. He squinted at the clock on the bedside table.

10:38

The glowing numbers taunted him as the faint sound of men talking reached his ears. *Alejandro*.

Memories from the night before flooded his poor brain. He'd hurt Alejandro with his brash words. He hadn't meant to, but in his own fumbling way, he'd screwed up. He tossed his arm over his eyes, debating if getting up was really worth it. At least until his bladder changed his mind.

Rolling out of the rack, he staggered to the bathroom. The thumping inside his skull reminded him exactly why he didn't drink anymore. His body just couldn't handle the aftermath. It was a bitch getting old. "Shit. How much did I drink last night?"

He shut the door and answered the call of nature. In the darkened confines, he desperately wished he hadn't gone back out to his bike to retrieve the whiskey he'd picked up in town. Always aware of the dangers of drinking and driving, he'd had one beer at the bar, then bought the pint. He'd intended to take it to his room and have a few—but with the way his head pounded, he'd had more than that.

Once finished, he washed his hands and opened the medicine cabinet in search of aspirin. He spotted the familiar white bottle, shook out four, and popped them into his mouth. Leaning down, he drank straight from the faucet, savoring the tepid water. With his thirst quenched, he started the shower and slipped inside the steamy confines.

With the water beating down on his shoulders, he hung his head between his outstretched arms. As the fog cleared from his brain, he knew he owed his boss an apology. He shouldn't have jumped all over the younger man the way he had. "Damn when I fuck shit up, I do it good."

By the time he'd finished his shower and slipped into his last clean pair of jeans, he thought he might be able to stomach some food. Wandering into the

kitchen, he was just filling a cup of coffee when the raised voices coming from the front porch had him pausing.

“Look, I don’t care what you think you know about my father, I’m not buying it.” Alejandro sounded pissed.

“You don’t understand, Mr. Delgado. It wasn’t that your father didn’t want to be around you. It was your bitch of a mother—” The unknown man was obviously trying to reason with his boss.

“Stop right there!” Alejandro’s voice rose. “Mama may not have been perfect, but I’m not going to listen to some rich, pansy-assed banker talk shit about her.”

“Damnit, you’re just as stubborn as your father. I told him, time and time again, that he needed to tell you the truth.”

Deciding he’d heard enough, Benji pushed open the door, uncaring that all he wore was a pair of jeans. An older gentleman in a suit stood on the first step leading up to the porch, holding a thick padded envelope in his hand. Alejandro didn’t even bother to glance at Benji. Instead he kept his gaze on the other man. Even from his spot five feet away, Benji could feel the tension radiating off Alejandro. “Is there a problem here?”

“No. Mr. Downing was just leaving, Benji. He has nothing I want.” Alejandro brushed by him, the scent of his soap and cologne teasing Benji’s nose.

He nodded. “I’ll see he gets off the ranch, boss.” He resisted the urge to tip the younger man’s face up. His sudden need to read Alejandro’s expression was strong, but he controlled it as his boss slipped by him to enter the house. The slap of the screen door seemed loud. He rolled his shoulders as Mr. Downing continued to stare at him. He couldn’t care less if the businessman liked him or not.

“Okay, time to leave. Boss has spoken.”

Mr. Downing gave a brief nod, then bent to place the padded envelope on the top step. “I understand Alejandro is upset. I would be too, if I were in his shoes. But the fact of the matter is that I promised his dad to deliver that to him once he moved onto the homestead. I keep my promises—even when I don’t want to.” He straightened and fussed with his tie. “Tell Alejandro, that while I don’t agree with how Kemen handled the situation, I can understand why he did. Men of my generation didn’t flaunt their lovers. Appearances meant

everything.” He nodded toward the parcel. “Please make sure he gets those. When the time is right, he’ll want to read them. A boy, even fully grown, still needs his questions answered.”

“I can’t promise they won’t end up in the fireplace, but I’ll take them to him.”

The man’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you.” He reached inside his jacket for a slender silver case. He opened it and pulled out a crème-colored business card. “My name and contact information.” Taking a pen, he scrawled another number on the back of it. “Please tell him to contact me if he has any questions. Doesn’t matter what time it is either. I’ll always make time for my Kemen’s son.” He placed the card on top of the envelope. “Tell him that.”

As the man walked back to the gleaming Lincoln Towncar, Benji let what the man said sink in. Whether Alejandro realized it or not, he’d just kicked out the one man who knew Kemen better than anyone else—his lover.

Alejandro was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee when Benji came back in—the thick envelope tucked under one arm. He stiffened. “I don’t want his damned letters.”

Benji shrugged, and placed the packet on top of the fridge. “Want? I don’t want to have an asshole of a father who kicked me out when he realized he couldn’t change the fact I was gay, or that I wouldn’t follow in his footsteps.” He tucked something under a magnet, before turning to face him. “But that doesn’t change the fact that, right now, I need him to be there for my ma.” He moved to the coffee pot. “Just like one day you may realize despite how his distance hurt, you’ll need the connection those letters offer.”

Leaning back in the chair, Alejandro watched as his cowhand put sugar in his own coffee. Benji sat down across from him, cupping the steaming mug. Then he sipped it, his eyes half shut. Letting the legs of his chair land on the floor, Alejandro glared at his hand. “How the hell am I supposed to stay angry with you, when you say things like that?”

Setting down the cup, Benji grinned. “You’re not.” The smile fell from his face. “I’m sorry about last night. I was an asshole. Forgive me?”

Alejandro stilled, unable to believe Benji thought a mere apology would make up for the man’s accusations. “You think it will be that easy?”

Stirring the spoon in his cup, Benji shook his head. "Nope. But a man can hope." He met Alejandro's gaze. "Look, I didn't handle the situation well. Chalk it up to frustration at being attracted to a much younger man who happens to be my boss."

Of all the things that Alejandro expected Benji to use as an excuse, that wasn't one of them. Alcohol? Yeah. Cranky from a long hot day in the Oklahoma sun? Sure, it could happen. But because he found Alejandro attractive? Never in a million years. "So you're saying that you would—"

"Like to get to know you better?" Benji propped his chin on one bent arm. "Yep, but I screwed the pooch on that. It's probably for the best anyway. Once my ma is... gone, I'll be heading back to Texas and..."

Alejandro's heart sank at the reminder. Benji's presence was temporary at best.

"...so I guess I settle for lusting after you from a far, while teaching you what you need to know."

Taking a sip of his coffee, he finally nodded. "While I can't say I don't understand your reasoning, I can wish things were different. You intrigue me, Benji Coleman, but I'll settle for picking your brain." He looked up at his hand. "At least tell me you're going to be sticking around until after roundup."

Benji took a long drink. "Mom's got stage four lung cancer. They're giving her less than three weeks to live. So I'll need some time off when she finally goes, but I'll be here for the roundup." He gazed at Alejandro, his expression unreadable. "That's what I promised the Widow Ranson when I agreed to help you out. I'm a man of my word."

"Of course you are." Alejandro forced a smile, uncomfortable considering his own mother's recent demise. Maybe a change of subject would be wise. "Why don't I make you something to eat? I'm sure you're hungry." He got up and moved toward the fridge. "How does leftover stew and rolls sound?"

Benji relaxed back against his chair. "For breakfast?"

"No, for lunch. Breakfast was hours ago." Rummaging inside the fridge, he pulled out the leftover stew and grabbed a tube of Grands biscuits. Then he carried them over to the counter. It only took a few minutes until he had the biscuits baking in the toaster oven and the stew reheating in the microwave. He turned back to face Benji. "It'll be ready in about ten minutes."

“Good, my stomach thinks my throat’s been cut. The hot wings I had at the bar didn’t stay with me very long.” As if on cue, Benji’s stomach rumbled so loud Alejandro couldn’t help but laugh.

“Obviously.” But the outlying cause had him frowning. “But let’s get one thing straight. I can’t dictate what you do on your off time, Benji. However, if there’s a repeat of last night, there will be no job. I need a sober hand who is willing to work, not one so hungover he has to lay in the rack ’til noon.”

Instead of becoming belligerent or even protesting, Benji merely nodded. “Understood boss. No more drinking.” He looked sheepish. “When I fuck up, I fuck up good.”

“That you do.” The microwave dinged and Alejandro pulled out the stew to give it a stir as a comfortable silence filled the kitchen.

“More coffee?” He offered as he waited on the biscuits.

“Yeah, I need the caffeine.” As Alejandro poured him another cup, Benji touched his arm. “Thanks, boss.”

Alejandro sighed. “You won’t be thanking me later, when I have you out chasing chickens.”

The cup froze halfway between Benji’s mouth and the table. Then he carefully lowered it. “Why on earth would I be doing that?”

“Because that damned ornery goat of Dad’s chewed through the twine holding the chicken pen shut. Good news is it was the inner door, so they didn’t go far. Bad news? They are now in the calving pen. We can’t move the yearlings, like we planned, until all the chickens are gone.”

“You’re shitting me.” Benji’s head thumped down on the table. “You’re going to have a grown man chasing chickens.”

“Yep.” The buzzer on the toaster oven went off, demanding Alejandro’s attention.

“You’re just evil, boss,” Benji complained, as he lifted his head.

“You have no idea.” Alejandro smiled as he set down the food in front of Benji. “But at least I’ll feed you first.”

Chapter Six

As much as it strained Benji's self-control, he and Alejandro fell into a routine over the next few weeks, even with his nightly visits to see his mom. Every morning when the alarm went off at five, he'd stumble out of the bed to find a fresh pot of coffee waiting for him while Alejandro showered. Then, after he'd had his first cup, they'd switch places and he'd shower while Alejandro made breakfast. When he was done, he'd then join his boss for breakfast.

A man's breakfast. He nearly drooled as he pulled up to the table. Steaming bowls of food filled the space between him and Alejandro. Light fluffy eggs, what looked to be like two pounds of crispy bacon, golden hash browns, and thick chunks of fresh sourdough bread. Combined with strong coffee and orange juice, Benji was in hog heaven. Even when he'd lived at home surrounded by all the luxury that money could afford, more often than not, it had been either cold cereal or pop tarts during the week, or some frou-frou breakfast food like quiche or crêpes on the weekends.

"Damn, it looks good, boss." He reached for a thick slice of toast and the jar of fruit preserves. "You're gonna end up spoiling me. How am I supposed to go back to Cookie's grub when I go back to San Antonio?"

Alejandro merely smiled as he filled his own plate. "Perhaps I'm trying to butter you up, so you'll stay."

He grunted as he sank his teeth into a piece of thick-sliced bacon. The salty hardwood flavor burst over his taste buds. "I'd say you'd have a good chance of it if you keep cooking like this."

Rolling his eyes, Alejandro began eating. "Figures. Mom always said that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach."

Benji chuckled. "True enough, but honestly? I'm more apt to fall for a guy who enjoys music as much as I do. You never realize how much I appreciate coming back from seeing Mom to find you fiddling around with your guitar."

"You need, I supply. Perhaps it means we're meant to be together." Alejandro joked around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

Benji paused at the words. It was true. His boss was more in tune with him than any other man or lover had ever been. He always seemed to know when

Benji needed a no-nonsense boss, or when the goofball could come out and lighten his hand's mood. When had he ever been as content or happy in his life? *Well, other than the erection from hell that always seems to be present when we're together.* Everything about Alejandro had him rethinking their agreement to just be friends. Especially the looks his boss kept sneaking when he thought Benji wasn't looking. Perhaps it was time to put them both out of their misery? Maybe once they scratched their itch, the chemistry would calm down. He opened his mouth to suggest just that when the telephone rang.

Reaching behind him, Alejandro grabbed the old handset off the wall and answered it. "Hello... oh hi, Lucinda. How are you?" Then his expression went sober. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Benji's heart plummeted. His mother. *Shit, not now.* He closed his eyes against the searing pain in his chest. Even prepared as he had been for the inevitable news, he couldn't believe his mom was finally gone. The soft gentle woman had been the one person, aside from Lucinda, who'd understood his need to be something more than a lawyer who sat behind a desk enclosed in an office. As he tried to cope with the reality of it, Alejandro's voice was distant—at least until his boss mentioned him.

"...yeah, he's right here." Sympathy shone from Alejandro's eyes as he tugged on the coiled cord and offered him the phone.

Swallowing hard, Benji took it. Putting it to his ear, he steeled himself to hear the grief in his younger sister's voice, but nothing could compare to the reality of it. "Sis?"

"Oh Benji, she's... gone." Lucinda's voice broke.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to compose himself. "Wh-hen...?"

"Early this morning." She drew a deep breath, anger bleeding into her voice. "The hospice worker told me she woke Dad around two, but by the time I got there at three, she was gone. The asshole waited until she was gone to call me. What the fuck... did we ever... do to him?" She was openly sobbing now.

At a loss, he tightened his fingers around the receiver. "Nothing, sis. He's just an old man who can't accept change—"

"This has nothing to do with change, and you know it! We were born this way. It's not a choice, despite what he thinks. Do you know he actually told me that my *roommate* wasn't welcome at the funeral? After ten years he still refers to my partner as a roommate. That if I brought Anita, he'd have both of us removed?"

He flinched under his sister's fury. It was true. The illustrious Benjamin Coleman the Third refused to acknowledge that both his beloved daughter and son were gay, but to ban his only daughter from having her partner at their mother's funeral for support was beyond cruel.

"I'll talk to him, Luc. Even if it comes to blows, Anita will be there." He squeezed the bridge of his nose as he wondered what heinous price his father would demand in return.

"Don't, Benji!" His sister's plea filled his ear. "It's not worth what it'd cost you. You know what Dad will demand."

He dropped his hand to the table, his breakfast a sudden lead weight in his stomach. Across the table, Alejandro covered his hand with his, giving it a squeeze—offering comfort silently. Meeting his boss's dark eyes, he reassured his sister. "It won't happen. There is nothing on God's green earth that will convince me to work for him. I'd end up killing him within weeks. I still plan on heading back to Texas. Roscoe offered me the job of foreman on the Flying J after roundup. He's looking to retire."

At the mention of his eventual return to Texas, Alejandro removed his hand. Benji immediately felt its loss and wanted it back. He caught the younger man's wrist and held on, while still focusing on his phone conversation.

"Good." She sighed. "Don't let that bastard win. At least one of us should be happy."

He kept his gaze on Alejandro, unwilling to let him withdraw. "I know you love your job as a partner in Coleman and Winterest, but is it worth dealing with Dad every day?"

"He'll eventually retire. Mom had been pushing him for the last few years to retire. Maybe her death will convince him."

In the background he could hear the bellow of his father's voice. "Is that Ben?"

"Yes, Dad." Her answer was terse. "I called him to let him know about Mom."

He thought he'd heard something about making sure "that damned irresponsible son of mine is at the funeral home by ten," before his sister came back on the line, but he refused to look away from Alejandro. He needed him. He didn't know if he could hold it together without him.

“Sorry, about that. Can you meet us at Hedke’s Funeral Home around ten to make arrangements?”

“Ten?” He softly asked Alejandro.

Freeing himself, his boss started putting the leftovers in the fridge, but paused long enough to nod. “I’ll drive you into town.”

“Yeah, Alejandro offered to drive me. If he does, can I catch a ride back with you?”

After his sister assured him it wouldn’t be a problem, he said good-bye, and reached across the small table to put it back on the cradle.

“It bothers you when I talk about leaving.” He caught Alejandro’s arm as the man returned for another load of dishes.

Alejandro glanced down at the hand on his arm, then sighed. “Look, it’s my issue. I care about you. I shouldn’t, but I do. But right now, you have other things to worry about than my feelings.” He brushed his fingers over Benji’s cheek. “Take the time you need. Me, the ranch? We’ll be here when you’re done and we can have this discussion then—if you’re still so inclined. Deal with your mom first, just promise me you won’t drink, no matter what an unforgiving ass your dad is. Your mom loved you—don’t honor her gift of life by falling into the bottle. I may never have met her, but from your stories, she sounded like a wonderful woman.”

Benji gave a curt nod, even as his eyes teared up. “She was. And she would’ve liked you. Kept asking me to bring you to see her, but with my dad...” He winced, not even wanting to contemplate his dad’s reaction to that.

“Is an asshole. I get it. Nothing new for me. I’m familiar with asshole dads.”

Benji wondered if Alejandro understood the shitstorm he was about to walk into just by driving him to town. “Still you know you don’t have to drive me. I can ride the Harley. Because sure as the sun rises in the east, Dad will catch one glimpse of you and accuse you of everything from being a fag to corrupting his worthless son.”

A grin kicked up one corner of Alejandro’s mouth. “Well considering I *am* gay and I *am* more than willing to corrupt you... I’ll just be living up to his bad opinion.” A determined look crossed his boss’s face. “I’m driving you. End of discussion.” Then in a move that had Benji freezing, Alejandro leaned down and brushed a kiss over his lips. “Now get moving, cowboy. We have chores a-waitin’.”

As Alejandro gathered up the last of the dishes and threw them in the old dishwasher, Benji suddenly realized that leaving the *Rancho de la Luna* after roundup might not be as easy as he'd thought. Somehow with everything he did Alejandro had snuck past his defenses. If he weren't careful, he'd fall in love with a man almost young enough to be his son. *And wouldn't dear old dad just love that.*

"Hey Benji?" Alejandro glanced over his shoulder at him.

"Yeah?"

"Someone once told me that us college boys will fuck anything that sits still. So unless you're planning on playing the willing victim, I suggest you get a move on. Or I might just think you're looking for some lovin'."

"You wish." Benji tried to say it with a straight face, but couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped him. Even with the horrific loss of his mother, his Alejandro knew how to make him smile.

Chapter Seven

Keeping his emotions under tight control was difficult, but Alejandro managed. With his back to Benji, he busied himself with loading the dishwasher, and waited for Benji to head outside. It was their routine. The older man would scatter the chicken feed while he cleaned up the breakfast dishes. But, as the man continued to sit and watch him, even after he'd made a joke about jumping him, Alejandro felt like a bug under a microscope. He probably shouldn't have kissed him, but he'd had such a lost look on his face, and then he'd tried to warn Alejandro off taking him into town. When would the man learn that, despite his age, Alejandro didn't run from a confrontation?

The sudden scrape of a chair being pushed away from the table had him sighing in relief. Soon he'd hear the snap of the screen door, but instead there was a sudden heat against his back and Benji's arms appeared on either side of him as the larger man crowded him closer to the counter.

"If I don't remember to say it, thank you, Alejandro." His voice rumbled over Alejandro. Every muscle in his body trembled with anticipation.

"You're wel—" He found himself suddenly spun around to face Benji—or rather Benji's chest. Even as big as Alejandro was, his hand still stood a good eight inches taller than his respectable five-foot-ten height.

"But the next time you kiss me, it'd better not be because you feel sorry for me." He wrapped a hand around the back of Alejandro's neck to pull him up on his tiptoes. "Because I'd hate to have us end up in bed for that reason. Especially when I want you squirming under me because you want me as much as I want you."

Then Benji laid a kiss on him that rocked Alejandro to his toes. Clinging to Benji's wide shoulders, he was panting by the time the older man lifted his head. Benji didn't seem to be in much better shape, his cheeks ruddy and his breath fast.

"Just remember that, boss." He warned before stepping back.

Alejandro nodded mutely as Benji smiled, turned and slipped outside. Sinking back against the counter, he braced his weight on his arms. *Damn, the man packed a punch.* Inside his pants his cock protested loudly. The urge to track down his cowhand and have his way with him was strong. Only the steady tick-tock of the old kitchen clock above his head reminded him

that they were on a tight schedule. If he did what he wanted, then they'd be late for sure. Even if his cock didn't understand, his brain did.

"Get it together. He was just thanking you." Turning back to the dishwasher, he poured in the soap before starting it. "Besides he's still leaving. Even if the sex would be explosive, he has plans for the future that don't include you."

As the truck ate up the miles between the ranch and Idabel, the tension inside of Benji grew with each passing second. He didn't want to make funeral arrangements, didn't want to deal with his dad, and sure as hell, didn't want to subject Alejandro to the fool. But as the old saying went, spit in one hand and want in the other... and see which one fills up the fastest. It wouldn't be the one filled with his wants, that was for sure. He was screwed.

"I'd tell you to relax but something tells me that you won't." Alejandro kept his gaze on the road.

"I feel like I'm being led to my own death. If that makes any sense." Benji tipped his head back against the headrest. "I'd rather be anywhere than here, but my sister is counting on me. If it weren't for her? I'd probably send flowers and be done with it. I loved Mom—I did. But having to deal with Dad?" He turned his head to look at Alejandro. "I'd rather have my teeth pulled out."

Alejandro chuckled and downshifted as they hit the city limits. "I can understand. I felt the same way when my dad showed up at my college graduation." He took his eyes off the road for a moment. "But I dealt with it. I wasn't going to let his presence ruin the day for me." He picked up Benji's hand and rubbed his thumb over it. "Just like you will make sure your mother gets the funeral she deserves."

"I wish I had your faith in me." Benji flipped his hand over to wrap his fingers around Alejandro's as they turned into the funeral home parking lot. He immediately recognized his sister's blue Mazda parked next to his dad's silver Escalade. "Dad had fits when Lucinda traded in the Mercedes-Benz he got her for the Mazda."

"But I see she still has it." Alejandro remarked as he parked next to Lucinda's car.

Benji smiled. "Of course she does. It's one way she can get back at him without starting a war."

“Little digs. I bet that sticks in his craw—almost as much as this will.” Alejandro gave him a genuine smile before lifting their joined hands. Brushing a kiss over his knuckles, he gave Benji a look so full of love it had him pausing.

He stared at his boss blankly. What the hell was Alejandro doing? Before he could form the words, there was a rap on his window. He stiffened. His father tapped his watch, a gesture reminiscent of Benji's childhood. His father lived by that damned watch. Nothing ever changed, including his father. Even with the death of his wife, Benjamin Augustus Coleman III was turned out as elegantly as ever in his silk suit, neatly pressed shirt and perfectly matching tie. He was the epitome of a well-to-do attorney at all times. *A pissed off well-to-do attorney.*

“Ben, if you're done making goo-goo eyes with your... whatever, your sister and I could use your undivided attention. At least she had the good sense to leave her *roommate* at home. Our meeting with the funeral director starts in less than ten minutes.”

“I know what time it is, Dad.” Benji tried to free his hand, but Alejandro continued to cling to it. Then he winked.

“Aren't you going to introduce me to your father, darling, before I head back to the ranch?”

Benji's jaw dropped. Of all the things he expected to endure today, his boss playing a total fruit wasn't one of them. “Ah... I guess, *cupcake*.”

Benjamin's shoulders stiffened. “I don't have time for this, son. We have serious things to deal with today. I just lost my wife, and this isn't the appropriate time or place for a social visit with some...” he glared over at Alejandro. “...twink you're fucking.”

Benji wanted to recoil in horror. He couldn't believe his dad was acting like this. “Dad! Alejandro happens to own the *Rancho de la Luna*. He's not a twink!”

Releasing his hand, Alejandro exited the truck to square off with Benji's father. “I'm sorry about your loss, Mr. Coleman, but there is no need to treat your son as if he's a simpleton. You may have lost your wife but he lost his mother.” Alejandro stood his ground even as Benjamin slammed his fist down on the hood of the truck.

“You have no right to lecture me on anything, young man. You're what twenty? Twenty-two at the most?” He glanced back at Benji, giving his son a condemning look. “As usual Ben is living up to my low expectations.”

“Enough, Dad.” Benji shoved the door open. “You can say what you want about me, but you’ll leave Alejandro alone.”

Benjamin laughed. “Alejandro is it?” He ran his gaze over Benji’s boss. “Let me guess, you’re Kemen Delgado’s boy. Tell me something son, are you assuring the bank doesn’t foreclose on that worthless ranch of yours the same way your daddy did?”

Surprisingly Alejandro didn’t even flinch. “You mean with a lot of hard work and just as long hours?”

Benjamin outright laughed. “Oh, I’m sure that he had to work hard... on his knees. The only reason *Rancho de la Luna* still belongs to the Delgados is because your daddy was the president of the bank’s lover. He sucked Ian Downing’s cock long and hard to keep that worthless piece of land. Much like you’re attempting with my son. I have a news flash for you, son—Ben may carry the Coleman last name, but he’s nothing but a broke, rundown cow punch, good for nothing more than running cattle. And in a few years, when his body gives out, he won’t even be good for that. I disowned him years ago. It’s only because I promised his mother he’d be here that I even let Lucinda call him when the doctor gave her less than a month to live.”

Alejandro bit the inside of his cheek to keep from decking the condescending man in front of him. Large like his son, Benjamin was merely an older version of the man he’d been falling in love with. Poor or not, Benji was twice the man his father was. Giving a short laugh, he pushed away from the bumper.

“You think I’m after Benji for his money?” He shook his head. “There’s one thing you’ll soon learn about me, Mr. Coleman. I’ve worked for everything I’ve ever had. Had my first paper route at twelve, earned a hockey scholarship to pay for college, hell I even worked two jobs while my mom died of staph infection. So despite the trust fund *my father* had the wisdom to set up for me, I’ll continue to do so. I could care less if Benji has twenty dollars or twenty thousand. I’d never take money from the man I love.”

The man’s jaw clenched. “Whatever. Come along Ben. Your sister is waiting inside.”

“Alejandro... I’m—” Benji looked torn, upset almost.

“Don’t worry about it. Nothing your old man says means a damn thing to me. You take care of business and I’ll see you back at home, sweetheart.”

When he slipped back into the truck he was well aware of Benji's gaze on him. His cowhand looked bewildered. He gave him another wink and blew him a kiss. "If you need me to come back and get you, call me."

Benji gave a curt nod, before turning to follow his dad into the funeral home.

Alejandro's smile disappeared a moment later as he put the truck into reverse. As he pulled away, he couldn't get Benjamin's words out of his brain.

"Your daddy... he sucked Ian Downing's cock... to keep that worthless piece of land."

Chapter Eight

Where do I start? That's the question that's been beating around my brain since I found out I was sick. How do I explain to my son, to you—Alejandro, why I let your mother have her way? Why I couldn't have been a stronger man in the face of her anger?

I have no excuses. I married your mother with all the hopeful dreams all men have. I wanted a family, I wanted to be a good man, an honorable man. I even wanted to love your mother. In truth, she was the best friend I ever had. I only wish I could've loved her the way she loved me.

Looking back now, I realize I never should've married her, but don't think for a moment I regret having you. You have always been my pride and joy, as well as my child. It nearly broke my heart when your mother demanded I stay away because I had the audacity to fall in love with another man. But whatever you do, please don't think badly of your mother. I'm not completely blameless. I married her, promised to cherish and hold her forever, then abandoned her when I fell in love with Ian. A man I've been lucky to share the last twenty years of my life with...

Alejandro swallowed hard against the tears stinging his eyes, while he crinkled the edges of the letter between his fingers. After going to the bank only to find out that the president was out of town on business, he'd remembered what Benji had said about one day needing a connection to his father. So now he sat at the kitchen table reading letters written in the shaky hand of a dying man. He just never expected to find out his father was gay, or at least bisexual. Smoothing out the letter, he set it on the table, then picked up Ian's ivory business card.

Pieces were falling into place, but he desperately needed to talk to the only soul still alive who could possibly give him answers. The only question was, after the way he'd acted toward Ian, would the man even take a call from him? Deciding there was no time like the present, he dialed the cell phone number with trembling fingers. As it rang, he swallowed hard.

"Alejandro? I was hoping you would call." Ian's tone wasn't as brisk as it'd been two weeks ago.

He clenched the receiver tight. "You knew... my dad?"

"Very well. I loved him."

The softly spoken words held more emotion than Alejandro had expected. He needed to look into Ian's eyes as they spoke of his father. "Look, I know you're a busy man, but would you be able to meet me somewhere for coffee? Or come to the ranch. I have some questions I'd like answered, but I don't want to ask them over the phone."

"Of course." There was a wealth of relief in the man's voice. "I can be at Rancho de la Luna in less than thirty minutes."

Alejandro rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll put the coffee on."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather have a glass of that sweet tea I heard so much about. Your dad used to brag about how truly delicious your tea was. That's if you have some already made?"

Alejandro flushed. "Yeah. Just fresh this morning."

"Good. I'll see you in twenty minutes, young man." Then the phone clicked in Alejandro's ear.

"Damn he was right. That is the best damned tasting tea I've ever had." Ian Downing set his iced tea down, looking more at home in the kitchen than Alejandro ever thought he would. Instead of his suit, he was wearing a pair of khaki's and a light colored polo. "So you want answers?"

Alejandro shifted. "Yeah." He nodded toward the folded letters in the center of the table. "You dropped those off to me. You said then, at my dad's request?"

Ian ran his finger around the rim of his glass. "Yeah. I did. He wanted you to know the truth."

"According to those, you and he were lovers?" Alejandro studied the older man's face.

"Yes." A small smile lifted the corners of Ian's mouth. "I always thought I'd be a bachelor, then I met your dad. He was so full of piss and vinegar when he stomped into my office at the bank, demanded to know why the hell I wouldn't approve his loan." He chuckled. "I found myself suggesting that we go out to Sullivan's for a beer and discuss it. There was just something about him. I had to get to know him better."

Alejandro clenched his jaw. "You used the loan as bait? Benjamin Coleman said it was the only reason you and Dad were together."

Ian narrowed his eyes. "Initially—yes, I did. I wanted him and my generation wasn't as open as yours is, but don't think for a moment that I abused my position at the bank to get into your dad's pants. Not once in twenty years did I ever sign off on a loan for Kemen. He did business with First Union, not First United. I wanted no hint of impropriety."

Relief filled Alejandro that Ian hadn't mixed business and pleasure when it came to his father. While he didn't like to think of the man using the idea of a loan as a way to pursue Kemen, he could understand Ian's reasoning. "So how did going for beer evolve into you being lovers? Because, according to those letters, he left my mom and me for you."

Ian nodded. "It wasn't something either of us wanted. When he told me he was married and had a child, I tried to make a clean break of it. I stayed away."

Alejandro leaned back in his chair. "You didn't know he was married? I find that hard to believe."

Ian stiffened. "Well it's the truth. I've been with the bank for thirty-five years. I knew your great uncle when I was a young man. When Oleksa died there were rumors of a distant relative claiming the land, so I naturally assumed that your dad was his heir—never thinking that he was married to Oleksa's niece." He sighed. "When I found out, we had a huge fight."

"Well it's obvious you must've made up, because my father and mother ended up divorced. Then Mom moved me halfway across the county."

"I can never tell you exactly how sorry I am for that. I tried to end things. I told your father to go back to his wife and child, I absolutely refused to break up a family. I'm an orphan myself and I wasn't about to let Kemen throw away his family." A flash of guilt crossed his face. "That's when he told me it was too late—that he loved me and whatever romantic feelings he had once for your mother were long gone. I tried to talk him out of it—we weren't lovers then, just good friends who happened to be attracted to one another. But your father was a determined man. Once he put his mind to something..."

"...it happened." Alejandro nodded. "If there's anything I remember clearly about Dad, it was his unwavering determination."

Ian propped his elbows on the table. "Along with his love of you, those were the two things that made me love your father the most. Sure, he had that handsome, dark, swarthy look that many Latinos have, but it was his heart that won me over." He sighed. "Looks fade. Time goes on, but when you find a man

who lights up your world, you hang on to him with all your might. I had twenty-two wonderful years with Kemen, but even if it had only been twenty-two days, I would've counted myself lucky." He reached out for the letters in the center of the table. "Have you read them all?"

"Not yet." Alejandro gave a brief shrug. "The first one was hard enough."

Ian scanned through several, before handing him one. "Read this, and then I have a proposition for you."

Alejandro reluctantly took the letter. "Really?"

A smile crossed the older man's face. "Yep. Your father has one last gift for you."

When Benji stepped into the kitchen, he never expected to find Alejandro sitting at the table reading his father's letters. Emotionally raw, he'd hoped that Alejandro would be playing on the porch. Instead of hearing the sweet notes he'd yearned for, there was nothing but silence. Not that it mattered, because the familiar sense of homecoming was the same. He might feel like he'd been run through the wringer after dealing with his dad, but the peace he found in his boss's presence remained the same.

"Arrangements made?" Alejandro looked up from the paper in his hand.

"Yeah. The funeral is the day after tomorrow at two." After walking over to the fridge, he pulled out sweet tea. "Do you want to go with me?" As the words flew out of his mouth, he froze. Had he honestly just asked his boss to put up with his dad again? "But truthfully, I'd understand if you don't want to—Dad acted like a real horse's ass today."

The scrape of the chair was his only warning, before Alejandro appeared at his side. He froze as the younger man took the pitcher from him. "If you want me there—I'm there. Dad or no Dad. Understand?"

He gave a nod. "Yeah, but Dad accused your dad of sleeping with the bank president today, and I can't promise he won't do worse at the funeral."

Alejandro gave a laugh. "Funny thing about that—Ian stopped by the ranch today. We had a nice long talk, and let me assure you Ian has never—ever held a loan on the Rancho de la Luna. They were lovers though."

Benji kept his face straight. "After talking to him the day he left the letters, it doesn't surprise me."

Alejandro nodded, before running his fingers up the front of Benji's shirt. "We had a very enlightening talk, too."

Distracted by Alejandro's touch, Benji fought to focus on their conversation. "And?"

"And he made me realize something." Alejandro's hands drifted back down over his abs, until they were mere inches from Benji's groin.

His breath caught as his cock hardened. "Yeah?"

"Yep." Alejandro curled two fingers through Benji's belt loops to tug him forward. "That if I found the one man who lights up my world, I should hang on to him as long as I could—whether it's twenty years or twenty days. Well, I've found that man."

Benji swallowed hard. Was the man saying what he thought he was? "But you..."

Alejandro arched an eyebrow at him. "But nothing. I know you're going back to Texas after roundup." He nodded toward the calendar. "And if I counted right that gives me approximately thirty-eight days to enjoy you."

Benji hissed, as Alejandro brought their lower bodies together. Desire struck hard and fast, turning the blood in his veins to molten lava. His eyes drifted shut as he wrapped an arm around the smaller man's waist. "You don't know what you're asking of me, Alejandro..."

"Yes, I do..." Lips skimmed over his jawline to settle near his ear. "I'm asking you to share my bed for the remainder of the time you're here. To not only fuck me through the mattress, but to hold me through the night." Teeth tugged at his ear lobe. "To make memories with me." Alejandro released his flesh. "I won't ask you to stay, but at least let me enjoy what time we have left."

"I can't give you what you want." His protest came out as a croak. Standing in front of him with his heart in his eyes, Alejandro was Benji's worst nightmare. What if he took what his boss offered him, and then he failed? He'd disappointed a lot of men in the past by not being what they needed. It would kill him if the same happened with Alejandro.

But instead of drawing back as Benji expected, Alejandro just smiled. "Can't or won't?" His hand drifted down to cup Benji's cock through the denim. "Because this tells me, you're more than capable of giving me what I want."

Anger surged through Benji, magnifying his arousal. “Damn it, I could fuck you all night long, Alejandro. But it doesn’t change the facts. I’m only here until roundup. Then I’m gone. I won’t break your heart.”

Alejandro actually laughed. “And you think by refusing to sleep with me, that when you do finally leave I’ll be left whole?” He squeezed his fingers, stroking Benji’s cock through the denim. “Too late for that. Because even if you don’t make love with me, you’ll be taking my heart when you leave.”

Benji jerked as if struck. “You can’t love...”

“Love you?” Alejandro leaned closer, pressing Benji up against the counter. “Newsflash, hoss, I can and do.” He leaned up and licked the pulse pounding at Benji’s throat. “And there’s not a damned thing you can do about it.”

Benji drove his fingers into Alejandro’s hair. “God damn it—you better understand what you’re letting yourself in for.” He growled the words against Alejandro’s lips.

Chapter Nine

Alejandro wanted to shout “hallelujah” as Benji tackled him to the bed. They bounced as they landed. Immediately Benji supported his weight on his knees, as he pushed Alejandro’s arms up and toward the headboard.

“Hang on and don’t let go—you hear me?” Benji’s tone was harsh, but the lust in his hazel eyes assured Alejandro that he wasn’t angry.

“Yeah.” Alejandro wrapped his hands around the slats in the headboard. He hissed when the thick pelt of Benji’s chest hair rubbed over his bare skin, as the older man moved back. Watching Benji through narrowed eyes, Alejandro marveled at the intensity of the other man’s need. It seemed once Benji decided to take him up on his offer, there was no hesitation. He’d stripped Alejandro down to his boxers before they’d even made it out of the kitchen. By the time they’d reached Alejandro’s bedroom, Benji was down to nothing more than his socks.

“Damn...” Alejandro moaned when Benji knelt between Alejandro’s spread thighs, his sex full and rigid from a nest of silvery hair. “I don’t think there’s anything sexier than a man who goes commando.” He tightened his thighs around Benji, loving the contrast between his lighter skin and Benji’s slightly darker tone.

Benji jerked when Alejandro’s inner thigh brushed his cock. Then he pulled back, freeing himself from Alejandro’s grip with ease. “And I find nothing more frustrating than a guy who wears boxer shorts.” He reached under Alejandro to grab the waistband of his underwear and yanked. “Makes me want to burn every damn pair you have.”

“Why?” Alejandro gasped as Benji’s other hand delved under the material in front to cup Alejandro’s cock and balls.

“Because it keeps me from tasting this.” He shoved the material down far enough that Alejandro’s cock sprung free, the swollen tip of his erection dotted with pre-cum.

Alejandro arched his back when Benji spread the fluid around the head. Benji’s touch was deft as he steadied the swollen length for his mouth. He shouted as Benji wrapped his mouth around the head of his aching sex. Each lash of Benji’s tongue sent a jolt of pleasure through him, until he was perilously close to coming. “Please, stop!” He squeezed his eyes shut.

Benji growled and lifted his head. "Stop?"

Alejandro panted. "Gonna come." His chest heaved, even as his fingers dug into the wood. "Want you inside me... when it happens."

A slow smile crossed Benji face. "Trigger happy, cupcake?"

"Fuck, yeah." He bucked up toward Benji. "I've been hot for you since you rode up on that damned bike. I've jerked off more in the past two weeks than I did during my entire time in college."

Benji narrowed his eyes. "When?"

Alejandro was getting irritated by the questions. Why hell wasn't the man fucking him?

"When did you jerk off? We've been in each other's back pockets since we met."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "In the shower—I'd go into the shower—smell your soap and rub one off. Quit asking me a million questions, damn it. Just fuck me!"

Benji circled the base of Alejandro's cock. "One last question. Please tell me you got lube and condoms."

"Bedside drawer." Alejandro gritted out, thrusting against Benji's fingers.

"Good." There was a scrape as Benji opened the drawer, followed by a snick as he popped the top on lube. "Legs up? Show me that pretty asshole." Benji ordered.

Lifting his legs, he hissed as the cool lube trickled over his crease to settle on his rosette. "Fuck!"

"In just a second." Benji promised as he breached the tight ring with the tip of his finger.

Pushing out, Alejandro moaned as Benji sank deeper. He was sweating and swearing by the time Benji worked what felt like three fingers inside of him. "Quit fooling around... fuck me... please!" His head tossed against the pillow.

"Well... since you asked so nicely..." Benji drawled softly as he replaced his fingers with his cock. "Shit! You're tight!"

"And you're... Goddamned thick." Alejandro gasped as Benji lowered his body over him until their chests were touching and his cock was trapped between them.

“Hang on to me. I want to feel those fingers digging into my shoulders.” Benji grunted as he began to move.

Releasing his grip on the headboard, Alejandro wrapped his legs and arms around Benji as the man slowly thrust against him. The bed springs squeaked as Benji moved a bit faster. Moaning deep in his throat, Alejandro could only hang on as the pleasure of having the man he loved deep inside him pushed him higher.

“Oh, my God.” He babbled, burying his face against Benji’s shoulder, as the intense feeling in the pit of his stomach grew. “More, please.”

“Oh, yeah.” Benji gritted out, the sound of his hips slapping against Alejandro’s ass echoing through the room.

Then toe-tingling euphoria washed over Alejandro as Benji shifted his angle and his cock pegged Alejandro’s gland. “Fuck... right there,” he gasped.

A low rumble escaped Benji. “Yeah... come for me, sweetheart.”

Alejandro’s breath caught in his throat as his body obeyed, filling the space between them with creamy seed. “Benji!”

“Good boy.” Benji rasped, his hips snapping harder and harder as he sought out his own pleasure. Clinging to him, Alejandro rode out the storm until Benji stiffened and filled the condom with his release. “Damn...” The older man collapsed over Alejandro.

Running his hands up and down Benji’s back, Alejandro began to hum an old Spanish love song he remembered his father singing—before his mother had moved them away.

“That’s the same song you were singing the first time I met you.” Benji whispered against his shoulder.

A low chuckle shook him. “A love song from my childhood—before my parents split.” He began to softly sing, the words flowing from his lips. “*Quiero regalos que a las palabras... para ser su red para cuando usted se cae... te llevará de la man al caminar...*”

Lifting his head, Benji smiled. “Beautiful. What does it mean?”

Alejandro pursed his lips. “You mean after how many years in Texas you don’t know Spanish?”

Benji dragged his fingers down Alejandro’s side. “Don’t make me tickle you...”

Alejandro widened his eyes in mock horror. "Okay, okay. It means... I want to gift you the words... to be your net for when you fall... take you by the hand when you walk..."

Benji rolled them over so Alejandro found himself cradled across the older man's chest. "What I wouldn't give to have that... to be the center of your universe. To share a love like that..."

Alejandro placed his hand over Benji's heart. "Who says you can't?"

"Says reality." He lifted Alejandro's hand and placed a kiss against its palm. "I wish that love was enough, but man can't live on that alone." He squeezed Alejandro tighter. "It would be so easy to love you, but food, shelter... all of it costs money, and I've seen your books. Even if we got top dollar for your herd, there's not enough cash flow to support one—let alone two of us. It's going to take prudent planning to keep you afloat until your trust fund comes in."

Alejandro stilled. While Benji hadn't come out and said he loved him, it gave him hope. He just needed more time. "What if I told you I had a way? Would you stay?"

"What way?" Benji ran a hand down his back.

"Well, Ian and I talked about more than love and my dad." He nibbled on his lower lip. "You know that worthless land your dad claims I have?"

"Yeah?"

"Well according to Ian, Dad set up one last deal before he passed away. It seems my land isn't so worthless. There is a company out of Houston that has a new technique of drilling for oil that won't harm the land—and they want to drill in the field north of the house. Surveys say that it's rich in minerals that normally only appear when oil is present."

Benji drew a harsh breath. Alejandro could see the slowly dawning hope in his lover's gaze. "So what does that mean? Drilling for oil can take even longer than your trust fund that's coming ready."

He smiled down at the older man. "What it means is that my father drew up an ironclad contract with the company, which includes a tidy sum to keep the ranch afloat until the oil comes in. I signed the contract this afternoon. So now the only problem I have is convincing my hand to stay on."

"You're serious? You want me to stay?"

Alejandro nodded. "You're my light, Benjamin Augustus Coleman the Fourth."

Benji groaned. "I'll stay... on one condition."

Alejandro cocked his head. "And what's that?"

"Don't *ever* call me that again." He buried his fingers in Alejandro's hair.

Wetting his lips, Alejandro lifted up enough that his mouth was only inches from Benji's. "So what do I call you?"

"How about 'the man who loves you'?" Benji whispered back.

Relief filled Alejandro. "Doesn't quite have the same ring to it, but I'll take it..." The rest of his words were swallowed up by Benji's mouth as he rolled Alejandro under him. His lonesome cowboy had finally found a home.

The End

Author Bio

N.D. Wylders is the flipside of the average girl next door, Dakota Trace. Writing in m/m for the past year, she's decided to devote all of her m/m books to a new pen name, keeping her traditional erotic romance books separate. She can be found around the web on her Facebook page, website or Twitter.

Contact & Media Info

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

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SORRY IS THE MAGIC WORD

By MA Jackson

Photo Description

A young man stands facing a wooden privacy fence, arms raised behind his head. He wears a flipped sun visor, no shirt and his white shorts are pulled low, exposing his muscled back and tanned bottom.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a Dom who blew it with my boy; see the picture and you will see I sent him to the corner for punishment out in my backyard. Unfortunately when I did that some friends of mine and some of his friends were there also for a BBQ party. After the party was over, he left and it has been five days. He isn't with any of his friends or his family, and I am worried. I have tried calling him, emailing him, and texting him, but no response. I finally got a clue, I remembered him telling me about a chance to be a counselor and trainer at an intense tennis camp where they are not allowed to have any contact with anyone except for emergencies. The camp ends next week Friday—will he come back to me or by humiliating him, did I lose him for good. I love him. Please write this story and let him know I love him.

Sincerely,

Roger

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM lite, established couples, hurt/comfort, medical personnel, spanking, masturbation, hand job

Word Count: 9,111

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Author's Note

BDSM practices, ideals and beliefs described in this story are based on the individual author's preferences and experiences. They are not meant to convey the only way to participate in this form of lifestyle, an instruction manual or a reference guide.

Copyright acknowledgement: Suzuki: Suzuki Motor of America, Inc. Galaxy: Samsung Group

SORRY IS THE MAGIC WORD

By MA Jackson

Chapter One

"It's over," Bryan murmured as he laid a quick smack to Dylan's ass, squeezing the plump, tanned cheek for a moment before letting go. His fingers trailed over the light pink imprint of his hand and Bryan pinched Dylan's flesh, digging his nails into the soft skin he cherished.

The look Dylan gave him, though, as he jerked up his shorts killed all amusement and thoughts of make-up sex from Bryan's mind.

"Thank you, Bryan, sir. I appreciate the opportunity to be guided by you," Dylan murmured and laid a quick kiss to Bryan's cheek, and then he turned and walked away.

Bryan blinked, too stunned to do anything more than watch, as Dylan left him standing alone at the corner of his lawn. Dylan stopped and hugged a friend of theirs. Greg chuckled at something Dylan said, and Dylan's mouth curled into an easy grin. He clapped Greg on the shoulder, nodded at Ellen, Greg's wife, and then pushed through the crowd and into the house.

Still, Bryan just stood there, watching as Dylan walked away from him. *What in the hell had just happened?*

"Fucked up, big time, Bryan."

Bryan turned and looked at Marshall. "What?"

Marshall took a long draw off his beer, and then chucked the bottle into the trash can. The glass shattered, the sound extra loud in Bryan's ears, and in the distance under the clatter, Dylan's bike started up. The buzzing whine of the engine on Dylan's Suzuki motorcycle rose over the conversation and music in his backyard before it lessened and faded into the distance as Dylan drove away.

Dylan's exit had caused a release of sorts, and an exodus of the people partying. On autopilot, Bryan watched as the group of people began to leave his backyard. Some ducked out the tall privacy fencing gate and others meandered through the sliding glass doors into his home and out the front door. Cars started, voices called out goodbyes, and Bryan just stood watching it all happen around him as if he was frozen, waiting for Dylan's return.

"You are so fucked," Marshall said again, and Bryan turned to stare at him. Melanie, Marshall's wife, sidled up to him. She handed him a plate and waited

while he tasted the potato salad Bryan had made just last night. Marshall hummed as he chewed then turned the spoon through the creamy sour cream sauce again and scooped up a red potato flecked with green onions and celery. He offered her the bite and she closed her eyes as she chewed.

Bryan waited for their plate sharing to end and his explanation.

"Thank you, sir," Melanie murmured.

"You humiliated him, Bryan, sir." She cut her eyes at Marshall, and he nodded at her. "If I can say so with impunity, you are going to need to grovel like a bitch before he'll forgive you."

Bryan scowled. "I did nothing wrong. We talked about this. He asked for it, and he knew what was coming."

Melanie whistled and walked away as Marshall shook his head.

"What?" Bryan asked again, still wondering why Dylan had acted as he had, and what he had done that was so terrible.

"He asked you to humiliate him in front of our friends? That doesn't sound like D at all, Bry."

Bryan ran his hands over his face and sighed. The world had taken on a surreal sort of quality, and he felt as if he was in shock. A cold, hard sensation rumbled in his gut, and he pressed a hand to his waist as he looked around the enclosed space of his backyard. His lawn was empty of visitors now, and only Melanie sat at the cedar wood picnic table, sipping on a cold soda and eating a hotdog. Bits of rubbish had fallen out of the bins he'd set out to collect the debris from the party. The pool water, so bright blue, lapped slowly at the side walls, a neon orange, green and white inflatable beach ball drifted along the surface of the water and bumped into a reflective silver tanning float.

The shining grill still smouldered, the scent of meat lingering in the air as the coals cooled. Dylan had barbequed hamburgers and franks for the entirety of their kink group's monthly munch meeting not too long ago: the extras were piled up on the small shelf attached to the large square grill.

And his boy was gone. Without so much as a goodbye, see you later, or even a fuck you. Bryan ran a hand over his face and dug his cell phone out of his pocket. He already had a text composed when he realized Dylan wouldn't be able to answer it as he was riding his cycle. He shoved the phone back in his pocket without sending the text.

“Talk to me, Bry. D asked you to humiliate him?”

Marshall's voice broke through his haze, and Bryan took a deep breath before speaking to Marshall.

Marshall had mentored Bryan when he and Dylan had joined the local BDSM group. Dylan had wanted to make their kinky fun something more official, more structured, and they'd sought out other like-minded people. Just a couple of years had passed since then, but both Bryan and Dylan had found something suited to their desires, a core group that was similar to their wants. Mentors, both dominant and submissive, other couples that had twenty-four/seven relationships. And they'd moved in that direction, too. Dylan also attended a monthly submissive's meeting while Bryan went to the Dom's discussion nights.

Bryan and Dylan weren't without their problems, both still learning how to fit in with the changed relationship dynamics, but this was the first time something had happened, and Dylan didn't let Bryan know what had gone wrong for him.

“No, he didn't ask for that. Dylan asked for more intensity in our play.” Bryan bent and picked up a soda can that had dropped out of the recycling bin and tossed it in. He continued to clean up as he talked with Marshall.

“I gave him exactly what he asked for. He wanted to be displayed, put out for show, to the group. I told him we'd do it at the munch.” Bryan looked back at Marshall. “Dylan agreed to it when we talked about it at the last full group meeting.”

Marshall grunted. “That didn't look like a display to me. Seemed like a punishment.”

Bryan groaned and dumped all the paper napkins and plates into another trash barrel. “It was a punishment because I couldn't exactly reward him for doing something stupid and dangerous. You saw how he acted with that idiot Michael. Someone could have gotten injured with the horseplay. As it was, Michael turned his ankle and ended up drenched when he fell into the pool, and all Ian did was laugh his ass off while Michael swore like a sailor. Fuck, even I know better than to speak like that in mixed company. Did you see how red Marla turned? And Charity was pissed, too, because Michael's fall soaked them and their food. Both of their behaviours were offensive, and I'm the only one who did something about it.”

Marshall snorted. "Yes, well, we're all adults, aren't we? And really, doesn't everything nowadays offend someone? Nothing is sacred anymore. Fucking crazy-assed kinksters. What the fuck were they thinking, acting like they were having fun at a party?" He laughed.

Bryan shook his head. "It's not so much that or the language that bothered me, and yeah, I suppose you are correct in the fact that this was supposed to be fun, but really... someone could have been seriously hurt. Michael landed awfully close to the diving board. What if he had hit his head? The concrete around the pool was slick from people going in and out, and that's why he fell when they were having their shoving match. It is common sense not to act like a fool around the water like that."

"Yup. It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt, and not in the kinky, fun way either. It was dangerous, and could have been potentially deadly," Marshall replied. "While I agree with you something had to be done, did you have to do it in front of all of us?"

"I don't know." Bryan crashed down onto a low-slung lawn chaise. "Maybe. Ian sure as hell wasn't going to say anything." Bryan scowled. "D had to show his ass in front of everyone, so I just made certain they saw it. What better way to drive home the lesson? Seriously, safety first, in all we do, yeah?"

Marshall nodded and settled down beside Bryan on the grass. "Ian took Michael to the ER and he's fine. Just a sprain. He wasn't even bruised, and neither was Dylan, which I am thrilled to say after he bounced his ass on the ground like that. It should have been embarrassing enough, but for them to continue to shout at one another..."

"You see why I did something about it. It was completely irrational."

"Possibly. You think you could have waited to dole out the punishment?"

Bryan huffed. "No. We said that if something was off, if it didn't feel right between us, we wouldn't wait to remedy it, especially if one of us was injured." He eyed Marshall. "You think I should have let it go?"

Marshall shrugged. "Can't say. I'm not in your relationship; all I can do is offer my advice. Dylan is an entirely different person than Melanie, and we've been together a long time. I know that her being exposed like that in front of our friends would have had an impact. Did you know Dylan would react as he did?"

Bryan shook his head. "Dylan is used to being in front of people. I had no idea he'd go off and be pissed over something like this." He looked Marshall in the eye. "But I don't think I did anything wrong. I didn't violate our agreements."

Marshall hummed. "Could be that you are still adjusting to the roles. You didn't do anything more than give him a time out, in my opinion. I'd have done the same if Melanie had been doing something stupid."

Bryan looked up at Marshall as he stood. Marshall snapped his fingers and Melanie came running. She hooked her fingers in his belt loop and smiled up at Marshall.

"Give him a bit to cool off then talk to him. Open communication, Bry. That's almost as important as being safe," Marshall offered as he wrapped an arm around Melanie.

"More. He trusts you to make the right decisions since you are the top and in control," Melanie added and Bryan looked at her. Marshall shushed her. She arched a brow at both men.

"What? It is. I've been where he's at now and really, it will work out if you just *talk* about it." Melanie shook her head. "You can't help it, I suppose, though." She grinned at them both then rested her body against Marshall's. "Gay or straight, you men are all emotionally stunted."

Marshall rolled his eyes and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Doms are human, too, pet. We can make mistakes, as well."

Bryan nodded, and then tugged out his phone. He read over the text again, changed a few words then sent it off. He glanced up at Marshall and Melanie before looking around the backyard. "But I don't think it was a mistake. Dylan could have injured himself or someone else fooling around like that, and I took the appropriate actions. If he's given me leave to do so then I don't see how I went about it the wrong way."

The knock on the door startled him out of his doze, and Bryan blinked, reaching up to rub his eyes. The banging came again, and Bryan heaved himself to a sitting position. "Yeah, just a minute!"

Sunlight streamed in through the windows and Bryan blinked again, groaning as he realized he'd fallen asleep in his living room while listening to the television last night.

Pushing off the sofa, Bryan grabbed the remote and turned off the television, the low sound of the music station cutting out brought the silence of the room into bold relief. His visitor rapped on the door a third time, the echo of the noise extra loud in the wake of the music. Disappointment speared him as he realized that Dylan would have come in because he had a key.

"Chill the fuck out," Bryan grouched as he lurched to his feet. Rubbing a hand over his head to straighten his blond hair into some sort of style other than just-crawled-out-of-bed, he crossed the room on bare feet and opened the door.

Michael stood on his doorstep, running a hand through his long, dark hair and fidgeting slightly. "Hey, Bry. Is Dylan around?"

Bryan shook his head and held the door open for Michael. "No. You want to come in though?"

Michael shook his head. "Look, I just wanted to apologize for the disruption at the party yesterday. I'm sorry about that, and I'm glad D didn't go into the pool with me."

Bryan nodded. "You're okay then?"

Michael nodded and smiled. "Yeah, Ian wasn't happy with me after he finished laughing, but it turned out to be nothing more than a sprain." He sighed then spread his hands. "So I just wanted to say, I'm sorry for acting like an ass. You'll pass my apology on to Dylan?"

"As soon as I see him."

"Thanks, man. See you later," Michael offered and ambled down to his car in the drive.

Bryan watched him go, and then closed the door. He padded back over to the sofa and checked his cell. While there were a couple of messages from his friends thanking him for hosting the party, not one was from Dylan.

With a sigh, he punched in Dylan's speed dial number and listened to the ringing. Three, four, five rings and nothing. Time enough passed that Bryan knew Dylan hadn't ignored his call because the voice mail picked up after the seventh ring.

"Hey, Dylan, it's me. Look, I don't know where you are or what you are doing, but call me. Or text, or whatever. I've got the night off again if you want to have dinner."

Ending the message, Bryan tossed his phone onto the coffee table and ran his hands over his face, rubbing his cheeks roughly before sighing again. He pushed to his feet and began stripping off the clothes he'd had on since yesterday and made his way into the bathroom to shower.

Adjusting the faucet, Bryan let the water warm then stepped under the spray. The almost-too-hot water cascaded over his body, and Bryan let the warmth and wetness sooth over his muscles that were waking up after a night spent on the sofa.

Slick shampoo scented with Dylan's cologne assaulted Bryan's senses as he lathered up his blond hair. Even the creamy conditioner carried with it Dylan's smell and forced a memory of Dylan interrupting Bryan's bath after a particularly long stretch at work.

Bryan tensed for a moment recalling how much fun they'd had and how that night had been the beginning of what led to yesterday's disaster.

His hands clenched the washcloth tightly as he wrapped the soap into the fabric, then he scrubbed the soapy cloth down his chest. Large, shiny bubbles appeared on his skin as the vigorous washing took a turn for the sensual and Bryan relaxed. He slowed his movements, the tension easing from his body as he leaned against the shower wall and thought of Dylan.

His prick lengthened as Bryan daydreamed of Dylan's golden skin. Dylan's tight, compact body was strong in the right places, muscles firm and his skin warm and soft in other places. Exercise and days spent on the courts in the sun kept Dylan fit beyond all measures in Bryan's opinion. Not unlike his body, though that had been hardened just by sheer determination and action in rescue operations.

Dylan's uniform—crisp tennis whites—starred in many of his fantasies, and even a few of their play nights, contrasted nicely with his sun enhanced skin. Even his own starched, dark blue paramedic's dungarees had made an appearance, but this time all Bryan imagined as he dropped the washcloth and curled his hand around his cock was he and Dylan wrapped about each other, warm skin brushing pale skin as they writhed against one another.

Bryan saw, in his mind's eye, Dylan dropping to his knees. Bending his head in submission as he assumed the position and waited for Bryan's command.

"Touch me," Bryan murmured with his fantasy, ignoring the shower spray that washed over him while he began to stroke himself.

Dylan smiled at him as he lifted his head. "As you wish, sir." He pivoted gracefully on his knees and nuzzled Bryan's groin. His tongue stretched out and carefully ran down the length of Bryan's cock as his fingers gently cupped Bryan's sac.

Bryan groaned, his hips canting into his fingers as he stroked and pushed his prick through his tight grip. In his fantasy, Dylan's hands ran over his thighs and then he leaned forward, swallowing down Bryan's prick. He sucked hard for a fleeting second, curled his fingers beneath Bryan's balls and stroked the delicate sensitive skin just behind his sac.

Cutting his eyes up at Bryan, Dylan smiled around his mouthful and winked at him. Bryan sucked in a breath in remembrance and coughed out some water that flowed in from the shower head. He thrust forward into his fist as he imagined himself fucking Dylan's mouth. His moans mingled with those from his fantasy as he tugged harder.

Unmindful of the cooling water, Bryan continued to stroke himself off, pulling in time with each dream push of his hips into Dylan's face. He cried out, spilling semen over his fingers as Dylan's eyes closed and the fantasy swallowed each and every last spurt of Bryan's seed.

Panting, Bryan watched soap and cum swirl down the drain. Dylan looked up at him and Bryan reached out to caress the imaginary face. Dylan's eyes closed as he drew in Bryan's fingers, sucking on the long digits, his expression, happy and sated, lingered in Bryan's memory.

"I'm sorry, D," Bryan whispered as the scene vanished, leaving him with the satisfaction of release but with a huge ache still in his heart and stomach. He yelped when the cold water beating down on him registered, and Bryan fumbled with the faucet, trying to extract a bit more hot water from the tank to rinse the rest of the soap from his body.

Turning the taps to shut the spray off, Bryan stood for a moment, drops of water running down his body to plink on the ceramic of the tub. Reaching out past the curtain, he grabbed a towel and wrapped it about his waist before stepping out of the bath. He stared at the steamed-over mirror then scowled at his blurry reflection.

Steeling his shoulders, he took a deep breath. "I did nothing wrong by punishing Dylan for his actions. He put himself in danger and that scared me, so I reacted..."

The condensation had slowly started evaporating from the bathroom mirror while Bryan stared at himself, thinking about what he'd just said and how yesterday had played out. He'd reacted out of fear for Dylan's safety and treated him much like a two-year old, despite being well over the age of consent. Dylan was twenty-five to his thirty-two, and they were adults. However, there was no sense in the childish way Dylan had acted, was still acting if he would admit to the truth, especially if they were going to continue this relationship. That realization hit him rather hard.

Did Dylan want to continue their relationship? Did Bryan? He did want Dylan, but not as he was acting now.

Bryan rested his hands on the sink, falling farther into his thoughts about what was happening in his life.

He and Dylan were adults and not just playing at some game. This was their life, and they had chosen to take these steps, to move what had been play into a lifestyle. Both of them were responsible for their actions because those actions affected both of them equally regardless of whom topped or bottomed, or who was dominant or submissive. Perhaps he wasn't the only one at fault, and with that thought, Bryan decided he could be just as angry with Dylan as Dylan was with him.

Communication was essential, that they had agreed on at one time. If Dylan persisted in keeping his head up his ass and not returning Bryan's calls, then perhaps they hadn't progressed as much as he'd thought.

The insistent beeping of his work pager as well as the ringing of the house's landline filled the air. The loud klaxon he'd programmed for the dispatch office on his cell rang out at the same time, startling Bryan out of his thoughts.

Scrambling out of the bathroom, Bryan put Dylan out of his mind. The calls and pager signified an emergency situation, and his requested weekend free wouldn't have been interrupted for anything less. Bryan's boss at the firehouse would have made certain, since it was he himself who had told Bryan to take the weekend off before the summer could become as hectic as it would soon. He'd never had a holiday off and apparently never would now.

Bryan was proven correct to hear Garth's barking commands to answer the damned phone on his voicemail as his pager and cell continued to scream at him. He silenced his cell and jerked up the house phone receiver.

"Connell," Bryan snapped as he shut off his pager and returned Garth's call. The news wasn't pleasant.

Five accidents, including a three car pile-up on the interstate, *and* a fire in progress from early celebrants of the upcoming Memorial Day weekend, demanded Garth take action. He was recalling everyone on furlough. *When it rained, it poured*, Bryan thought as he listened to the dispatch instructions after he called the firehouse his ambulance was attached to.

The towel dropped to the floor as Bryan began pulling on his uniform. He raced out the door just a few moments later, buttoning up the trousers as he tucked in his shirt. His boots loose on his feet, still not quite tied correctly.

Seventy-two hours later, Bryan collapsed back on to his bed, damp once more from another shower that, again, hadn't been as satisfying as the one in his memory. He could still smell the lingering waves of fire and smoke, hear the cries of the woman trapped in her car but the only thing that registered was the fact that Dylan still hadn't called. He surrendered to Morpheus' arms wishing it was Dylan that cradled him instead.

Chapter Two

Dylan lay back on his bed, staring up at the latest bit of technology in his hand. His four hundred dollar Galaxy phone was nothing but a useless bit of plastic and glass in the mountains surrounding the Amherst Tennis Camp and Resort. Still, Dylan flicked his finger over the screen, reading the texts and listening to Bryan's voice mails he received before the range had forced him into a no service area.

Guilt began to burn in his chest as he read over the text once more. Bryan's anger came through the message and that made his stomach roil as he'd been so upset with Bryan, too. He still couldn't believe, two entire days later, what Bryan had done.

Dylan felt his face heat with embarrassment once more despite being alone in his appointed room. Sent to the corner like an errant schoolboy, his ass bared to all and sundry, and for what? A bit of horseplay because Michael had been drunk and teased him about being a good little subbie.

He groaned and ran a hand over his face, trying to put aside the incident, but it was all for naught. His game had been crap today, and that day was the cause of it. Another thing that tugged on his conscience was the fact that he'd left matters unsettled between him and Bryan, and that just wasn't on. It smacked of deception and Dylan had no way of remedying it until next week.

The lack of communication hadn't even registered on his radar when he'd signed up for the tennis camp. He'd told Bryan about it, about the intensive training he wanted to attend and how they would be separated for nearly two weeks. Bryan had been encouraging about Dylan's desire for extra training, and they'd made plans for their reunion afterwards.

The heart of the matter was that they had talked about it and Dylan felt better for that. He'd walked away from Bryan this time, though without so much as a word. And that weighed most heavily on him since it had been his condition in their relationship that they not end a day in anger.

The relationship Dylan and Bryan had was unlike anything Dylan had ever been involved with before. They *talked* to one another, for fuck's sake, was that such a crime? And Gods, what they had was good. He missed it and scowled at his reflection in the phone's screen. Was it such an unmanly thing to admit he missed his lover?

He'd been teased enough about being the "girl" in his affairs. But it was better than the stilted atmosphere he found himself in now. And Dylan had sworn that once he'd found Mr. Right, his relationship wouldn't be the stagnant environment his parents' lives had been.

Bryan and Dylan had spoken for hours about their wants, needs and desires. Talked for days it seemed about careers, schooling and what they wanted from their lives, relationship and arrangement. Both had come to a mutually satisfying conclusion or so Dylan had thought. And Bryan had fulfilled each and every desire until recently.

Anger threaded through him as Dylan thought back to the party night. All he'd been trying to do was have a little fun before leaving for his training camp duties. Dylan was one of the best players on his college team, and though he was in school on scholarship for tennis, what he really wanted to do was be a sports medicine physician. He was excellent on the courts and had even been told he most likely could play professionally or even try for the Olympics; it had been a one chance meeting with Bryan that had changed his entire outlook on his life.

Dylan's mind trailed back to his introduction to Bryan and how they'd gone from a couple to a kink relationship. He grinned as he imagined Bryan in his tight blue dungarees and the way he'd dropped out of the ambulance when it had arrived at the club.

Employment at the country club was part of Dylan's scholarship and the job was fun. It allowed him to play tennis and also to instruct young children in the sport as well. Dylan liked working with kids, especially when they were enthusiastic about the same things he was interested in.

However, there was always one in the bunch, no matter how hard they tried; they couldn't quite comprehend the basics. His one had been a small-for-her-age little girl named Sheila Mansfield. Sheila's mother, Anastasia, came to the country club with her husband Conner looking to improve her daughter's agility and clumsiness.

Sheila was awful at just about everything it seemed; inflicting bruises on Dylan and herself trying to return on his serves. Skinned knees from diving to catch and return the easy lobs he offered her or just complete falls to the rough court ground as she drove herself to catch what should have been out of bounds balls. She just didn't seem capable of improving, but she and Dylan both

persevered, and when she turned her ankle in a last-ditch effort for points, it was the last straw.

Sheila crashed to the ground, grabbed her ankle then tossed back her head and wailed to the heavens.

Dylan dropped his racket and raced over to her, kneeling beside her as he motioned to the towel boy to call for aid. He drew Sheila into his arms rocking her and rubbing her back to soothe her.

He looked up as the paramedic came through the door and just stared at the man.

"I'm medic Bryan Connell and I'm here to help." Bryan had knelt beside them and smiled, and Dylan was lost. Sheila was as well, it seemed, because she sniffled and listened to his every word.

Dylan watched Bryan charm Sheila as he swiftly and gently assessed the damage, then wrapped her ankle. Anastasia had arrived by then and she thanked Bryan before whisking Sheila away. Dylan had nearly swallowed his tongue when Bryan turned the thousand watt smile on him and asked. "Do you need attending Mr. Masters?"

Dylan swallowed and shook his head. "No, but I'd like to take you to dinner," he'd blurted.

Bryan's deep laugh rolled out, and he nodded, holding out his hand to Dylan. Dylan gripped Bryan's hand, feeling a small card in between their palms. "All right. Call me about that," Bryan had murmured then walked away.

Dylan hadn't hesitated, and they'd been together ever since. It was hard to imagine that had been nearly five years ago. So much had changed and yet, despite the incident at the barbeque, Dylan was happy with Bryan.

The moment when their play turned into something more had both stunned and awed Dylan. He'd always been one for adventure, and had talked Bryan into attending a munch. He'd wanted to see what the hype was about after a certain series of books had been published.

What he'd found hadn't been anything like what he'd read. Yes, some people practiced the way that had been sensationalized in the stories. But others lived in a way with their kink that made the stories he'd read seem like nothing more than a shameful way to excuse supposed inadequacies of self. Neither he nor Bryan was ashamed of the things they engaged in whilst alone.

It had become a game between him and Bryan to see if they could find a particular story that titillated them and try out any activities on their own. However, after a particularly intense night where Dylan had spent several hours deprived of his senses, he decided he wanted—needed—more than just kinky sex.

Dylan had wanted validation that they weren't alone or mentally deficient in any way because of the things they enjoyed. Bryan had told him so, more than once, but seeing was believing, Dylan felt. And saw he had. Every day couples, both gay and straight, in loving satisfying relationships with a little extra on the side. Vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce and nuts was how one presenter had likened a kink-filled relationship.

He felt alive, more so than any other time, after a session with Bryan. His entire body and mind reeled with sensation, feeling and completion. After an emotionless upbringing, Dylan desired a permanent way to retain those emotions. And Bryan had agreed to go along with him as he searched for a way to find what he needed.

Finding like-minded individuals to share and instruct in their experiences was a boon. After checking into some non-fiction books on the subject, Bryan and Dylan had written their own agreement out. They might never be able to marry, but the simple statement between the two of them was all the documentation Dylan would ever need.

"Both parties agree that any accidents, miscommunications, etc. will be handled in a timely and constructive manner," Dylan murmured the last line of their declaration and groaned.

Oh yes, indeed, Dylan had royally screwed the pooch this time. Bryan had every right to be upset with him, and would probably be well into an earned and deserved sulk when Dylan came home.

Sighing, Dylan checked the clock on his phone then swore. It was late and tomorrow's exercise was a difficult one, not only physically but mentally as well. Despite still feeling justified in his anger at Bryan, he listened to Bryan's message once more before turning out the light. Bryan's voice brought him a small bit of comfort as he tried to make himself settle down enough to sleep.

"Tennis is hard work, requiring almost constant movement and even more visual awareness. It is a leg sport, aerobic and anaerobic exercise that requires

one to develop the entire body in preparation for a match. Tennis is, however, still only a game unless it is your livelihood and even then, we still want you to enjoy it.”

The woman giving the lecture, “Tennis: Sport, Game and Serious Business”, was pretty in an athletic sort of way. Her ponytail of thick, dark hair bounced as she paced back and forth in front of the group of players gathered for morning session.

Dylan listened to her with half an ear as she demonstrated several warm-up techniques. Many of the other players followed along with her as she moved on to the exercises and spoke about an individual trainer setting up an appointment time to work with everyone on a one-on-one basis.

“Doing this lessens the chances of injury not only to you but also to your partner or opponent. As I said, we at Camp Amherst want you to have fun with your game and each other. What we don’t want is someone hurt in the name of the sport.”

Dylan started as the words filtered in through his skull. He blinked and had an epiphany on not only his game, but his life and relationship as well. While he’d been wallowing in self-pity and his own righteous embarrassment, it dawned on him that what had happened at the party was, in fact, his own fault. Or more accurately, their fault. Together. Collectively. They were a unit after all, and if one team member let down another, grave consequences could happen.

Bryan had acted accordingly, well within the confines of both their agreement and lifestyle. Bryan knew Michael was an irresponsible person who took greater chances than necessary, and Bryan had done his level best to not only drive home the point, but to also show Dylan why. They’d forgotten the follow through, though.

They had let one another down, he and Bryan, and at this particular moment in time there was nothing he could do to fix it.

Granted, he still felt like a chastened school boy, but at least now, he understood why. Twirling his racket, his mind racing with the possibilities and the things he and Bryan needed to talk about once he returned from camp, distracted his game again.

He lost his individual match with another player and scowled at the outcome. He was better than that, and his trainer, Ron, told him so. Ron set

Dylan to running a few practice drills to remind him to keep his focus on his game, and a tiny spark of awareness again made itself known.

Cause and effect of his actions directly affected his game, and the irony of that revelation wasn't lost on Dylan as he applied the same thinking to his relationship woes. He shook his head and forced himself to put his personal business aside when a stray ball nearly blackened his eye.

Chapter Three

Bryan was certain that if one more person tried to analyse his relationship with Dylan, he would have to resort to violence. And not any of the fun kind either. Not only had he not heard from Dylan in almost two weeks, but Dylan's sister, Aimee, and Dylan's aunt, Barbara had both made their displeasure with him known.

Dylan was close to his sister and aunt in ways that he wasn't with his parents. Over the years, it had ceased to be a point of contention between them as Bryan's family was close-knit, and he came to understand the dynamics of the Masters family.

"You lost my brother?" Aimee asked when he'd called to see if Dylan had decided to stay with her instead of his apartment near the university.

Bryan felt guilty immediately. "No. No, I didn't. I just don't know why he won't return my calls."

Aimee sighed. "What did you do?"

"How do you know it's my fault?" Bryan demanded.

Aimee giggled. "Oh, Bry. It's nothing personal, but it will always be your fault as D is my brother."

Bryan sighed. He should have known Aimee would take Dylan's side no matter what happened between them. She was loyal to a fault and had been one of their biggest supporters when Dylan had introduced him at a Masters' family gathering. He loved her for that quality, even if it wasn't doing him a bit of good at the moment. "So, you've not seen nor heard from him lately?"

"Not a word, but considering it's Dylan, and I know my brother, give him some time. He'll come over in a day or two, bounding with energy about something or other and you guys will work it out."

"Thanks, Aimee."

"You'd best treat him right, Bryan Anthony Connell, or I will hear about it."

Bryan flinched, but promised to call her once he reconnected with Dylan. His next phone call hadn't gone over so well, and he deserved it, he supposed. Barbara Stratton, Dylan's mother's sister, had appointed herself Dylan's surrogate parent in light of her sister's indifference.

"Mister Connell, I had wondered when, and if, you were going to contact me." Barbara's voice was low and forceful. Bryan always felt as if he were sitting in the principal's office whenever he and Dylan had gone to see the woman.

She loved Dylan fiercely, and after a grueling interrogation session during the holiday meal in which Dylan had introduced Bryan as his partner, she'd grudgingly come around to the fact that Bryan was now a part of her nephew's life. The only thing that grated on his nerves more than anything else he had endured, was the fact that she had never—and probably wouldn't ever—refer to him by his given name. Of course, he returned the favor to her with the caveat that he used her maiden name instead of her married name since she'd divorced her husband recently. Still, he tried for Dylan's sake.

"It's Bryan, Ms. Stratton. I just want to talk with him. I need to apologize and I can't do that unless he contacts me."

There was silence for a long moment on her end of the line, and Bryan was almost certain that his call had been disconnected, or perhaps she'd hung up on him purposely, when he heard her exhale.

"I wondered what had happened," Barbara said. Her tone had softened some, though Bryan could still hear the censure.

"You know where he is?" Bryan blurted out.

"I do, indeed, Bryan."

Stunned by her use of his name, Bryan just listened, holding his breath as she told him of Dylan's call the night of the party.

"He said you'd had a disagreement, but he still wanted to attend his training camp and that if you happened to phone, that he would speak with you once he returned. I will be shuttling him from the airport to his apartment on Friday."

Bryan swallowed. "I forgot about the camp."

Barbara chuckled, the smoky sound soothing him even though she was most likely laughing at him. "Dylan said you might, and asked me to remind you to check your calendar on your phone. He also informed me that the only way you would remember was if he set it to a specific alarm and even then you might disregard it if something from work came up."

Bryan smiled, remembering the little notes he received on his phone after Dylan had stayed over or they'd gone to dinner. They had never said the words

as both believed actions were more than enough, and Dylan's notes to him said "I love you" more than anything else. He'd saved almost every one of them on the phone's memory card. "Something did, but I don't remember any alerts."

"I believe he mentioned a klaxon ringtone would be the only one you would always respond to."

Bryan closed his eyes. He'd heard the klaxon and dismissed it as work related. Considering all that had happened that weekend, it wasn't too far outside the realm of possibility that he'd seen the reminder but had been too distracted to process it. "I think I know what happened, Ms. Stratton, and if you don't mind, I'd like to retrieve Dylan from the airport when his flight arrives."

Barbara hummed. "Barbara, if you please. And I shall pass on the message to Dylan as soon as I am able."

Bryan ended the phone call feeling a bit better as well as completely reprimanded. He had many things to contemplate over the next few days until Dylan came home.

Dylan let himself into the house, trying to remain quiet even though Bryan wasn't at home. He was almost certain that this stunt would earn him some sort of recognition from Bryan, although he wasn't able to figure out if it would be good or bad attention.

Once he'd started the trip down from Amherst camp, his phone signal had reengaged, setting off a plethora of noise indicating the numerous texts and voicemails he had not been able to receive prior. Not the least of which were several from Bryan and one intriguing message from his Aunt Barbara.

Since he'd finished his trials early, Dylan had decided to surprise Bryan and refused his aunt's request for Bry to meet him at the airport. She hadn't been happy with him to learn the truth behind the estrangement but set him on the right course to correct it.

Dylan had just settled himself on the sofa when he heard Bryan's key in the lock. The door opened and Dylan stood, waiting for Bryan to enter.

"Hello Bryan," Dylan said in a low tone, the soft sound carrying across the room despite the quiet greeting.

Bryan's head jerked up, and Dylan fought off the grin threatening to curl his lips at the expression on his lover's face.

"D?" Bryan breathed and stared at him.

Dylan stood while Bryan looked him over, feeling a bit uncomfortable in the silence of the room. Bryan shut the front door with a heavy thud, and stood stock still staring at Dylan.

Dylan took a deep breath. "Are you going to say hello or are you just going to stand there staring at me?"

Dylan watched Bryan swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing, and his mouth working for a moment before Bryan said anything.

"You came back."

Dylan nodded, waiting for Bryan to work through whatever it was he had decided to put himself through while Dylan had been gone. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

Bryan crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Dylan for a moment. "You left me."

Dylan arched a brow then bowed his head. "I guess I did," he admitted. "But you had advance warning that I wouldn't be available for a couple of weeks."

"That's beside the point, Dylan, and you know it."

Dylan knew it, and it almost seemed as if Bryan hadn't come to the same realizations he had during their time apart. He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't. He had been the one to leave matters between them unsettled, and he was more stunned than anything about Bryan's attitude, especially in light of the surprising things Barbara had told him. Again, he answered in the affirmative. "I do, and yet, you are still upset it seems."

Dylan looked up at Bryan to see he had turned around. It hurt to have Bryan's back to him and despite becoming upset; he couldn't muster the energy to be angry. He looked away and tried not to feel the emptiness that was slowly filling his gut.

"I think I've a right to be," Bryan murmured.

Dylan nodded, bowing his head again as he considered Bryan's words. He heard Bryan's footfalls, slow and deliberate, never registering that each step was coming closer.

"Don't do it again." Ghosted across his ear. "Don't leave me again, Dylan."

Dylan gasped when Bryan's arms came about him and squeezed the breath from him. He forced himself to focus on the rest of the words that Bryan was speaking to him.

"I'm sorry, D. So sorry. Please? Forgive me? I didn't know how you'd react," Bryan whispered. "You scared the fuck out of me, and then left me. What the hell was I supposed to do, Dylan?"

Dylan drew in another breath as Bryan held him out at arm's length and shook him. "You ever walk away from me like that again and I will... I'll—"

"What?" Dylan interrupted, suddenly finding the necessary wherewithal to be angry in spite of Bryan's apology. "You embarrassed me in front of our friends and you want me to forgive you just like that? What will you do to me if I decide to leave, hmm? What are you going to do for an encore, Bryan?"

Bryan swallowed and stepped back from Dylan, and Dylan wondered if shouting had been the right thing to do when Bryan answered him.

"Beg your forgiveness for being an insensitive ass when it comes to putting you in that position."

Dylan blinked, not understanding what he heard just yet. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Dylan. I shouldn't put caveats on an apology."

"I..." Dylan began, then shook his head. "That's right, you shouldn't. And in saying that, I owe you an apology as well." He sighed and looked Bryan right in the eyes. "I'm sorry for walking away, especially when I knew that it would upset you."

Bryan nodded. "Don't ever do it again," he whispered.

"I won't," Dylan answered, stepping closer to Bryan. "Don't treat me like a child as I don't need protection."

"Everyone needs to be protected once in awhile," Bryan began, but Dylan shook his head.

"Stand beside me or behind me, but let me make my mistakes, Bry. I'm just as human as you are and will, in time, learn from the experiences."

Dylan waited while Bryan processed what he said.

"As long as you know that if it ever comes to that situation again, I am only acting in your best interest. You could have been injured and that's what scared me."

Dylan licked his lips. "All right. I'll try not to put myself in a place like that again so long as you realize that you can't keep me from being hurt. I know I'm younger, and sometimes even stupider, but life happens and you can't stop it. You don't truly live unless a bit of pain is involved."

Bryan closed his eyes and nodded again, and Dylan felt the weight ease from his stomach. He smiled and took another step closer to Bryan before wrapping his arms about Bryan's shoulders.

Bryan's arms came around Dylan, squeezing him close, and Dylan closed his eyes and relaxed into the embrace. Bryan's hands drifted over his back, rubbing along his muscles and soothing away the tension.

"I missed you," Dylan muttered and nipped at Bryan's ear.

"Oh?" Bryan chuckled, his hands resting on Dylan's ass, fingers cupping the curve of his cheeks and digging into his flesh.

Dylan moaned and nodded, biting down on the tender skin of Bryan's ear again. "Yes, sir. Missed you something terrible," he breathed and licked Bryan's lobe before sucking on the sensitive spot behind his ear.

Bryan laughed again, tugging his ear out of Dylan's mouth. "Something terrible, huh?"

"Yes," Dylan started to say then yelped as Bryan's palm came down hard on his ass. The smack, though softened through his jeans, still stung. Shock and pain radiated through his body. He rocked forward into Bryan, feeling the hard outline of his cock against his own. "Bry?"

Bryan's hand connected with his ass once again, harder this time, and Dylan tried to pull away. Bryan's other arm tightened around his waist holding him in place. "I believe the correct response is, 'One, sir. May I have another, please?'"

Dylan leaned back just enough to look into Bryan's face. He grinned at him, licked his lips and said, "I believe that was two, sir, and may I have another, please?"

"Cheeky little bastard," Bryan growled and released Dylan. He leaned forward and snarled. "Run."

Dylan nearly tripped, turning around and racing for the bedroom, Bryan hot on his tail. Stumbling into the room, Dylan fell across the end of the bed and

Bryan landed on top of him. He never had the chance to turn over because Bryan landed another smack on his ass, the sound echoing in the room.

Dylan groaned and Bryan rolled them, manhandling Dylan across the bed and over his knees. Prime position and Dylan wriggled his ass at Bryan. His fingertips brushed the carpet and Dylan offered, "Three, sir. May I—"

He never got the rest of the words out before Bryan's palm flattened against his bottom again. He rocked against Bryan's leg, his pride and ass on fire even as his cock brushed up against Bryan's thigh.

Two more swats landed, and Dylan bit back the tears and cries that threatened to escape. Bryan rolled him off his lap; and he shuddered as Bryan's hands tugged at his clothing, divesting him of his jeans and briefs. Cool air graced over his skin, taking some of the heat Bryan had laid there.

Legs caught in the tangle of clothing, Dylan struggled as Bryan brought his legs up and spanked him again, his hand burning into Dylan's skin when it connected. He howled this time, and Bryan leaned over him, letting his legs fall back to the bed.

Bryan's hot hand wrapped around Dylan's cock, squeezing and stroking him as Bryan hissed at him. "Next time any punishment will be in private. No one but me will see you like that and I'll finish you when I'm done, so you'll know it's over."

Dylan nodded, canting his hips into each pull on his cock. Each stroke brought him closer, despite the throbbing of his ass and the friction on his skin. "Please," he begged. "Bryan, please."

Bryan nodded and leaned closer to Dylan's face. "Now, D. Now," he murmured and slanted his mouth over Dylan's.

Dylan whined into Bryan's mouth, his body drawing up bowstring tight before he came. Hot splashes of semen slid through Bryan's fingers, landing on Dylan's stomach as Bryan continued to stroke Dylan past orgasm. Dylan curled around Bryan, his skin overly sensitive to the prolonged caress.

"Enough," Dylan gasped, and Bryan drew back. Sprawled on the bed, Dylan allowed Bryan to divest him of his jumbled clothes. He stretched out properly on the bed as Bryan used Dylan's T-shirt to clean the semen from his stomach.

Bryan settled down beside him, and Dylan relaxed as Bryan rested his head on Dylan's chest. "It's over, D," Bryan murmured.

Dylan tensed for a moment then realized Bryan's fingers were stroking along his hairline, carding through his hair, and he sighed, wrapping an arm about Bryan's back, understanding what exactly was over. The fight, the misunderstanding and all the tension surrounding the last two weeks. The time apart hadn't dissolved their relationship, but instead strengthened what they had between them.

Dylan leaned up and pressed a kiss to the top of Bryan's head. "Yes, sir. It is, indeed, over."

The End

Author Bio

MA Jackson is an independent author who has written speculative, fantasy fan fiction under the nom de plume unbroken_halo for nine long years and is now working toward publishing her original works. Lately, she writes M/M BDSM erotica. And w00t, she is a real-life Domme who was into kink long before it was cool.

A career in homemaking led her to the brink of insanity. Or, depending on whom you ask: her best friend, her husband or her daughter, past the brink. Her hobbies include violating the rules of good writing and grammar simply because she can, playing games on her tablet, telling strangers to chill the hell out, and preparing for the zombie apocalypse, otherwise known as her daughter's graduation. Please deposit an additional twenty-five cents for more bio.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Livejournal](#) | [Fiction Archive](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SPELL BOUND

By Pelaam

Photo Description

There is a group of young men, well dressed in greys and blacks, but one stands out from the crowd. Unique, powerful, graceful, his aura sets him aside from the others. They mill together, nervous and excited, outside a three-floored mansion.

The mansion calls itself a centre for holistic studies, but the locals regard it differently.

All who attend there are branded as witches.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

There's a group of young men standing nervously outside the old mansion, but there is one that draws my attention, like a beacon of light among the crowded masses of grey, black and leather clothing.

But his light is dark, mysterious and ensnaring. I cannot avert my gaze as desire scorches in my veins, even though my mind tells me; he is of them, belonging to that strange cult and the black house with its secrets and dark sounds.

"Witches," the townspeople whisper. "Born devil spawn, they are."

But witches aren't real and I'm a Dom. I take what I want and who I want, and I want him, like I need air in my lungs.

I will have him collared, kneeling and begging for my touch, but I cannot help feel that this strange attraction for the beautiful creature goes deeper than lust, stronger than desire, and it will be the end of my reign as the Alpha Dom.

"I shall have him," and yet at those words the radio starts playing: "I Put a Spell on You" by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Sincerely,

The Wulf

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, action/adventure

Tags: BDSM, demons, soulmates/bonded, male witch

Content Warnings: off-page abuse of secondary character

Word Count: 17,143

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SPELL BOUND

By Pelaam

Chapter 1

Mordecai smiled indulgently as his friend leaned across him for a better view of the gate and the building beyond as their minibus approached it. The gate was impressive. The metal looked silver, and depicted a dragon, wings extended.

“That’s so awesome,” Mithras whispered.

Mordecai murmured his agreement, as he looked at his friend. Mithras sometimes reminded him of an overeager puppy. Although only a few years separated them in age, Mithras still looked, and sometimes acted, like a teenager. By comparison, Mordecai himself was often assumed to be in his late twenties, rather than just twenty-five. His birthday would be in just a few weeks.

A tingle skittered down Mordecai’s spine, as it had each time he thought about it. Not only that, but lately his dreams had darkened, and he felt an inexplicable aura of darkness closing around him. He looked out of the window to lighten his thoughts.

Although they were just an hour’s drive from the biggest, most bustling city in New Zealand, the thick, lush greenery they’d travelled through reminded him of isolated, tropical islands. They’d just driven through the village that was only a minute or two from the house, but those watching the bus hadn’t appeared welcoming.

Mordecai focused on the building, which was three stories high and dark brick. He knew that it was built around a courtyard. On either side of the three steps that led up to a columned balustrade were handrails the likes of which he’d never seen before. They were wrought iron griffins, whose metallic tails wrapped around the nearest columns. The top of each window on the ground floor had flames carved into the stone.

Surrounding each window on the second story were waves carved into the stone. On the top story, the windows had images of birds carved around them, and just beneath the roof stood a series of tikis, in red, blue and green that resembled gargoyles as they looked down. On the roof itself stood a great dragon, its wings extended as if the beast was about to take flight.

Mordecai’s feelings of unease faded. Air, water, fire, and earth, the building paid homage to the four elements, and he knew he’d feel at home there.

“Are you nervous, Mordi?” Mithras asked. “I am. I have butterflies.”

“I guess so.” Mordecai shrugged. “I’m eager. The fact we’re here shows we’re the best. We have the strongest emerging magic.”

“I know that. I do.” Mithras sighed. “I just don’t have your pedigree. Magic goes back a long way in your family.”

“Whatever’s afflicting the female witches, making their numbers dwindle, affected my family as much as anyone else’s.” Mordecai looked harder at his friend. “You’re worrying about the matching aren’t you?”

Mithras nodded. “That, as well as being good enough to be here. My family is so proud. They think marrying a girl without magic herself, but whose family have a pedigree of magic, would be a marvellous accomplishment for me.”

Mordecai scowled. “They’ve tried this for a generation. There are still no more female witches being born than before. But what we do have are some male witches whose magic has dwindled because they’re not in harmony with their mate. They can’t stretch themselves or their gifts because the one chosen to be at their side can’t channel it safely.”

“You sound so passionate,” Mithras whispered, his brown eyes wide.

“I am. I will not be bound to a female that someone thinks should be a good match because somewhere in their lineage was a female with strong powers. I will choose my own mate.” He laid a hand on Mithras’ shoulder. “And if you feel the same, I will speak for you. We both want male mates. I will have nothing less. Do you want that enough to stand beside me?”

“Yes.” Mithras nodded eagerly. “Yes.”

Mordecai exited the bus with Mithras behind him. Of the ten students, only one was female. He adjusted his hat as he looked around. Everyone wore black or grey. He favoured leather pants teamed with a charcoal grey shirt, and a wide-brimmed black hat. Mithras wore his usual black leather corset over a pale grey shirt, and black dress pants.

Even the woman in their midst wore black pants, shirt and suit jacket. Her hair was hidden under her own wide-brimmed hat. But from a distance they’d all look the same. They were all nervous to a degree. For Mordecai it was nervous excitement. He was ready to move on, to command the next level of magic.

Although that meant he really did need to consider finding a mate. One who could not only help harness his power, but one who felt the same desire for him as he would for them. A true mate in every sense. His skin tingled at the thought.

The doors opened, and three people came outside; two middle-aged blond-haired men, who looked eerily alike, and a woman with her dark hair upswept. They all held black capes wrapped tightly around their bodies. They stopped at the top of the stairs. The iron griffins now looked like sentries.

A conch shell sounded, and again. Then a fourth person came out. A gasp arose around Mordecai. The man was Maori, his copper skin liberally tattooed. The intricate blue designs were on his face, chest, arms, and thighs. Mordecai's eyes travelled over the well-sculptured, smooth chest, and the muscular legs.

His thighs were easily visible as he only wore the traditional *piupiu*, the flax kilt reaching to mid-thigh, over which he wore a belt, a *tatau*. His hair was up in a traditional topknot, decorated with feathers, and a bone comb, a symbol of power.

He held a greenstone *mere*. The weapon was short, broad-bladed, and shaped like an enlarged teardrop. Looking like it should be used like a club, the *mere* was a close combat weapon designed to strike an opponent in the body or head. It was also the symbol of a chief.

The Maori warrior spun around, his *piupiu* swirling to reveal glimpses of the tattoos on his muscular ass cheeks. Mordecai recognized what was happening as the *powhiri* and the *wero*, a traditional welcome and challenge.

The warrior chanted as he slapped his chest, arm, and thighs. His eyes widened to show their whites, and he stuck his amazingly long tongue out as he brandished the *mere*. Finally he lay down a small effigy handed to him by one of the men still standing on the stairs. He stood, *mere* raised, knees bent, as if he would strike anyone approaching the effigy.

Mordecai looked around. If any of the others remembered they'd been told about the Maori welcome and challenge they'd face, the display had wiped it from their minds. Removing his hat, Mordecai pushed his long hair back out of the way. He passed the hat to Mithras and stepped forward. He kept his gaze firmly on the warrior as he leaned forward to pick up the effigy.

As he straightened up, the warrior nodded, and opened his arms. "*Tēnā koutou. Haere mai.*" He drew Mordecai forward so that their noses touched in the traditional *hongi*.

“*Kia ora*. Thank you,” Mordecai said.

“Hello and welcome. My name is Arana, and I’m the senior tutor here. Your name is?”

The warrior’s voice was melodic, but powerful. Even Mordecai stood a little straighter, recognising the power and authority of Arana.

“My name’s Mordecai.”

Arana nodded. “Since you were brave enough to answer the challenge, you can be the spokesperson for the other students. If any of you have a problem or issue, report it first to Mordecai. He’ll then seek assistance from us if needed. Let me introduce you to my friends and fellow tutors here.”

The other teachers came to join Arana, and he introduced each in turn. Firstly, he indicated the woman. “This is Era.”

The woman smiled, and nodded slightly. “*Haere mai*, welcome to the Academy.” She stepped back as the two men came forward.

Arana indicated one, then the other. “This is Bryne, and his brother Arlyn. We’ll all teach you during your stay here. Now, if you’ll collect your luggage, we’ll take a register, and show you to your rooms.”

Chapter 2

With a grunt, Kerr sat up in bed. He ran his fingers through his unruly mop of hair. He'd been restless all night. He'd dreamed he was flying, then he'd seen dark shapes pushing through the ground, add to that a figure whose face he never saw, but that he desperately kept trying to get to, and it made for one hell of a bad night's sleep.

He shuffled into the bathroom. He let the shower run while he took care of another necessity before stepping under the hot spray with a sigh of contentment. He poured a generous dollop of shower gel into his hand, and began to work it over his body. He washed thoroughly over his furred chest, the thick nest at his cock and down his hairy thighs.

He'd head to the gym once he'd had breakfast. His abundance of body hair was genetic, but he had to work at keeping toned. He dried off enthusiastically, and then tackled shaving. He kept a well-trimmed anchor beard. He scowled as he saw the shadows under his eyes. He'd need to address those. No one would want to see him walking around the club looking more like he'd rather be asleep than in charge.

Kerr padded from the bathroom through to the kitchen. He yawned, and muttered under his breath. He'd had odd dreams for a week now. Nightmares, for the first time in his life. *I need a holiday. I haven't been away for over a year now.*

Scooping up the remote control, he switched on his TV so he could listen to the news while making his breakfast. He flicked on the kettle for the morning cup of tea, and dropped two pieces of whole-wheat bread into the toaster. Banana, yogurt and berries went into his blender to make a smoothie. By the time he'd poured that into a glass and set it on his table, his toast was ready and the water boiled.

He spread the toast with almond butter, and he took it, and his cup of Earl Grey tea, over to the table. He ate as he watched the news. There was nothing exciting going on, and then he had a sudden realisation. He'd heard that the college was getting some new students. He smirked as he thought of some of the things the local villagers said about the place.

"Hogwarts it ain't." He drained the last of his tea, and took the plate, glass, and mug to the dishwasher. There wasn't enough in there yet. He'd put it on

later. He glanced at his clock. If he left for the gym now, by the time he got back, the students would be arriving. For some reason he really wanted to see them.

Despite what some of the villagers said, as far as he could gather the college was some kind of yoga, holistic, meditation place. But they were, in truth, very secretive. They also seemed to favour dark garb, which he thought unusual, but, until now, had never questioned. His mind made up, Kerr hurried to dress and get out.

Kerr wasn't alone as he watched the minibus drive through the dragon gates, and stop outside the mansion. He watched a group of young men who stood nervously outside; but there was one that drew his attention. He was like a beacon of light among the crowded masses of grey, black and leather clothing.

Kerr wasn't sure exactly how to put it into words, but the stranger's light seemed dark, mysterious and ensnaring. He couldn't look away and desire scorched through his veins, despite the fact the young man belonged to that strange cult and the black house with its secrets, and dark sounds.

"Witches." The woman at his side whispered. "Born devil spawn, they are."

"Not all witches serve evil." Kerr surprised himself, not just the woman at his side, with his retort.

She glared at him. "They're not our kind. But while that... that *place* gives the council big payments, we're stuck with them."

"I've lived here nearly two years. The mansion's always been there, and nothing spooky or evil has ever happened." Kerr smiled down at her, but she wasn't mollified, and headed off, muttering to herself. Kerr put her from his mind.

Witches aren't real but I am, and I'm a Dom. I take what I want, and who I want and I want him, like I need air in my lungs. I want him collared, kneeling and begging for my touch.

Despite the desire burning through him, there was one other thought circling Kerr's mind. He had an odd notion that his strange attraction to the achingly beautiful creature, was something deeper than lust, stronger than desire, and could herald the end of his reign as an Alpha Dom. Kerr shook his head. *Not gonna happen.*

He didn't know how he could arrange it, but he wanted the stranger. "I shall have him," he whispered. As he spoke, he heard a tune coming from one of the cars parked beside him. He recognised it instantly, turned to stare at the vehicle and shivered.

"I Put a Spell on You" by Creedence Clearwater Revival played for a moment before the music stopped.

Chapter 3

As Mordecai turned toward the minibus, heat permeated his body, and his cock reacted, filling slowly. His breath came in short gasps, and he stared into the distance. A man and woman stood side by side, but he knew they weren't together. Despite the woman's superstitious fear, she was irrelevant.

But the man. *The man. Mine. I want him, and will have him. I will have him naked and begging for my touch.* Mordecai wrapped his arms around his body and hugged himself.

The whispered tales of how it felt to find the one destined to be at your side paled into comparison against the reality. Mordecai actually wanted to just leave everyone, and everything, and go claim the man for himself, riding him until neither of them knew where the one ended and the other began. Only it was more complex than that.

He licked his lips, dry from the heat of desire. *I've taken others, but never given myself. That has always been reserved for my true mate. But there are rituals to observe. And I don't even know who he is.*

A smile curved Mordecai's lips. The man's desire for him reached out to him. *An Alpha. My mate is an Alpha. That's good. He's going to need to be powerful to deal with me and all that comes with me.* His smile turned mischievous. He focused on the car close by the man.

The perfect words came to mind. He didn't know who sang it, but the spell would take care of that. "I put a spell on you," he whispered.

A soft laugh escaped his lips as the man turned to the car. "Perfect. I'll find you. Soon."

"Mordecai, get your bags. We're waiting for you," Arana called from the steps of the mansion.

"On my way." Mordecai grabbed his cases, and hurried to where the tutors waited for him. He went inside.

The foyer was beautiful, dark wood, and the light fittings were Art Deco. A gilt-edged mirror hung on the wall to his left with an umbrella stand next to it. On the right was a dark wood staircase, and ahead was an open door leading through to the courtyard.

“The next floor up has the student bedrooms, libraries, and study rooms. The top floor has the tutor bedrooms, and the classrooms.” Arana laid a hand on Mordecai’s shoulder and urged him through into the courtyard. “Straight ahead are the kitchen and dining room. To the left are a first aid room, and various storage rooms. On the right is the swimming pool and gym.”

Turning in a circle, Mordecai finally faced Arana. “This is beautiful.”

The courtyard itself had low-level plants and the occasional tree around in front of the buildings. Awnings reached out from over the ground floor windows providing shade over wooden tables and chairs. In the centre was a fountain. The base had an ornately carved design of birds, tikis, and flames. The fountain’s water cascaded from the blow hole of a leaping dolphin. Mordecai instantly felt the calm and balance of the elements in alignment.

Arana smiled and nodded. “I was told the power was strong in you. We must ensure your match is equal to you.”

“I have my own ideas on that very subject,” Mordecai said. “But now isn’t the time to discuss them.”

“Mordi, isn’t it amazing? It’s making my skin tingle.” Mithras came over to him, his eyes shining.

“Yes it is. That’s great,” Mordecai said. He squeezed his friend’s shoulder. Mithras’ enthusiasm was contagious. The pair then hugged, laughing.

“It’s going to be so awesome here,” Mithras said.

“Yes. Yes, I believe it is going to be awesome.” Mordecai’s smile turned mischievous. “In more ways than one.”

Chapter 4

The rest of Kerr's day passed without any other strange happenings. He chose to spend lunchtime in the city before going into work. He wandered down to the port, and ate lunch in one of the restaurants at the Viaduct. He took a short walk around, and then it was time to work.

The advantage of working as the owner of a nightclub was the ability to have the morning to enjoy himself. But Kerr was disciplined enough to make sure he was there no later than mid-afternoon. That allowed him to check all the messages, takings, and reports concerning the previous night.

He rarely left before the last customer had gone, so if there were any immediate issues, he was on hand to deal with them. But sometimes his staff thought of something that they decided he should know, and he encouraged dialogue with them.

Unlike Lilith.

He ran his hand through his hair. She'd been his business partner for a year. They ran two BDSM clubs; one welcomed anyone, which Lilith ruled as Alpha Dominatrix, and the other was exclusively gay, where he was Alpha Dom. The clubs fronted on two different streets, but were back to back. A glass walkway on the third story connected them.

That floor in each building had some offices, and a suite of rooms that were used as a home away from home. He frowned. At least he used his as a home away from home. Even though he and Lilith had worked alongside each other for the last twelve months, he barely knew her. He assumed she lived elsewhere, but now he realized she'd never mentioned anything of her home life to him.

Not that it was any of his business. He'd heard often enough that she was a good Dominatrix, but she rarely kept the same sub for more than a week. Sometimes she had two; male, female or a mix. There didn't seem to be any preference for her. He knew a couple of the men she'd been seen with were definitely gay. He absently wondered if she was pansexual. Then he wondered what his sudden preoccupation with her was.

The only problem he had with her was her constant attempts to seduce him. She made light of them now, and he laughed them off, but in the beginning

she'd been quite aggressive, then she'd been passive, but persistent. Although she referred to them as their running joke, there were times he caught her looking at him with naked lust.

He rubbed at his face. He was gay. Through and through. He liked and respected women, but he wanted a man in his bed. And now not just any man. He wanted the man with the long, red hair he'd seen outside the mansion. *He will be mine. I know it.*

He grimaced at the knock on the door. But he went and opened it with a smile on his lips. "Afternoon, Lilith."

"Kerr, sweetheart. You're not dressed yet. Or perhaps I should say undressed. Would you like a hand?" Lilith swept past him. Her black leather corset was laced back and front, but her chest was hidden from view. The matching leather shorts had metal rings down each side, and her thigh-high boots had metal heels and studs down the back. She noticed his gaze, and pirouetted. "You like?"

"It's okay," he said, then he looked at the sub that knelt at the doorway. It was possible the boy was a very fresh faced twenty-five year old, but Kerr had an uncanny vibe about such things. Nor did he like the genuine fear in the boy's eyes. "Where's his ID?"

Lilith looked at him, an elegantly drawn eyebrow raised. "Why?"

"Because I don't allow anyone under twenty-five in my club, and that was the agreement with the joint operation. The cops—"

"They won't care so long as he's over eighteen." Lilith interrupted him, her voice a mix of scorn and boredom.

"I know that." Kerr retaliated by sounding as if he was talking to a child. "But I do. Even if he is over eighteen, which I'm not convinced, he isn't over twenty-five. Unless you get me his ID right now, I'll call the fucking cops myself."

Lilith didn't react to his increase in volume. She stared at him for a few seconds, her dark eyes cold. "Since he seems to mean so much to you, keep him. I'll have his clothes sent up to you." She stalked from the room, her heels sounding heavily on the floor.

The sub looked from Lilith back to Kerr, but didn't move. Kerr went over to him, and urged him to his feet. "How old are you?"

"I was eighteen a couple of weeks ago." The young man glanced back towards the door. "Am I in trouble?"

"No. What's your name? Were you looking for a Dominatrix?" Kerr had another vibe about the youth. He wasn't surprised when he shook his head.

"Michael. And I don't know what made me say yes to her. She scares me."

"Are you into the scene at all?" Kerr unfastened the leash, and then removed the studded collar from Michael's throat.

"I have a friend who likes it," Michael said. "I liked what he told me, and told him I wanted to try it, and see for myself. Then I was introduced to Lilith."

"Look, give me a minute." Kerr went to his office, and picked up a business card for the club. He took it back to Michael. "Give yourself a couple of weeks. Think about it. Then call, and say that I told you to ring. I'll be sure to call you back and make sure you have a trusted Dom who will do nothing more than give you a personalized tour, and answer any questions you might have."

Michael looked at the card, and then smiled shyly at Kerr. "I thought you told her I'm too young for your club?"

"You are. But if the scene appeals to you, there are other, less intense places to go. Don't let one bad experience put you off."

A knock at his door interrupted Kerr. He patted Michael's shoulder. Opening his door, a surly man in leather pants held out Michael's clothing.

"Mistress Lilith said to give you these."

The man didn't wait. He thrust the clothes at Kerr and turned away. Kerr had half a mind to call him back, but decided against it, especially with Michael still in his rooms. *Lilith and I need a long, no-holds-barred business meeting.*

Chapter 5

“Are you sure we won’t get into trouble?” Mithras asked.

Mordecai patted his friend’s shoulder. “We were told there were no issues if we wanted to come into town. We’re going into town.”

“Yes, but I don’t think the tutors meant for us to be going into clubs. Especially fetish clubs.” Mithras dropped his voice to a whisper and glanced around as if the tutors would materialize any second.

“It took me a while to find out the identity of the man I saw when we arrived, and where he worked. I thought the safest place for me to approach Kerr would be his workplace. It’s not too personal. Plus there’s the added safety factor of his other patrons. You can go somewhere else if you don’t want to come into the club with me.”

“You should have told the tutors about Kerr.”

Mithras shook his head as Mordecai checked his map. Mordecai smiled at his friend. “Mithras, I want to be sure about this man. I don’t want to blurt it out to our tutors, for them to get... overexcited about it, only for me to meet him face-to-face and have been wrong.”

“From the way you described it to me, there’s no way you think you’re wrong.” He stopped suddenly, his eyes wide. “You’re not thinking of becoming bound to him before telling them are you?”

“No! Of course not.” Mordecai grabbed Mithras and pulled him back into motion. “There are rituals that need to be performed, and a safe place chosen for our binding. I just want to meet him. See him. I’ve felt him close by the mansion this last week, but he’s not going to just knock on the door. According to what I found out, he has a club somewhere here, and this is where he’ll be. I just have to find it. Ah! There it is.”

Shifting his grip off Mithras’ shoulder, he held his friend’s hand instead, and walked up to the doorman with his head held high. Their dress code of black and leather wouldn’t look out of place in a fetish club. However, Mordecai hadn’t thought of proving his age when the doorman held out his hand.

“Identification. Rule here is no one under twenty five. Prove it or move it.”

He glanced at Mithras. His friend was only twenty three, and although he was old enough, he didn't have any form of identification with him. There was only one option. He reached into his jacket as if to bring out a wallet, and as he drew his hand free, he sketched a pattern in the air and murmured a minor incantation. "Pass," he said aloud.

"Pass." The doorman repeated the word, his eyes staring straight ahead.

Mordecai strode forward, pulling Mithras in with him. Not the ideal way to enter the club, but having reached this point, Mordecai was not of a mind to go back home without getting at least an up close view of the man he knew to be his mate.

As they moved through the club, Mordecai wasn't surprised that Mithras stayed close. His upbringing had been sheltered. He didn't expect his friend to be comfortable with such outlandish dress, or rather, lack thereof.

"Over here," he whispered directly into Mithras' ear. He stood his friend at the end of the bar. "A glass of water please. It's a little... warm in here." Mordecai fluttered his lashes, glad they were unusually long, and smiled at the bartender.

The man returned quickly, and handed Mordecai the glass with a wink, and a blown kiss. Mordecai grinned as he gave the glass to Mithras. "Keep hold of this. Wait here. I'll be back in a few minutes. Okay?"

Mithras nodded, and eased back a little to merge better with the shadows. Mordecai was sure his friend would be fine. He wasn't going to be gone that long. Without having to worry about Mithras, he could focus on the man he wanted. No matter how many others were there, Mordecai would find him. *Kerr*. The name rolled so easily on his tongue.

Mordecai half-closed his eyes. He walked slowly, ignoring the flirtatious looks, and occasional verbal approach. Kerr was there, but not on that floor. He let his powers guide him. He went through the club and into an area clearly intended for staff only. He walked past spare tables and chairs stacked neatly, ready to be brought through, and stared at a lift.

He pressed the call button, and saw that the two was illuminated. When the doors opened, the button for the third floor was worked only by key. Mordecai smirked. That was basic stuff. He laid a finger on the button. "Move," he whispered.

The lift doors closed, and it moved upwards. The lift rose smoothly and Mordecai hugged himself as he felt the growing nearness of his mate. Then as the lift stopped, he stood tall and exited it, head high, to meet the man. To his left he saw a glass-covered walkway. He frowned. He should have been able to discern something about what lay beyond; a feel for what was over there. Instead it was though a veil hid it from him.

He shook his head. The proximity of his mate was obviously affecting him in more than just a physical way. Mordecai was almost certain he could see a golden thread gaining strength as he walked down the corridor to his right.

As he approached a door, it opened. Up close the man was even more desirable than Mordecai could have hoped for. His dark hair was gelled back. His chest, furred and powerfully muscled, was bisected by a studded leather harness, emphasizing his pecs. Black leather pants moulded to his legs, and accentuated a package Mordecai had an immediate yearning to open and explore.

"My name is Mordecai," he said. "I've been looking for you."

Kerr looked him up and down. His eyes, a bewitching tawny shade, darkened as his gaze hovered over Mordecai's body. "Indeed? And just why would you do that?"

A smile crept across Mordecai's face. Kerr's voice was low, even, beautifully modulated. But he could hear the desire Kerr did so well to hide. The man was already proving perfect on so many levels that it was all Mordecai could do not to just grab him.

"Because we both felt the same thing when we saw one another the day I arrived at the mansion."

That sparked a reaction. "How did you get up here?"

"The lift." Mordecai pointed back the way he'd come. Kerr's face creased into a frown, giving him a dangerous appearance, but Mordecai stood his ground.

"Not without a key," Kerr said, his voice dropping in timbre.

"Magic," Mordecai said, and smirked.

"I don't believe in magic. Or witches," Kerr said. "That lift needs a key to get up here. Who did you bribe?"

"I didn't, and I don't need keys." Mordecai held up his hands. He crafted his power so that blue flames danced at his fingertips. "Now you know witches are real." Kerr stared at him, and Mordecai was pleased to see the man didn't shrink back. He doused his power. "Now, are you going to invite me inside?"

Kerr cocked his head, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "Somehow I doubt you really need my permission to come inside."

Mordecai laughed delightedly. "You're right, of course. And I don't sparkle in daylight, sprout fur during the full moon, or melt if you douse me in water."

Kerr's laughter was rich and melodic. "Come inside. I'd hate to be turned into a toad for forgetting my manners."

Mordecai couldn't stop his laughter bubbling free. He crossed the threshold into Kerr's offices. This wasn't his home. Mordecai felt a good resonance of the man here, but he was sure Kerr's home, back near the mansion, would have a much stronger feel of the man. "Thank you." He turned and gestured around. "This is just part of your work?"

"I have a private suite back there." Kerr pointed. "But it's more somewhere useful to crash if it's a really late night here, and I don't want to drive home. The villagers said you were witches. You aren't welcomed by all."

Mordecai shrugged. "Sad to say, those they see—like me—are generally the ones helping protect their sorry asses. The practitioners of the dark arts on the other hand prefer to keep away from humankind, until striking at them that is. We, the protectors of light, are regrettably feared and misunderstood. We don't stand around a bubbling cauldron, wearing black pointy hats tossing, in the odd ear of newt."

Kerr guffawed loudly. "I'm glad to hear it." He came and stood close to Mordecai. "I've thought about you."

"And I about you. You're magnificent, and an Alpha." He smirked, and cocked his head sideways. "I like that, and you'll need your strength to cope with me."

Kerr wrapped a hand around the back of Mordecai's head, and pulled him closer. "Really? You're so sure of yourself."

Mordecai rested his hands on Kerr's bare chest. The energy that crackled between them made them both gasp. "You will help me control my powers, and

enable me to grow. We will be bound, in this world and for eternity. But not here. And not now.”

“I don’t know.” Kerr shook his head, but didn’t move.

“You can. You will. I’m as much your destiny as you are mine. Don’t deny what you feel. Open your heart to it. Embrace it. You will grow as I will.”

Kerr closed his eyes, and Mordecai felt the power dance around them, touching them, enlivening him. He laughed, stepping closer, letting Kerr wrap him in an embrace.

“I’ve never experienced anything like it,” Kerr said. “What is it?”

“Neither have I. You’re feeling a mix of my joy, and my power. When we’re bound you’d be able to find me in a full club like you have downstairs just as I did you. You’ll feel me.”

“Now that sounds very inviting.” Kerr’s voice was a sensual purr of sound against Mordecai’s ear, and the heat of arousal swept through him.

Chapter 6

As he leaned into Kerr, pain suddenly lanced through Mordecai, and he bent double with a gasp.

“What is it? Are you all right?” Kerr said.

Mordecai was glad of Kerr’s strong arm encircling his waist. “My friend, Mithras. He’s in trouble.” Mordecai hissed out the words from between clenched teeth. He met Kerr’s anxious gaze. “Someone here must know what we are.”

“I swear that before you demonstrated your power, I never truly believed in witches,” Kerr said.

“I believe you. I can feel your honesty. We don’t have time. I have to get to Mithras.”

“I’m coming with you.” Kerr stood tall, and cracked his knuckles. “This isn’t all just show,” he said indicating his body. “If there’s trouble. I can take care of it.”

Mordecai nodded, and set off at a run. He and Mithras had been friends long enough for him to be able to track his friend. He was surprised when he crossed over the glass walkway. He saw the lift door to his left as he emerged in the building across the alleyway from Kerr’s club. He hit the call button.

“Down,” Mordecai said. “Is there a basement here? He feels deeper than the level I left him at in your club.”

“We both have basements, but the clubs are only connected by the top floor walkway.” Kerr followed him into the elevator, pulled out a key, inserted it and turned it to ‘B’. “Without the key, you can’t get down to the basement, or up to the top floor.”

“Are you certain the only connection is the walkway?” Mordecai asked as they started down. There was no way anyone had come to their floor, especially not Mithras, and he doubted they’d taken his friend out through the alleyway.

“I’m not sure I can be certain of anything any longer,” Kerr replied.

Leaving the lift at a run, Mordecai’s anger grew exponentially to Mithras’ proximity and fear. He faced a locked door, and murmured a word of power,

touching the door handle as he did. The lock flared red hot, and fell from the door as Mordecai kicked it open.

Dressed only in his flimsy boy-shorts underwear, Mithras was strapped to a St. Andrew's cross. Two bulky men stood in front of him, their erections still in evidence as a masked Dominatrix readied to strike another blow to Mithras' back. Two red welts criss-crossed the tattoo on Mithras' pale back and inflamed Mordecai's fury.

The Dominatrix screamed as the crop in her hand flared red, and she clutched her hand to her chest as she stared wide-eyed at Mordecai.

"It's all right, Mithras. I heard you. I'm here." Mordecai headed around the cross to face his friend and started unfastening his restraints.

"Who the fuck are you?" One of the two men started forward. "He's ours. Fuck off."

"More importantly, what are you doing with someone who isn't a club member, and clearly isn't consenting to what's happening?" Kerr's voice was low and deadly.

"Who are you?" The second man growled the words stalking toward Kerr.

"I'm the joint owner of these clubs. If you're staff, you're fired. If you're members, the membership's revoked."

The men exchanged glances, and moved to join the woman, who kept staring at Mordecai.

As Mordecai released the last of Mithras' restraints, his friend's legs buckled, and he started to collapse, but Kerr caught him, and swung him up in his arms to cradle the limp form to his chest.

A woman appeared in the doorway. Mordecai was aware of something unusual about her, but his anger and fear stopped him from focusing clearly. He tried to push them away and concentrate on what was happening.

"I was told there was a disturbance. What's going on here?" The woman addressed Kerr, her hands on her hips.

"Do you know those men, Lilith?" Kerr nodded towards the men who still stood back.

Lilith barely glanced at them. "Why?"

“This was non-consensual, Lilith. Ban them or fire them. I don’t care which. But if I see them in either club again, I’ll deal with them personally.”

“Are you quite certain?” This time, although she addressed Kerr, her gaze turned to Mordecai.

“Very sure. Let’s go, Mordecai.” Kerr strode past her, heading out of the room.

Following him, Mordecai glanced back at Lilith. She was examining the woman’s reddened palm, and didn’t look at all concerned about the men. Mordecai frowned. *Who told her there was a disturbance? We didn’t pass anyone. No one came to the door.* He shivered. Something was definitely off-kilter with Lilith, but this was neither the time nor the place to try and work it out.

Kerr was already in the lift, his key in the lock. As Mordecai stepped inside Kerr turned it and the doors closed.

“Are your rooms secure?” Mordecai asked.

Kerr nodded. “It’s a self-contained suite. Lockable. But there’s no reason to worry. No one can get up in the lift without a key.”

“And Lilith has one,” Mordecai said.

“Yes.” Kerr stepped out as the lift doors opened. “She won’t bother us. We’ll be fine up here.”

Mordecai gazed levelly at Kerr. “When we get inside, I’m putting a protection spell on the door. Only the three of us will be able to open the door.”

“You can do that?” Kerr asked. “The key to the suite is on the chain around my neck. I don’t want to disturb your friend.”

Mindful of Mithras, Mordecai eased the chain from around Kerr’s neck, and unlocked the door. As soon as Kerr walked through, Mordecai locked it, and murmured an incantation. The spell wasn’t as strong as it could be, but he had nothing with him to create a charm to make it more powerful. He couldn’t shake the feeling it needed reinforcing.

He’d be back. He wasn’t losing Kerr over this. Kerr was his mate. But having the bad experience meant he’d want to consummate their binding somewhere he felt safe. He followed the sound of Kerr’s voice, and glanced through into Kerr’s bedroom.

Mithras had been put into the large bed, and Kerr knelt at the bedside stroking Mithras' hair, and murmuring quietly to him. Mordecai leaned against the doorframe. There was nothing sexual in Kerr's action. But protective feelings rolled off the big man in waves, and they helped Mordecai relax. He sagged into the wood.

Kerr stood up. "He's asleep. They must have slipped something into a drink. We can take this to the police if you want."

Mordecai shook his head. "No. It's not for them to sort. I'm a witch. So is Mithras. He wouldn't have accepted a drink. Even if he had, one sip would have been enough for him to realize a drink was tainted. Unless magic was involved."

"There aren't any witches here," Kerr said. "We're all just normal people." He winced. "Sorry."

"We're normal, too. We just have gifts that can be trained."

Kerr moved closer, and he cupped Mordecai's chin. "I'm sorry. It's going to take me some time to get used to all this."

"We were fated to be, but that doesn't make it any easier for us. I want you. I know you want me. Love will come in time."

Kerr smiled, and Mordecai felt like his stomach flipped. "You're that confident."

"Yes. Yes I am. Can we go somewhere other than here?" Mordecai glanced at the door, although he knew Mithras was unable to see or hear what was happening. Kerr took his hand, and led him into a living room with a good-sized settee, but they didn't get that far.

In keeping with his nature, Mordecai resisted as Kerr pulled him into an embrace, but the bigger man persisted until Mordecai finally rested his head against Kerr's broad shoulder. "There are forces at work I don't understand," he whispered.

"So long as they don't try to keep us apart, I don't care." Kerr nuzzled down Mordecai's cheek to nip at his jeweled earlobe before darting his tongue into the small shell, which made Mordecai shiver.

"There are rituals to observe before we can become bound."

"Bound? I like the sound of that." Kerr whispered directly in Mordecai's ear.

A hand on Mordecai's shoulder pushed him to his knees. He stared at the bulge at Kerr's groin, evident even through Kerr's leather pants. A thrill skittered down his back. He'd never done this. Would never give himself like this to another. He looked up at Kerr.

The big man's eyes held lust and desire, but there was more. There was a hint of something much deeper already. Mordecai felt as if the ties that would bind them had already cast their spell. Kerr wasn't demanding, and Mordecai wasn't actually submitting. *Not yet.*

He leaned forward, and Kerr hissed softly as Mordecai rubbed his face against the enticing, yet still-hidden, erection. A scent of musk and leather made Mordecai dizzy, and his cock swelled. He reached up to unfasten the pants, staring as hard, thick flesh instantly bulged in his direction.

He freed Kerr's cock and held it in his hand. Kerr ran his hand through Mordecai's hair, then tightened his grip and urged him forward. Mordecai resisted.

"I've never done this. I've never allowed myself to be in this position."

"Stop fighting. Let me take charge. Relax. I won't force you to do anything you don't want. But you want this. We both want this. You don't need a ritual for this. Do you?"

Kerr's voice was soft, almost seductive, but still retained his Alpha's authority. Mordecai swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He *did* want it. He wanted it very much, but he wasn't willing to be submissive. *Not yet.*

He gently squeezed the flesh in his hand. The quiet groan and thrust of Kerr's pelvis told him the bigger man was taking pleasure from his touches. He leaned a little closer. The tang of pre-ejaculate was in the air, and a drop oozed slowly from Kerr's slit. For a few seconds, Mordecai stared, mesmerized as the drop expanded.

His tongue seemed to possess a will of its own. Before the drop vanished, his tongue darted out to catch the fluid. The taste exploded in his mouth, and he shuddered. Strength, saltiness, raw power, musk, the flavours of the man himself, and something much, much deeper. A whine escape Mordecai's throat before he took the head of Kerr's cock into his mouth.

Leaning against Kerr's thigh, Mordecai sucked slowly. Kerr's hand massaged his head, occasionally directing him into a rhythm enabling Kerr's

cock to thrust back and forth in his mouth. Mordecai closed his eyes. He was enjoying letting Kerr dictate what happened. He fell into synch with the gentle rocking of Kerr's pelvis.

"Enough." Kerr's voice was deep, and low. "I want to taste you. Strip."

Mordecai rose to his feet. All that Kerr wore on his chest was the studded, black leather harness, and it seemed he wasn't taking that off. Instead Kerr attacked his leather pants, pushing them down solid, furred thighs. Mordecai's hands shook as he unfastened his shirt, letting it slide to the floor. Then he undid his own leather pants. Thankfully his weren't as tightly moulded to his legs as Kerr's pants.

He always went commando, and his cock bounced up as it came free. Mordecai whimpered softly at the hunger in Kerr's eyes. There was no hint of colour in them now. Just glittering darkness. He bent down to pull off his shoes, and then shoved his pants and socks off in one move.

Kerr closed the distance between them, and pulled Mordecai tightly to his chest. "As much as I want you, there's something else. Something more. I've never had a feeling like it." He traced the fire tattoo between Mordecai's shoulder blades. "This is beautiful."

Not interested in discussing his tattoo, Mordecai wrapped his arms around Kerr's neck, and pulled him down for a kiss. He thrust his tongue deep into Kerr's mouth, learning new tastes. As his tongue retreated, Kerr's advanced. Mordecai clung to the bigger man as Kerr laid siege to his mouth. Kerr's tongue was the manifestation of the man as an Alpha.

Kerr's tongue swept around his mouth, slid sinuously against his own, ran across the roof of his mouth, and along his gums. Mordecai's knees went weak, but Kerr's hands palmed his ass cheeks, holding him up as much as holding him close.

As the kiss ended, Mordecai rested his head against Kerr's shoulder, panting softly. Kerr lifted him, and carried him over to the couch. Laying him down, Kerr dropped to his knees, and took Mordecai's cock in his mouth. He sealed his lips over the hard flesh, and slid down to take it effortlessly to the root.

Sharp shards of jealousy sliced into Mordecai's chest. No one would ever know this touch again. He groaned as Kerr grazed the head of his dick with his teeth. Mordecai wanted to thrust, but Kerr's hands pinned his hips down.

One of Kerr's hands moved to cup Mordecai's sac, rolling his balls, and the touch was all he needed. His body jerked hard as he came, and he heard a low, deep, reverberating growl of sound from Kerr as his lover swallowed all he could give.

His body was still twitching as Kerr kissed him. There didn't seem enough air in the room as Mordecai tasted himself in Kerr's mouth. He clutched at Kerr's shoulders, his body on fire. Lust, desire, and love inflamed him. He was certain he was going to combust.

One of Kerr's hands wound in his hair, and he gazed up as Kerr broke the kiss.

"Mine. Today, tomorrow, forever. Mine. No one else, ever again." Kerr's voice was harsh, demanding, and something deep inside Mordecai reacted.

"Yours as you are mine. No one else. Ever again."

The air felt charged with power as Mordecai locked his gaze with Kerr. He was certain he saw sparks at the periphery of his vision as Kerr nodded.

Before they could kiss again, an eerie, drawn-out wail sounded. Mordecai shuddered. He didn't know what had made the noise, but he felt its evil. "We have to get away from here."

Kerr frowned, and then stood quickly, holding out his hand to help Mordecai. "I trust your judgment. What was that?"

As Mordecai got to his feet, Kerr headed towards the discarded clothing. "I don't know, and I don't want to wait and see. No time for leather. We need to get Mithras, too. Is there another way out of here?"

"The door in my kitchen leads onto a patio. At the end of the patio are stairs up to the roof. The fire escape stairs are up there. We can grab sweats from the bedroom."

They hurried to the bedroom together. Mithras' body was sluggish, but his mind was sharp enough. Kerr threw T-shirts at them, but had only managed to drag on sweats for himself when the wail sounded again. Closer. From the other side of Kerr's suite door.

"Your shirts will do," Mordecai said. "We have to go. Now. I don't think my charm will be strong enough to stop whatever that is getting through."

"Come on then." Kerr helped Mithras to his feet, almost carrying the younger man as Mordecai led the way.

The living room led through to a small dining area and an open kitchen. Mordecai's hand shook as he turned the key to open the outer door. He could feel the power of darkness as the suite door began to rattle.

"Thank the Powers that whatever it is has been sent to come through the front door," he said as he hurried along the patio and onto the stairs. "It's not thinking. Just obeying. Hurry. Do you have a car near here?" Mordecai looked down as Kerr slung Mithras over one broad shoulder and began to ascend.

"Across the road, diagonally left. The blue car in the small parking lot."

Mordecai ran onto the roof as the sound of a crash rent the air. "It's through. Quickly!" He raced to the fire escape, and hurried down, Kerr a few steps behind him. He jumped the last few stairs, and as Kerr ran past him, he raised his hands and pointed at the stairs.

The metal glowed for a moment before becoming as fluid as writhing snakes that coiled in on themselves before resuming its solid form. Satisfied, Mordecai took off after Kerr who had just set Mithras in the back of his car.

"It'll follow us down the stairs," he said. "That mess should delay it."

"But it'll still come after us," Kerr said.

"Mordi, give me your hand." Mithras held out his own, and Mordecai clasped it tightly. Mithras closed his eyes and his lips moved as he silently chanted. He sagged back in the car, but smiled.

"The ground we travel on won't leave it a trail for it to follow. It'll be as if we vanish here. But I'd rather not see it face to face if you get my drift."

"In the car, Mordecai."

Kerr slid into the driver's seat, and Mordecai ran around the car. He glanced over at the building. A dark, monstrous shape slowly descended the stairs, and Mordecai shuddered. Even from across the road he could feel its evilness. Whoever had summoned it was a strong practitioner of magic. He would have to confess tonight's happenings to his tutors. He felt certain the creature sought him and Kerr.

He buckled the seat belt, and Kerr drove off. Mordecai didn't look back. The wail he heard was more than enough. Kerr gripped his thigh and squeezed gently.

"Whatever it was, we've escaped it. I'll take you to my private home. In the morning I'll take you back to the mansion."

“I want you to meet the tutors there. Maybe they’ll understand more. I don’t think that’s the last of it, and you are as endangered as I am.”

Kerr glanced quickly at him. “I’ve had dreams where darkness chased me as I tried to find someone I could never see.”

“A premonition,” Mordecai said. “Because of our fated destiny. But who would want to keep us apart? Why? I’m not that powerful.”

“When you changed the stairs, you felt powerful to me,” Kerr said. “I can’t explain it better than that, but it was as if you weren’t even using a half of the power you possessed.”

Mordecai looked across at Kerr, and lapsed into silence as his lover focused on the road.

Chapter 7

Kerr drove to his house. It was too late to go to the mansion. He had no desire to turn up there in the early hours of the morning, with two half-naked young men. He didn't want to have to explain what had happened, especially as it now seemed like some warped dream.

The three of them slept together in his bed, Mordecai and Mithras both cuddled close in his embrace.

When morning came, he took them to the mansion where all three of them were taken aside to meet with the tutors.

"Let me try and explain something, Kerr," Arana said. "The universe is a living entity, and made of the four elements: air, earth, fire and water. It is also a balance; of chaos and order, dark and light, evil and good. Forces like ourselves work towards maintaining that balance. Other forces seek to promote evil, give rein to the dark, and unleash chaos."

Kerr rubbed the back of his neck, and fixed Arana with a level gaze. "Let's make it simple. Basically you're the good guys, white witches, and what we saw was something conjured up by black witches."

Arana shrugged and then nodded. "At its most basic, yes. You, and we, are now involved in a power struggle between evil and good. Mordecai is a powerful witch who has yet to reach the apex of his gifts. You are his fated mate. The one that will help him grow into his full strength, channel his power, and prevent it from burning him out. It's a vital role."

"Where are your mates?" Kerr asked, looking at the tutors.

"Bryne and Arlyn are fortunate in that as twins, each can channel the power of the other. My mate, and that of Era live nearby and are part of this community, although they don't live in the village. They're brothers and farmers. No one questions them. They also keep us informed of the feeling of the villagers, and are the voice of reason when some get a little concerned about us. As you know, we don't promote ourselves as a witches' training academy but as a college for holistic studies. After all, we seek to preserve a balance."

"Then what the fuck happened last night?" Kerr leaned forward, his voice a growl of impatience.

"I think someone knows we have a novitiate with a strong power," Arana said. "I'm fairly convinced that this was staged to test you, nothing more, Mordecai."

That was unexpected. Mordecai sat up a little straighter. "In what way?"

"You reacted to Mithras' distress. You found him without difficulty. You acted with courage and power." Arana stood and paced the floor. "We need to be careful. A long time has passed since the dark forces attacked an academy. But they have, and they may again."

"Surely you're all more powerful than he is." Kerr stood and rubbed the back of his neck as he looked around. "Why Mordecai? He's just a student."

"A novitiate with a great deal of potential. Even more so with his true life mate at his side. With time and training, he will make a formidable force." Arana reached to squeeze Kerr's shoulder. "What concerns me more is that this was done so easily. That tells me, you were expected Mordecai. Someone knew you'd find your way to Kerr's club."

"But, even I didn't know that." Mordecai glanced between Kerr and Arana. "When Kerr didn't approach me at the mansion, only then did I decide to go to the club."

"There are many spells that will conjure something instantly. However, you don't simply conjure a demon. Unless..."

"Unless what?" Kerr and Mordecai spoke in unison.

"Unless what we face is a demon itself. A demon can force apart the veil to bring more of its kind through."

"If that's the case, we need you to keep as close to the mansion as possible, Mordecai. We can't let you go into town again."

"What about Kerr?" Mordecai asked. He stood, and clutched at Kerr's arm.

Kerr drew Mordecai against his body, as a protective urge swept through him.

"Can you leave your club in someone's hands for a couple of weeks?"

"Probably."

"What about his home? Will he be safe to stay there?" Mordecai asked.

"I think you'd have known if it wasn't, but I'll check it tomorrow," Arana said. "We need to ensure the preparations are made for your binding. Kerr, it

may be preferable for you to stay here until you are bound to Mordecai. We can collect some things from your home tomorrow to ensure you're comfortable."

"Are you sure *this* place is safe?" Kerr asked. "There are walls around the mansion, but how safe are they against a demon?"

"I assure you, the mansion is protected. I'll ensure I get a message to the other elders. It doesn't hurt to be prepared in the meantime."

"As difficult as it may be, Kerr, trust us. We want to protect Mordecai, too," Era said.

"Mordecai, you and Mithras go with the others and rejoin your classes," Arana said. "I'll show Kerr to his room, and we can call around to his house later."

Arana gestured for him to enter, and Kerr walked into his room. A sense of calm descended on him. The walls were a pale green, and in one corner several plants made a tasteful arrangement of shades, green with one flash of red.

A plasma screen TV was set into the wall with a comfortable couch facing it. Beneath the TV was a gas fire with imitation flames. The overhead lights had beautiful glass Art Deco shades. Farther into the room was a table and chairs beside a well-stocked bookcase next to a set of windows that reached from floor to ceiling.

Beyond that was the doorway to the bedroom, only it was like no doorway Kerr had ever seen. It was a large semicircle, half of which was open, the other half had iron latticework. He looked back at Arana. "Very nice," he said.

Arana laughed. "Much of the mansion has Art Deco decoration. We like it."

"Where does Mordecai sleep?" Kerr still felt very protective. He needed to know exactly where his lover was.

"All the novitiates sleep on the floor below. Mordecai is halfway along the hallway. If he is endangered, Kerr, not only will you know it, but you'll instinctively know where to find him. The mansion has power of its own. Even though you and he aren't bonded, the house knows you are his mate."

Kerr shook his head. "This takes a lot of getting used to."

"If you hadn't already spent time with Mordecai, you'd probably think me a madman." Arana shrugged. "Yet here you are, and you're not laughing at me. Already forces are at work, preparing for your binding. Mordecai expected it to

take place in your home. I think it will be better here. This room feels right for you.”

Kerr looked around again and nodded. “It feels... comfortable, right. Like I belong here.”

“Good. Now I still have students to teach. There is a computer and printer in the bedroom. I realise you have a business to run. So I’ll leave you to it. We’ll also begin the preparations for your binding. There are rituals to observe, so it’ll be a couple of days yet.”

“Fine,” Kerr said. “I’ll contact my partner and let her know I’m taking a few days off. I have a deputy who can stand in for me.” He rubbed the back of his neck, and looked directly at Arana. “I’m not going to be able to keep the club am I?”

Arana gave a wry smile. “Mordecai will need you close by. It’s not so much that you won’t be able to. But if he needed you, you won’t hesitate to be by his side. That will be an inherent part of your nature once you’re bound. You already feel you should be near him.”

Kerr laughed softly, running his hand through his hair. “That’s true enough. I guess I’ll make a reasonable amount if I sell it. I don’t know if it would be enough to guarantee financial security for us, though.”

Arana laughed, a rich deep musical sound that made Kerr raise an eyebrow. “Sorry,” he said. “But whatever you make should you sell your business, don’t worry about it not being enough. We have access to funds that are pooled and support all our people across the globe. Neither Mordecai, nor you, will ever need to worry about finances again.”

Kerr knew he was staring, but he couldn’t quite engage his brain to make an intelligent remark. Arana laughed again, and patted his shoulder.

“Let it sink in. Your bathroom is off the bedroom. Attend to your business, relax, and join us downstairs for lunch at twelve thirty.”

Kerr waited until Arana left, and then went to look at his bedroom. The bed was large, with a wrought iron bed head in the same pattern as the doorway. The black writing desk was against the left wall beneath a stained-glass circular window. A dark wood door was on the right, which Kerr assumed led through to the bathroom.

He sat on the bed, and bounced a little. The mattress was firm, and there was no creaking or squeaking. A bolster in a rich crimson lay beneath two

black pillow cases. The sheets were also black, and the thick coverlet was red with a black border. The room had a feeling of opulence, and Kerr felt instantly comfortable in there.

He stood and went to the desk. Picking up the phone, he called Pete, his usual stand-in deputy. As he'd expected, there was no issue, no drama, and not even too much curiosity in regard to the sudden need around a vague request for about two weeks' worth of cover for him. The man was solid and dependable.

He dialled a second time. "Lilith, it's Kerr. I'm good. Look, something's come up and I won't be around the club for a week or two. No. Not sure when I'll be back exactly. Personal business. No. Just personal." Kerr scowled as Lilith pressed for more information. "Look, I'm not going to be there for at least two weeks. I've sorted cover. I'll let you know if the situation changes. It's not like you need me looking out for your side of the business. See you."

He slammed the phone down. He was annoyed more with himself for being irritated with the woman than with Lilith herself. He knew her well enough to know she'd want to know everything. He should have thought out a fake reason for being unavailable. He grimaced, suddenly feeling very sorry for Pete. Lilith would hunt him down, and give him a grilling. Maybe it was just as well he didn't have a fake story.

He stalked into the bathroom. Perfect, there was a decent-sized shower in there. He'd get showered and changed, and then have a chat with his accountant, followed by his solicitor. Although a part of him regretted giving up the club, he had never really gelled with Lilith. Maybe this was a great opportunity to move on. Do something different. He shook his head.

Shared funds across the globe. Amazing.

Chapter 8

Kerr stood outside his room and took several deep breaths. He looked back at the young men and one woman who had lined the hallway as he'd walked along. He could scarcely believe it had only been two days since he'd arrived there. Now he was about to be bound. To Mordecai. Finally.

Apart from meal times, they'd been kept apart, and Kerr was ready to tear the door down to get to his lover. But he'd understood that there were rituals involved, and so he'd waited, and abided by Arana's ruling.

Now his waiting was over.

He opened the door. Kerr swallowed. Mordecai sat cross-legged on the bed and wore only a towel around his waist. His hair was loose, and his eyes were closed. Next to him was an ornate amphora made of greenstone.

The bed had been moved into the living room, and was now positioned within a circle drawn on the floor. Each of the four points of the compass was marked. Mithras stood beside the bed, and the tutors stood close by, each wearing a robe of a different colour.

"Mordecai. It is time to bind with Kerr, your mate," Arana intoned the words in a deep, resonant voice, and helped Mordecai from the bed. "Kerr, take your place within the circle with the man you choose to bind to."

Kerr didn't hesitate. He strode forward and took his place at Mordecai's side. The air around them crackled, and Mordecai grinned.

"Finally," Mordecai whispered.

Kerr nodded, unsure of what to say. Excitement and arousal coursed through his veins, and he tried to ignore the erection tenting his towel. The air around him seemed charged with energy. As he looked around he saw things more sharply, and colours were brighter.

"It is time," Arana said. "Let the binding of Mordecai and Kerr begin."

All the tutors moved to stand around the bed. Era, dressed in green, stood at the north point. She carried the pentacle signifying earth. Bryne wore yellow and stood on the east point. He held a wooden wand, set with glittering crystals, for the element of air. His brother was opposite him on the west point, dressed in blue and holding a chalice to signify water. Finally Arana stood at the south point, wearing red and holding the ritual knife, the *athame*, for fire.

Mithras held a broom, ready for the end of the ceremony when they were bound, and two red roses. For a moment it all seemed surreal, then Mordecai gazed into his eyes. Love, heat, desire, seared into him, and it was all Kerr could do to keep from pulling Mordecai into his arms. They hadn't been permitted to sleep together, or be intimate, since the club, and Kerr's cock ached.

But it was more than lust, deeper than desire. This wasn't a fad, or a phase. He'd already made a vow. Mordecai was his, just as he was Mordecai's. His heart yearned for his lover. Arana's voice drew his attention.

"Mithras, please give Kerr and Mordecai a rose each." Arana waited for them to take the rose. "Now exchange the roses. These roses are your first gift to each other to symbolise love and commitment. Each year on your anniversary exchange a single rose to commemorate your love and remind yourselves of your vows and how you felt today. If your relationship is troubled, and you can't find the right words, gift your partner with a single red rose to let them know that you still honour your vows and remember this day."

Era lifted her pentagram. "We offer these blessings upon Mordecai and Kerr. Spirits of Earth, we ask that you give them the rock-solid place to stand and fulfil their destiny. May their journey mirror the vast planes and fertile fields, expansive and alive. When they look up at the Northern Star, may they know that it is as bright and constant as their love for each other as well as the love of the divine is for them."

Bryne held up his wand. "We ask the spirits of Air to keep open the lines of communication between this couple. May their future be as bright as the dawn on the horizon. As Air flows freely to and from and through us all, may their hearts and minds and souls come to know the world and each other in this manner. Seeing not only with their eyes, may they together grow in wisdom."

Arlyn raised his chalice. "We ask the Spirits of Water, that their love for each other and the comfort of loved ones, like the serenity of the deep blue ocean, be the oasis that forever surrounds them. May they be well loved, and love well, letting the surety with which water makes its journey to the sea, flowing over rocks or around trees, even turning into vapour and riding a cloud, ever serve as a reminder that with love all is well and will endure."

Finally, Arana held the *athame* aloft. "Spirits of Fire, we ask that their passion for each other and for life itself remain ever strong and vital, fortifying

each day with a vibrancy rooted in boldness, and courage. As Fire clears the way for new growth, may they know that this power is theirs: to create change and bring about the richness and quality that comes with a true love of life.”

Then all four tutors spoke in unison. “Since ancient times, people have communed with nature to learn more about themselves by example. Since it is within nature that we all do abide, we ask for Mordecai and Kerr the blessings of nature’s elements, air, fire, water and earth. We do this that they may fully come to understand the lessons each element has to offer. The attributes of which are examples of those aspects they mirror not only within divinity but within ourselves as well.”

Arana took Kerr and Mordecai’s hands into his. “Is it also your wish today that your hands be fastened in the ways of old?”

They replied in unison. “It is.”

“Remember then as your hands are fastened, these are not the ties that bind.” Arana held cords of red, yellow, blue and green aloft. “That has been done by the song your hearts share which shall now be strengthened by the vows you take. All things of the material world eventually return to the Earth unlike the bond and the connection your spirits share which is destined to ascend to the heavens. May you be forever as one in the passion and fire of your love.”

Kerr felt the air around him ripple, and it crackled with energy as Arana bound their hands loosely together.

“You are now as your hearts have always known you to be, bound. Today, tomorrow, and for eternity.”

Kerr didn’t hesitate. Tossing his rose onto the bed, he cupped the back of Mordecai’s head and pulled him into a kiss that sent fire through his veins. “I love you,” he said as he eased back.

“I love you, Kerr.”

“One more thing,” Arana said. “Mithras, lay down the broom. We’ll forgo jumping, stepping over it will suffice.”

Kerr’s heart soared at Mordecai’s joyful laughter as they stepped over together.

“Congratulations, Mordi,” Mithras said and hugged his friend. “You, too, Kerr.”

“We’ll leave you alone to complete your binding. Welcome to our fraternity, Kerr, bound of Mordecai.”

“Thank you.” Kerr was touched by the affection in Arana’s deep brown eyes, but at that moment, he desperately wanted nothing more than to be alone with Mordecai.

The moment the door closed, he pulled Mordecai back into another kiss, this time pillaging his lover’s willing mouth. As he withdrew his tongue, Mordecai thrust his own into Kerr’s, matching him in passion and want.

The kiss broke only when both men were panting heavily. The cords were shaken from their hands, onto the bed, then Kerr reached out and snatched the towel from Mordecai’s waist. He let his hand hover close to, but not touching, Mordecai’s hard cock. “Do you want me to touch you? Tell me.”

“Yes.” Mordecai groaned the word. “Touch me.”

Kerr cupped Mordecai’s balls, rolling them in his hand, as he pulled Mordecai closer to him. “Use your mouth on my nipples.”

Mordecai obeyed, nibbling and sucking the peaked nubs, but he also rubbed his face against the fur of Kerr’s chest. Kerr grinned. Mordecai would never be a true submissive. An instinct had told him that the day he’d seen him outside the mansion. He didn’t care. He’d take the incredible man he’d just married in any way he could.

He slid his hand from the nape of Mordecai’s neck to his shoulder, and pushed gently. “Suck me.” His voice was deep, throaty, and filled with desire.

Mordecai knelt slowly, but didn’t immediately obey. Instead he kissed Kerr’s thighs, and licked his way up to kiss Kerr’s ball sac. He dragged his tongue slowly up the length of Kerr’s dick, teasing the head with light licks.

A long, low rumble of pleasure came from Kerr’s chest. He reached down, sliding his fingers into Mordecai’s hair, flexing them as his lover’s lips glided over his cock. He could have dictated Mordecai’s rhythm, but chose instead to simply enjoy the sensation.

Mordecai’s hands weren’t idle either. He stroked up and down Kerr’s inner thighs, scratched gently over his ass cheeks, and fondled Kerr’s sac. Given his arousal was already at feverpitch, Kerr tugged at Mordecai’s hair, and pulled back from the sinfully talented mouth. “My turn. Stand up.”

As Mordecai rose to his feet, Kerr scooped him into his arms. He laid Mordecai on the bed, and knelt between long, lean thighs. Mordecai's cock lay against his stomach, hard, red, its head glistening enticingly. With a feral grin, Kerr leaned forward. He ran his tongue slowly from root to tip, grazing the crown with his teeth to a soft gasp from Mordecai.

Kerr picked up one of the roses. "You teased me. Now it's my turn." He ran the head of the rose over Mordecai's nipples, then swept it across his lover's chest.

"Kerr, please." Mordecai moaned, and thrust his pelvis upwards, but Kerr just continued to smile.

He ran the rose down to Mordecai's legs, sliding it up and down the sensitive inner thighs, then over the ball sac, and finally up and down the length of Mordecai's weeping dick. He leaned down and lapped up the pool of pre-ejaculate that had gathered on his lover's skin. "I dreamed of hearing you beg for my touch. Do you want me inside you, filling you?"

"Yes. Do it." Mordecai groaned.

Kerr kept up the stroking with the rose up and down Mordecai's cock. He paused to take the lid off the amphora. He inhaled the scent of rose. Dipping his finger in, he smiled. Then he realized there were no condoms.

"You're clean, as am I. If either of us weren't there would be condoms with the lube. We will know no other lovers. It's safe. For both of us."

Kerr coated a finger and pressed it cautiously against Mordecai's entrance. His lover groaned as he penetrated Mordecai. The tightness testified to Mordecai's lack of experience. A long time had passed since Kerr had taken a virgin, or as good as virgin, lover to bed.

He prepared Mordecai carefully, slicking and stretching him, until certain it was time to progress. "Ride me," he said. "You keep control that way. More comfortable for you." Kerr leaned back against a pillow against the head of the bed, and waited for Mordecai to straddle him. "You control speed and depth this way."

Mordecai nodded, and reached behind himself to snug the head of Kerr's cock against his entrance. He slid down slowly, taking Kerr into his body. Kerr murmured encouragement and endearments as Mordecai impaled himself to finally sit flush at Kerr's groin.

“Beautiful,” Kerr whispered, and kissed Mordecai. He held loosely to his lover’s hips, and Mordecai held onto his shoulders as he cautiously rose and fell. Kerr released one hip and took hold of his lover’s softened cock, squeezing and stroking as Mordecai rode him.

To Kerr’s delight, Mordecai soon found a tempo that suited him. He rode in earnest, sliding easily up and down Kerr’s cock until they were both panting heavily, and sweat ran down their chests. The air around them shimmered, and power surged through Kerr.

“We’re aligning,” Mordecai panted. “Can you feel it? Becoming as one.”

Kerr could indeed feel something. His heart hammered to the same frantic beat as Mordecai’s and as they gazed into one another’s eyes, something deep inside him clicked into place. At that moment everything around him disappeared, only he and Mordecai existed. His world narrowed to the sight, sound, taste, smell and feel of Mordecai.

He knew instinctively that no matter where Mordecai was, he’d find him, that they’d never truly be alone again. They were each a part of the other.

His climax hit him hard, washing over him in wave after wave of pleasure. The sensation was so intense that his whole body jerked. He heard Mordecai cry his name, seconds before his hand was coated in Mordecai’s seed. Their orgasm seemed to extend far beyond any he’d ever known.

Slowly his world returned to normal. He opened his eyes, unaware of when they’d closed. Mordecai had collapsed against him. Kerr didn’t care that they’d be covered in dried semen if they didn’t clean themselves now. He slid down the bed, his cock sliding free of Mordecai’s body as he did. He wrapped his arms around his lover and closed his eyes as a sensation of contentment, that went far deeper than mere sexual satiation, enveloped him.

He and Mordecai were bound. In ways as yet he didn’t understand, and yet knew to the depths of his soul.

Chapter 9

To Kerr's frustration, his honeymoon only lasted one day. Then Mordecai resumed his studies. As beautiful as the house and its courtyard were, Kerr was bored. He sat outside with his espresso, and pulled out his cell phone. He texted Pete to find out how things were going at his club. The reply only made him more frustrated. Lilith was trying to make it look as if she was taking over. He rang his friend instead.

"What exactly is she saying?"

"That you needed the time because of stress. You're struggling to cope. And not to be surprised to find you're selling up. In which case she'll be in charge of both clubs, so we'd best make sure we mind what she says."

"No one's believing that shit are they?" A wave of guilt rolled over him. He was thinking of selling. But not to Lilith. He needed to sort this out.

"Well, to be honest, she's making her presence well known over here. A couple of patrons have been asking questions. Oh, and some kid said you'd spoken to him recently. He wanted to meet up with you."

Kerr looked up at the ceiling, but no answer mysteriously appeared. He needed to sort this out for himself. "Okay. Look, I'll be there in an hour, or just over. Can you get a message to the kid? Tell him to be there, too, and as many of the crew as can make it."

Kerr wrote a message for Mordecai. He wasn't allowed to disturb his husband while in classes, and the next break wasn't for another four hours. Time enough for him to get to the club and back, and let his people know there was nothing to Lilith's posturing. Neither Mordecai nor Arana would be very happy, but nothing more had been said about the night they ran from the club. He was an Alpha Dom. It was up to him to reassure his people. Arana would do the same in his place, Kerr was sure of it.

He hesitated long enough to grab his car and club keys, and headed out at a run.

Kerr arrived at the club, and looked around the parking spaces. None of them had been used by his staff. Not even Pete's motorcycle was there. He'd

expected a few to have parked there. He shrugged. There were other car parks around. He unlocked the door and went inside. "Hello? Pete? Anybody?"

The club was in darkness, and silence greeted him. Normally if he called a staff meeting, it was done in the club, but he guessed it was possible they were waiting upstairs for him. Especially if the kid was with them.

He headed to the back of the club, and stopped. He felt the hairs on the nape of his neck rise, and goose bumps prickled down both his arms. A voice told him to run. Now. But he carried on, refusing to give in to the scarcely recognised, and seemingly unfounded, sensation of fear.

He stood to one side, balanced on the balls of his feet as the lift door opened, but it was empty. He went inside, and turned the key. The lift rose smoothly, but he flattened himself against the wall of the lift as the door opened. He stepped out into the hallway.

Empty.

He walked cautiously forward. Nothing. No one. No sounds. He pulled out the key to his suite and went inside, pulling the door shut behind him. "Anyone here?" He wasn't surprised this time when there was no reply. Moving forward, he checked his living quarters. They looked as they had when he'd left.

He turned to leave, but Lilith barred his way.

"I thought I heard you. How are you, dear? Feeling better?" Lilith's mocking tone belied her apparent concern.

"There hasn't been anything wrong with me. I just had some things to sort that meant I needed time to myself. I'll be back here soon enough. Where's Pete?"

"By now he'll be home with no memory of ever being here. The same as those he managed to contact. After all, a bloodbath only draws too much attention, don't you think?"

It took a couple of seconds for Kerr to register what she'd said. He stepped back.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You know who I am. You've worked with me for months. Ever since we knew you were the destined mate of Mordecai."

"We?" Kerr backed away a little more, wanting to give himself ample room to move when the right moment struck.

"My minions and me, of course. Such a shame I couldn't sway you. You needed to deny who and what you were for that to work. I'd have loved to have you under my heel as my submissive."

"Not a hope." Kerr growled the words.

"Mordecai will come for you. Nothing will keep him away."

Kerr shook his head. "He's no fool."

"No he isn't. That's why I wanted you bound to him sooner rather than later. He picked up on his friend's distress. How much more intense do you think it will be for him when it's the man he loves?"

Kerr moved. He took a minimal run, and aimed a perfect dropkick to Lilith. And simply bounced off her. Her laughter went from shrill cackle to something deep, and menacing.

Kerr rose to his feet, not taking his eyes off her.

"How very amusing. Perhaps you should see my true form?"

Kerr stared as she shifted.

The black leather jumpsuit rippled, and took on a scaled appearance. Kerr swallowed. *Dear God, it's her skin.* Her hands became talons. Black, leathery wings sprouted behind her. Her legs fused, becoming a huge serpent's tail. The top of her head widened and flattened, and two black horns curved above each eye. Her eyes became elliptical and glowed red. Her nose vanished, and her jaw narrowed and elongated.

He shuddered as she smiled, to display two rows of long, sharp, teeth.

"There now, much better."

The voice remained that of Lilith the woman, although Kerr knew now she was anything but a woman.

"What now?" he asked, forcing himself to remain calm. Panicking wouldn't help him. He had to keep his mind clear, and take whatever opportunities presented themselves.

"Now I hurt you. If Mordecai hasn't already felt your fear, a scream of agony will most assuredly bring him running."

“Why?” Kerr demanded. “Why him?”

“Not him alone. Both of you. Together you will be a formidable team. I intend to stop that from happening.”

“Not if we can help it, bitch.”

Lilith vanished with a bellow that turned Kerr's blood to ice as the ground beneath her churned and opened into a deep hole. A white-faced Mithras stood in the doorway.

“Upwards,” he shouted as he ran past Kerr heading for the fire escape.

Kerr followed him, not wasting his breath with questions. As he emerged on the roof, Mordecai was there with Bryne and Arlyn. Bryne grasped one of Mordecai's hands and held out the other to Kerr. He took it and Bryne lifted into the air. Below him Arlyn and Mithras merged their powers of earth and water.

The building collapsed around them as the ground shook and rocked. Water from Arlyn's hands cascaded down, turning earth and brick into mud and sludge. Only a column of earth remained on which Mithras and Arlyn stood until Mithras guided it to the ground. They then ran for a car.

Bryne sank to the ground and as the car screeched to a halt beside them, he shoved Kerr and Mordecai into the back seat alongside Mithras. “She's coming. Go. Go!”

Mordecai had his arms around Kerr, his face buried against his shoulder. Kerr wrapped his lover in a tight embrace, and glanced out of the back window. There was nothing to see. He looked forward. The traffic around them was still, and their vehicle weaved easily in and out of the unmoving cars.

“They can't see us,” Mordecai whispered. “This is why humankind doesn't realise how much we fight for them. We're moving too fast. By the time they realise your club has collapsed, we'll be halfway to the mansion.”

“How can that be explained?” Kerr asked. “Buildings don't just fall down.”

“Sink hole,” Mithras said. “Our elders will make sure that's all it gets recorded as.”

“Lilith said my people wouldn't remember being called,” Kerr said.

“Deleting a memory is easy when something's as simple as that. But if she tried to remove your memory of me, it wouldn't work. Thankfully she spared

your people. Her mind was on us.” Mordecai hugged Kerr harder as if afraid Kerr would vanish.

“I’m sorry. This is my fault. I didn’t think.” Kerr bent his head forward and kissed the top of his lover’s head.

“I’m just glad we’re so attuned that I knew as soon as you left the mansion. That gave us time to decide how to come after you. Arana stayed behind with Era to ready the mansion for defence. We also have some additional elders coming to help.”

“You make it sound like a war,” Kerr said.

“It is,” Bryne said. “She wanted Mordecai. Now she’ll try and take out the mansion as well. ‘The evil Lilith, who causes the hearts of men to go astray and appears in the dream of the night.’”

“You sound like you know her,” Kerr said. “And since you mention it, I was having nightmares, and she did try and seduce me. She must be a powerful witch. That form she took on was horrific.”

“She isn’t a witch,” Bryne said. “She’s a demon, and that’s her true form.”

Kerr looked out of the rear window again. A swirling mass of greys and blackness followed them, obliterating the sight of anything else. “What the fuck...?”

“She’s called on her minions,” Bryne said. “We have to hurry, Arlyn.”

He laid his hand on his brother’s shoulder, and the car lurched forward causing Kerr to tighten his grip on Mordecai. The mansion came into view, but he frowned to see the normal gate missing. The car screeched to a halt across the open gateway.

As they ran from the car towards the house, Kerr saw the reason why the dragon gate was missing. An iron dragon stood guard, flanked by the iron griffins from the stairway. Harsh, grating cries filled the air that made Kerr wince. He glanced back.

Darkness was almost upon them.

Chapter 10

“Stay near me,” Mordecai shouted to Kerr. He bounded up the steps and into the house. Arana stood waiting for them. “She’s right behind us.”

“The other novitiates are with Era. They’re guarding the rear with the other protectors.”

“She’s almost on us,” Mordecai said.

“We’re ready.” Arana gripped Mordecai’s shoulder. “You can help Era if you prefer.”

Mordecai shook his head. “She came after me. I’m not hiding from her, and I’m not leading her to the other novitiates. They’ll have enough without Lilith herself to handle.”

Arana nodded. “Keep Kerr close to you. His strength will help.”

Mordecai started to turn, but Kerr was already at his shoulder. “Stay close,” he whispered.

“No demon bitch is going to take you from me.”

Mordecai didn’t resist as he was pulled into a demanding kiss. “Or you from me,” he said as the kiss ended. He looked around. Arana was closest to the doorway, with Bryne and Arlyn near him. Mithras stood back a little, his face pale, but there was no mistaking his look of determination.

Mordecai readied himself, letting the familiar tingling sensation build up in his body. He glanced down at his hands, and his eyes widened. Sparks glowed around his fingertips already. He closed his eyes, he felt stronger, more focused. He balanced himself on the balls of his feet. *Come on, you bitch. You’re going down.*

Lilith wasn’t first through the door. Her minions came through; shrieking; black, scaly-skinned and the size of sheep, several rushed through, each as different as the next. One had a snout and sharp, curved tusks, another two dog-like heads, a third a snapping maw like a crocodile, but all were intent on attacking his friends.

Bryne and Arlyn used the power of water and air to deal with two, pinning them to the floor while water covered them. Mordecai felt no sympathy or pity. They were mindless demons, and killing them was the only way to deal with

them. Mithras used earth to crush the third, its slaving jaws oozing black blood before finally stilling.

The next set of minions were bigger creatures, winged, with slashing claws and talons, and tails spiked like scorpions. This time Mordecai added his power into the battle. He burnt one to ashes as it leapt for Mithras who was engaged with another.

“Well done, babe,” Kerr whispered.

“My power. It’s so much stronger. Thanks to you, love.” Mordecai risked a quick glance over his shoulder.

For a few moments, all was still. They all looked toward the doorway, waiting for the next wave. “She’s biding her time,” Arana said. “I don’t like it.”

Yells and screams made them turn, just as another set of minions crashed through windows behind them.

“They’ve breached the rear. Be ready. Era will bring the novitiates here. This is our strength.” Arana’s voice boomed out as Mordecai and the others fought the newest attack of demons.

He proved to be correct. Era ushered the rest of the novitiates ahead of her. Mordecai saw they were bruised and bloodied. He looked around, realizing that he and his friends looked no better. All bore at least one wound from the attacking minions. Even Kerr had claw marks down his arm.

His lover drew him into a hug. “It’s okay. We’re all a bit battered, but we’re doing okay.”

Mordecai nodded. Then he crouched ready to use his power as shadows followed the students. Then he stared. A row of tikis stood guard, barring the way into the courtyard. The animated stone carvings reminded Mordecai of large grey gargoyles. The tikis smashed several minions that tried to follow, their stone fists pummeling at mere flesh.

An inhuman shriek sounded, and Mordecai flinched and moved closer to Kerr. His heart hammered so hard against his chest, he was sure it would burst free. Arana moved closer to the door, his *mere* raised and ready to strike. Mordecai could feel Lilith; she was getting closer. “She’s coming,” he yelled.

The warning was almost too late. Arana dived aside just as a huge, black serpent’s tail lashed out, clipping his body, and sending him tumbling across the courtyard. Bryne ran and stood protectively beside him.

The tail curled and writhed, and slowly the rest of Lilith appeared. She was easily eight feet tall as she swayed before them. Mordecai stared at her. She'd changed her appearance again. Her upper body remained black and scaly, but her face was that of a beautiful woman with long, lustrous red hair. She smiled. Her teeth were sharp, and needle-like.

"You could have spared your friends, Mordecai. You should have come to me when you knew your mate was with me. Now they will all die. All except you, and Kerr. You will be powerless once I break Kerr and make him a mindless slave."

"You haven't won yet," Mordecai said, edging forward to keep Kerr behind him.

Lilith's laughter was shrill and piercing, and made him wince.

"My dear child, look around you. Do you really think a handful of mere babes can withstand me? Perhaps I should start with this one. He meant enough to you to make you come running last time."

Lilith swung around to tower over Mithras who'd been separated from the rest of the group. As she reached for him with deadly talons, Mordecai unleashed a ball of fire that struck Lilith, just as Mithras sent up a cloud of dust.

Lilith shrieked as the dust blinded her and the fire ignited her hair. She swung around, her lips drawn back to bare her teeth.

"Kerr. Hold my hand, but try and keep it hidden. Then Mithras', and tell him to grab hold of someone else and do the same, until we're all holding hands. I have an idea."

It took only a moment for Mordecai's instruction to be followed. Arana was the last. He nodded at Mordecai.

"Oh, how deeply touching." Lilith mocked as she swayed side to side. "All of your friends lined up. All the easier for me to kill."

Mordecai didn't look at her. He felt the bond he shared with Kerr. But more than that. He felt the power of all the elements coursing through him. He raised his head, and took a step forward.

"You're killing no one today."

The ground behind Lilith opened and the iron dragon rose up. It snapped at Lilith's tail, severing part in one crunching bite. The dragon twisted and sank

its teeth deep into the undulating flesh as Lilith screamed, and black blood splattered the courtyard.

Mordecai drew on the strength of each novitiate, as well as the tutors. He felt as if he was taller than Lilith, as if he was looking down on her. He murmured an incantation, and sent a ball of energy to strike her in the chest.

A vacuum surrounded her, water cascaded over her, fire enveloped her, and she was dragged below ground, the earth filling the hole as she vanished.

For long minutes no one moved. Waiting, watching, staring at the ground where Lilith had vanished.

"She's gone. We're safe." Arana came forward. "I can't feel her. Mordecai, can you?"

Blinking, Mordecai concentrated for a few seconds, and then shook his head. "No. I don't feel her either."

"Is she dead?" Kerr asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Arana said. "We weren't adequately armed to actually destroy a demon. But with the arrival of the elders I called for, we will be. Just in case she tries again."

"You think she will?" Kerr wrapped an arm around Mordecai who leaned into the welcome embrace.

"I can't say for sure. The strength Mordecai exhibited may have come from ten novitiates and four tutors combined, but the fact he was able to deal with it, and use it so effectively, may encourage her to look for easier prey. If proof was needed about your place at his side, Kerr, this was it."

Mordecai gazed up into his lover's tawny eyes. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Slowly they all made their way out into the mansion's grounds, and looked around. Minions lay dead or dying. The iron griffins and a couple of stone tikis dealt with any still moving. A man and woman, dressed in black, came from the back of the house. Mordecai recognized the man as an Elder of great power who'd visited his previous college.

"Sorry we didn't get here sooner. None of the minions around the back will bother you again. The guardians are dealing with those left here. Congratulations, Mordecai. You coped excellently. Your mate complements

you perfectly. We would have helped if we thought you needed it. You have a great future ahead of you.”

Mordecai flushed with pride at the accolade. “Thank you, Elder.”

“Arana, good to see you,” the Elder said. “Although I wish the circumstances were better. Let’s leave the guardians to deal with the minions, while we tend to your novitiates. Then I think they all need to rest.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Kerr said. “I’d like to tend to Mordecai personally.”

Mordecai smiled and leaned into his husband’s side. “I think I’d like that, too.”

“Go,” Arana said. “We’ll be safe now. I and the rest of the tutors will have the place back to normal. If you need us, we’ll be around through the night.”

“Thank you.” Mordecai slid his hand into Kerr’s. He was quite sure the only thing he needed was his husband.

They walked to their room, and Mordecai offered no resistance as Kerr pulled him into a hard kiss.

“I want you.” Kerr’s voice was husky, filled with need, and Mordecai wanted to give himself to his beloved mate. Wanted Kerr to take control.

“Take me,” Mordecai whispered.

To his surprise, Kerr scooped him into his arms and laid him on the bed. Kerr stripped first, teasing Mordecai by flexing his muscles, and stroking his cock as he tossed his clothing aside. But when Mordecai reached to undress, Kerr shook his head.

“Mine.”

Mordecai didn’t argue, and Kerr kissed him repeatedly as he removed his clothing. By the time Mordecai was naked, he was aching to have Kerr inside him. Kerr positioned him on all fours, and traced the fire tattoo with his tongue, before licking down and over Mordecai’s ass.

With a final nip to his left cheek, Kerr moved back. Mordecai rolled onto his back at Kerr’s command, and moaned softly as Kerr sucked him, rolling his balls before finally sinking a lube-slick finger inside him. “Please, Kerr.” Mordecai wasn’t above begging, but Kerr didn’t speed up, stretching him slowly and carefully.

Finally Kerr withdrew his fingers, and coated his dick liberally. "Lie back and enjoy the ride, babe," he whispered.

Long, slow deep thrusts alternated with short, sharp, staccato jabs, of Kerr burying his cock deep inside Mordecai and grinding his hips. There was nothing Mordecai could do, except lie back and enjoy the ride. His legs rested on Kerr's broad shoulders, and Kerr had also pinned his wrists to the bed in one of his large hands.

His cock was trapped between their stomachs, but there was enough friction for him to enjoy, even not having Kerr's hand stroke him. He keened softly as Kerr changed his angle, giving Mordecai's prostate a work out.

Mordecai closed his eyes; he was teetering on the edge and couldn't hold out much longer.

"Let it go," Kerr murmured. "Give in to it. I'm here to catch you."

With a cry of Kerr's name, Mordecai came hard. His body shuddered through a powerful climax as his world turned white and the only sound was the blood pounding in his ears. He dimly heard Kerr call his name as the flesh inside him swelled and Kerr's seed flooded his body.

Mordecai's legs were leaden as Kerr eased them from his shoulders. Mordecai grasped Kerr's shoulders and pulled him against his chest. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you," Kerr said as he pillowed his head against Mordecai's shoulder.

Mordecai stroked Kerr's shoulders and back. They'd faced their first test as a bound couple, and passed. He knew there would be more battles, more dangers, but with Kerr at his side, Mordecai wasn't afraid to face any of them.

The End

Author Bio

Pelaam lives in clean, green New Zealand and is a multi-published author of gay romance and erotica. When not writing, Pelaam can be found indulging in her other passions as a foodie and wine buff.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Facebook](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

STRANDED BY LIES

By Finn Marlowe

Photo Description

A young man lies on the floor, his only clothing a shirt, unbuttoned to reveal his lean frame. His dark hair lays in wisps upon his shoulders. His wrists are loosely bound by a silken red ribbon, but he's peaceful, his pose suggesting he has bound himself. Perhaps he has offered his submission to the man towering above him, straddling his waist? The scene is set for a dark seduction, but who is seducing whom?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'd been running from him for so many months, it had begun to feel like a reflex, no different than the instinct to fight for breath when you're underwater or rip back your hand from a red-hot forge. By the time I got to the market town, I could feel my time running out. I don't know why—an instinct maybe? Or maybe I was just so tired of running. I thought I could outlast him, I thought he would give up. I'd not counted on how much the predator in him would love the chase. There were times, while I huddled in my nightly hiding place, when I could almost feel his glee at the challenge, his satisfaction as he went about closing off every avenue of escape—seducing my family to his side, convincing my friends that I was mad, that he just wanted to protect me. There were times, usually on the coldest nights, when I wondered if he's right—maybe I am mad. Maybe I do belong to him. Maybe I should surrender. Maybe I should stop running. At least then I could just rest.

Please some sort of fantasy or paranormal setting.

Good luck,

Lilia Ford

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, alternate universe

Tags: fetish/toys, light BDSM, D/s relationship, friends to lovers, aliens, soulmates/bonded, HFN

Word Count: 45,477

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

STRANDED BY LIES

By Finn Marlowe

Part 1

Jason

Blood from my split lip was making a mess of the dove grey duvet, the crimson smears staining the silken cover where my face was being shoved into the fabric. I struggled uselessly, and when I tried to curse at my assailant, I got a mouthful of down-filled comforter instead. My nose might have been bleeding as well, but I didn't register the sting of either injury—I had more pressing problems on my mind. Like not being able to breathe. Or the fingers on the back of my head ripping out what felt like handfuls of my hair, and more fingers yanking open the buttons on my Levi's.

"Get the fuck off me!" I finally spat out while kicking backwards. My heel connected with something bony. Good. A shin. I hoped to fuck it hurt.

The man behind me grunted softly, then brutally kneed me in the back of my thigh. "Son of a—!" I wheezed, shocked by the pain. Oh, goddamn, that hurt. My leg collapsed under me, but as I was already bent over the bed, I didn't really fall so much as slump deeper into the mattress. Pain radiated up to my hip and down to my knee. Jesus. The bastard sure knew how to hurt a guy. But then, that's what he did. Hurt people. Not for kicks—but because he was a soldier. Of sorts.

"Wasn't that you agreeing to my terms all those months ago, Jase?" the brute asked rather menacingly in my ear. "And wasn't that you promising me you'd obey me just three short days ago? I remember it quite clearly, you on your knees, begging for all you were worth. And didn't I grant you mercy?" The faded and worn denim ripped loudly as he yanked my jeans, and my boxers, down over my ass. "Or have you changed your mind?"

I contemplated another kick. Then thought better of it. I had begged, and he had been merciful. Besides, my leg was still slightly numb. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"Well?" he asked.

I twisted my arm up and tried to free my head from his tight grasp before an embarrassing cry of pain escaped my lips. No luck. I concentrated on answering his question as I caught his wrist and dug my thumb into a soft spot. Evidently he was impervious to pain. I hadn't changed my mind, because, well, only a fool would. He gave my head a hard shove that almost broke my neck and then

finally released my hair. Christ, now it hurt worse, a flaming pinprick of heat for each and every strand where it had been torn from my scalp. "I haven't changed my mind!"

"Then shut the fuck up and quit kicking me!"

There were more ripping sounds as what was left of my jeans were shoved down to my knees. Cold air assaulted my newly bared ass. Since I knew what was good for me, I shut up. Aiden wasn't one for losing his cool, and I'd really pissed him off. Why in the hell had I punched him? I even started it. That wasn't like me—I wasn't usually that stupid. And he *had* been merciful—beyond merciful.

"Move up on the bed."

My ribs, where he had given me a good jab, complained as I struggled to comply. When I got one knee up on the mattress, he gave my butt a shove, and I landed fully on the bed, face down, where I could bleed on the fancy pillows. Aiden pulled off my Levi's and gave my ass cheek a squeeze hard enough to bruise.

You agreed to this, I reminded myself. Over the months of running, I had steadfastly refused to admit that he scared me—everything scared me. Almost as steadfastly as I was, right now, refusing to admit I was more than a little turned on. How fucked up was that? Some crushes never died, I guess.

Aiden's thumb invaded the crack of my ass. I jerked a little—he startled me, that's all.

"You've a sweet ass, Jase." The big thumb dug in and pulled my cheek back, exposing my hole. "Looks hardly broken-in. You been fucked before?"

Maybe if I was truthful, he'd go a little easier on me. "Twice," I answered. I wiped my nose on a flowery pillow. The bleeding had almost stopped.

"Did you like it?" he asked. His voice had softened somewhat, not that I expected him to be merciful twice in one lifetime.

I decided to stick with the truth. "Not the first time." It had hurt like hell, the guy I'd been dating and fooling around with for two months had been a real asshole, and I'd gone home aching, and without even getting off for my pains. I never spoke to him again—he knew I'd been a virgin and had treated me like a conquest instead. I'd been so naïve.

“And the second time?” he asked, moving his thumb to press against my hole. Jesus.

Second time. Uh? Fuck. I couldn't remember with that thumb touching me so intimately, and making those wiggly motions. “Ah—” I sucked in a breath. “Better.” It had been with a cute guy who'd picked me up in a bar, and he'd been a total top. I didn't manage to come while he was fucking me, but after a while I'd begun to like it, begun to understand that pleasure could be had with the right guy. After he'd had his way with me, he'd jacked me off. But I never saw him again, either. “It was a little better.”

“Did you come?” Aiden asked.

Aiden showing mercy even once was a miracle. Angels probably sang. As humiliated as I was, I didn't want to get more on his bad side by lying. “Um... no,” I admitted, reluctantly. Hell.

“You're going to come for me.”

He said it so matter-of-factly, I almost believed him. My dick sure as hell believed him.

“But I'm going to have to loosen this tight knot a bit first.”

Aiden pressed the very tip of his thumb into me and I jerked, startled again. He didn't laugh, but I was pretty sure he had that sarcastic smile of his all over his lips. For a second, I was tempted to try for another kick. My chances of success would likely be zero, so, yeah. No.

“Take off your shirt.”

I sighed deeply as his invading thumb disappeared. Then I heard the bedside table drawer open. Shit. *You should be thankful he's gonna lube you up first.* Yes. I would be thankful. Various body parts ached as I pushed myself up and fumbled out of my ratty button-down and the T-shirt underneath. I wiped at my face with the cotton tee and dabbed at my swollen lip. Aiden had only slapped me around a bit to put me in my place. If he'd meant to hurt me, I'd be in a world of pain right now.

Still. I'd never picked a fight before, and I'd never been smacked around before. I was just mad—mad at my grandfather for what he'd done that caused all this, mad at my estranged aunt, who represented the last of my family, and every friend I thought I had for being a bunch of traitorous shits. And I was mad at Aiden because he was a grade-A sadistic asshole, and I had a hard-on

for him. I would have called it a *fuck my life* moment, but I hated all that emo teenager talk that my college mates wouldn't quit using.

"Rollover, sweet thing of mine, and show me what you got," Aiden said, flinging all the fancy designer pillows on the floor and leaving only the ones for sleeping behind.

I rolled over fast, and sat up. "Don't be such a prick!" I snarled. And glared. I didn't have one of those faces that did a glare justice. Something about the play of the light on my cheekbones and the tilt of my mouth made me always look mischievous, like I was up to no good. My mom used to tease me about it. My friends tell everyone that's what makes me one of those ridiculously photogenic people. Right. I hated my face.

"But you know I'm always a prick, don't you, Jase?" Aiden tossed a disturbingly big bottle of lube onto the blood-smeared silk and started to undress. My breath hitched. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I suspected no one else could either. He had the most glorious red-gold hair I'd ever seen, and he'd grown it out so it now hung well past his shoulders. Instead of blue eyes, his were yellowish-green, like a cat's, and slanted like a cat's, too. For a moment, I forgot to hate him.

Even though Aiden was slightly shorter than me, he made me feel small and... well, wimpy. I worked out at a gym, but he had that type of muscle definition that toned up fast, the kind only the lucky are born with—he'd won the genetic lottery as far as muscles went. Nothing big and bulky, just lean and powerful grace. His abdomen was ripped. My eyes slid down along with his pants.

Jesus. Even his uncut cock was beautiful. And really long. Or did it just look extra-long because he'd trimmed his pubic hair and I could see every inch?

"Want to suck it?" he asked me.

I did. But this time I lied. "No."

"Another time."

"I bite."

He laughed. "Then I guess I'll just have to fuck you all the time instead." He grinned, and damn, if it didn't make his whole face even more beautiful. "Hard, and fast," he smirked, "repeatedly."

The coppery-flavored spit dried up in my mouth. I swallowed. My dick pulsed.

“Spread your legs.”

Hell, no. It wasn't modesty so much as I didn't want him to see how hard I was.

“Are we going to go for round two?”

Round one had been more than enough for me, thank you very much, and my nose had just quit bleeding. My heart thudded a little erratically as I dug my fingers into the bedding and slowly spread my legs. My glare probably looked like an invitation to him.

“You're pretty all over, aren't you?” He looked me over thoroughly. My skin was several shades darker than his, but I'm sure my blush was quite obvious. I was twenty-four, a first-year med student and here I was flushing like I was sixteen and never been kissed. A warm thread of pre-cum drooled between my slit and a spot near my hip where the other end had glued itself. “*Very* pretty,” Aiden added.

Naked, and fully erect, Aiden climbed on the bed and settled between my shaky legs. He skimmed his hands up both my thighs. “A shame about your lip,” he said, smiling.

Sure it was a shame. The bastard was altogether too pleased with himself.

“I've been dying for a taste of your mouth, and now I'll have to wait some more.”

I wanted to kiss him, regardless. What was another sting when I was dying to share tongues? I licked the split in my lip, and the tang of metal filled my mouth. Damn. Aiden probably didn't want to taste my blood. Or maybe he did—he kept staring at my mouth. His cat eyes narrowed, and he leaned in slowly, stuck his tongue out, and gently licked my bottom lip, a slow, hot swipe that made me gasp.

“Tasty.”

But he only gave me that single lick. Then he pushed me back into the remaining pillows and ran his calloused hands all over me. Minute tremors shook my body, and not all of it was from delayed shock. I was unbelievably horny. Without warning, he pinched my nipples, and I gasped louder. My hips

jerked. My dick leaked. It had never oozed non-stop like that with any other guy I'd played around with. How humiliating.

"I'm glad you want to get fucked."

"I don't!" I lied—again.

Aiden's true laugh was as beautiful as the rest of him. I hated him some more.

"You do. Your body knows how thoroughly I'm going to fuck it, how hard you're going to come. How many times you're going to come and how good it's going to feel."

Things wouldn't be so difficult if only he'd quit talking. "You're an arrogant son of a bitch, you know that?"

He smiled. "Probably," he agreed. He reached for the lube, popped the top open, and slicked up his fingers. "But what I said is true. Now let your legs fall open all the way."

My legs complied, with no input from my brain whatsoever. Without preamble, Aiden's slippery, hot fingers encircled my shaft, and squeezed. Some humiliating noise escaped my throat and my back arched, my spine as traitorous as my dick.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

My throat made another incomprehensible sound.

Aiden clamped his fingers together and pumped, slowly, almost leisurely. My hips thrust up into that hot, slick hand—Aiden's hand. After all those cold, lonely, scary nights, he'd finally caught me, and now he was going to fuck me. And I wanted him to, god help me, I wanted it.

Another set of slick fingers began working magic on my balls. Aiden wasn't particularly gentle, and I was shocked to realize I didn't want him to be. His strength excited me, and the knowledge that he could kill me in seconds if he wanted, added a dark undercurrent to that excitement. I'd always been attracted to that danger, to Aiden's ruthlessness.

Shamelessly, I rocked into the sleeve made from his hand. Slick fingers glided down my taint, and slipped into my crack. The wetness of the lube and the fingertip on my hole shocked me all over again, and yes, thrilled me. I couldn't wait for that finger to breach me. But it didn't. I must have made some kind of frustrated sound.

“Eager for it?”

Yes. No! I felt humiliated and on fire. “I...” *What? Hate it? Hate that I want it?*

“You like it. And you like it because it’s me. My fingers. Not some other guy whose name you won’t remember the next morning.”

“What?” I sputtered. “That’s not true!” Oh, but deep inside, I knew it was.

“Don’t think I didn’t used to notice you watching me all the time. That I wasn’t aware of your eyes on me, or the way you tried to hide your arousal.”

“I didn’t!”

Aiden’s slippery fingertip finally breached my entrance. I jerked, gasped and clenched, all at the same time. “I noticed. You were so cute, blushing and trying to adjust your pants when you thought I wasn’t looking.”

God. I wished I’d chosen death instead of this. My cheeks burned. My ass burned as Aiden’s big finger plowed deeper.

“After a few years,” he said, leaning down to whisper in my ear, “it wasn’t cute anymore. It was damned irritating.”

I bit my lip as a wave of embarrassment crawled over my skin. Fresh blood trickled between my teeth.

Aiden licked my ear. “It was irritating because I’d started wanting you back. Wanting you in my bed. And you’re just a baby.”

My whole body convulsed, and my dick pumped out so much pre-cum it was like I was coming. I whimpered and tried to make my tongue form words.

“Don’t say anything,” he ordered. “It’s true and we both know it. I don’t give a fuck how young you are, and I’m not going to fight it anymore. You’re mine now, and I’m going to *own* you. I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk, until you’re so sore you’ll be begging to suck my cock so I’ll leave you alone for five minutes.”

I almost sobbed something.

“No! No talking. No smart words—I’ve had enough of your snotty comments. I only want to hear your cries.”

Fucking... fuck! Aiden popped his finger out, and I gulped in a ragged breath.

“Roll your ass over.”

I would have—once I could function, but Aiden grabbed me by the hip and thigh and flipped me himself. My lube-slick dick slid along the nubby silk and I pushed into it. No good. Too smooth, when I ached for friction.

The lube cap snapped open again, and seconds later, cold gel oozed into my crack. I shuddered, and shuddered harder still when Aiden directed it to my hole with a push of his fingertips. The tight ring of my anus already ached a bit from just one of his thick fingers. I dreaded more fingers, the ones I knew would come, and yet craved them at the same time. My mind reeled in confusion. *Come on brain, don't fail me now.* My brains were all I had going for me.

My hole gave in to the prodding finger easier this time. “So tight,” he commented. “I’m sorry I wasn’t your first,” he added. “It should have been me.”

“What!” I sputtered into the pillow.

“If it had been me, you would have liked it the first time.”

His head was so fucking fat. “Think pretty highly of yourself, don’t you?”

“Shut up. I’m doing the talking here.” Only he went silent as he began to fuck me with that one finger. Holding still took every ounce of willpower I had, and I had a lot. I wanted to push back on that finger, and I yearned to rub my dick against the duvet at the same time. It burned a little, but Aiden had been generous with the lube. “I’m in love with your ass. I can’t wait to have it.”

I still wasn’t humiliated enough to stop being turned on. As Aiden fingered me in the ass, he squeezed my buttock, quite hard, marking me, and pulling me open to give him better access. I moaned into the duvet and the sheet below. “I’m a real finger man. I’m going to be sticking my hand in your pants all the time, and my tongue in your mouth. I’m going to make you squirm—and then come in your shorts.”

I knew he meant it. He always meant what he said. To think, I used to admire that. Instead of words, I grunted an unwilling acknowledgment. *Why the hell am I agreeing with him?*

“Later, after I’ve had you over and over and loosened you up with lots of fucking, I’m going to fist you.”

Fist? My mind processed that for a split second. “The hell you will!”

Aiden chose my moment of indignant refusal to begin working a second finger into my newly accommodating opening. I tried pulling my ass away, but he put a knee on my thigh—the one he hadn't numbed—and held me down. "Hold still."

I squirmed, but didn't get far, I was pinned *and* skewered. And unbelievably aroused by that.

"It won't be soon, you're far too tight. And too new at this," he continued, as he skillfully worked that second digit in me. "But when you're ready, I'll have you completely."

"Never," I said on a gasp. Two fingers were in me now. Thrusting. The thickness was slightly uncomfortable, and more than slightly pleasurable.

He gave his fingers a deep, rough thrust. "It will happen." He squeezed my already bruised buttock. "I'm going to play with this ass a great deal." He bent down and bit my cheek. I bit the down comforter and groaned. "And not just my fingers are going in here."

Huh?

"I'm going to buy some sweet toys for you. A nice plug. Yes. Most definitely going to plug this ass. Going to come in it first, and then plug that cum inside you to keep for me all night long."

Plug? Butt plug! Not in this lifetime. I tried to jerk away, but he obviously expected me to try it, and pressed harder with his knee.

"And a dildo—a really fat one, for when I feel like stretching you, seeing how much you can take. You will give me all your cries then, Jase."

I couldn't keep silent any longer. "You're horrible!"

He laughed and smacked my ass while he drilled me with his fingers. "You're going to love both. You don't think so now, but you will. You'll be my little slut and eager for whatever I want to do to you."

Since I was now writhing around on the fingers busy violating my ass and trying to rut with the duvet, I thought there might be some truth in his words. Maybe I could stand the plug part—I had, more than once, wondered what one would feel like.

"That's it. Relax your ass. Don't clench. I want to stretch your little pucker some more before I fuck you."

I just wanted him to fuck me. But no way was I going to say so.

Aiden kneed my legs further apart and then pushed one of my legs under me. "Raise your ass up so I can get at it better."

At least he didn't mince words. I hated when people did that. I arched, and tilted my ass up. Aiden slowly worked another finger in. I groaned loudly, and stuffed my face into the crook of my arm. I could really feel it now. The stretch burned, and yet my dick throbbed eagerly.

"That's it, baby," Aiden cooed. "Relax and let me fill you."

Sure. Relax? He had half his fucking hand crammed in there. In my ass! It hurt a little.

"Almost ready for me," he whispered.

He finger-fucked me in earnest then, twisting his fingers, pressing them as deep as they would go. The nerves inside my ass and around my uncomfortably stretched hole were as confused as I was. I think I started whimpering.

"Don't worry, I'll give you what you need," Aiden said.

The brute would undoubtedly give me *more* than I needed. When he finally pulled his fingers out, I sucked in a shuddery breath. My heart thudded madly. My asshole stung. But I still ached to be filled. Fucked.

The snick of the lube cap startled me. Then something smooth and fat prodded at my entrance.

"Let it happen. Take my cock—don't fight it. Bear down and push back against me."

That's what the last guy told me—the cutie from the bar. But I'd been a hell of a lot more relaxed then. I'd had a couple of drinks and an enjoyable game of tonsil hockey first. With Aiden, I was stone cold sober and nursing a fat lip. And I had no choice. I was his to do with as he pleased.

As the blunt head of Aiden's penis teased my entrance, he rubbed my shoulder—which shocked the hell out of me. Comforted me—calmed me, somehow. I was still hard, and smearing a fluid other than my blood all over the ruined duvet, but I was also scared. Aiden was about to fuck me. I couldn't wrap my head around that.

Aiden.

The blunt pressure increased.

“It’s going to feel so good. Promise.”

God, I hoped so. Aiden moved his hand from my shoulder to my hip. And pushed in.

I clenched—I couldn’t help it. Aiden smacked my hip. “While I may like that, it’s going to make you sore. Stop it.”

Make me sore? Fuck that shit. It already hurt like hell, a slow, relentless burn. I think Aiden was quite a bit bigger than the bar cutie. Was something tearing? Aiden held himself motionless, and rubbed my flank, and my lower back. The burn eased. I felt stuffed full—and really stretched. And he was barely in me! “Please,” I mumbled into the corner of the pillow.

“Please... *more*?” Aiden asked.

He was asking my opinion? “Please... *gentle*,” I begged.

“Of course, baby.”

Keeping his word, he sank in slowly, carefully, rocking his cock into me while his hands caressed me all over. I couldn’t tell if I was still hard—all my focus was on the thick cock claiming my ass. Jesus, how long was it?

“Almost in,” Aiden whispered.

As he filled me, the meatiest part of his shaft stretched me so wide I was sure I would tear. “Aiden! I can’t—”

“Shh,” he hushed. Not so much of a command as assurance. “You’ll take it all.”

I disagreed. I had the shakes all over, but then Aiden’s thighs pressed against my backside, and the prickly short hairs stabbed into the sensitive skin on my thighs, and my creamy, never-seen-sunshine butt.

“Such a sweet ass, Jase. You feel amazing.”

I panted and sucked in gulps of air. My mind short-circuited, synapses firing all over the place. Aiden was inside me. The thought revived my arousal, and my flagging erection sparked back to full and throbbing life. Aiden noticed my renewed excitement, and smoothed a hand over my back. His hips moved, and his cock slid out a little—then back in. I was stretched open, and my sphincters had finally relaxed. The burn and hurt eased—I was ready and he knew it.

“Time to get done properly, sweet Jase.”

The slow, gentle rocking turned into more determined thrusts. I cried out with each one. My body suddenly no longer felt like my own—it belonged to Aiden. The pain mellowed to a deep ache as his thrusts grew more forceful. Despite the lingering burn, and my shaky legs, the surging pleasure intensified. My skin felt electrically charged, and produced a spark everywhere Aiden touched me.

“Jase,” Aiden called to me from far away. “Pull your knees up. Get them under you. I don’t want to pull out—it’ll only hurt when I enter you again.”

I couldn’t move. Really. I tried. All my limbs shook and were oddly uncoordinated. Aiden’s fingers dug into my hips, and he lifted me up, while keeping his cock buried deep inside me. Clutching handfuls of bedding as my anchor, I dragged my legs under me and squirmed, with Aiden’s assistance, until I had both knees under me, my ass in the air, and my forearms sinking into the mattress. The first thrust in the new position went impossibly deep, jerked me violently forward, and tore a startled yelp from my throat.

It felt exquisite.

Aiden wanted my cries? I gave them to him. Freely.

With my face getting repeatedly shoved back and forth into the bedding, and my ass getting ruthlessly pounded by a ruthless man, I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. Some of Aiden’s thrusts slid across my gland—nothing else could feel like that—and I whimpered and cried so much I couldn’t hear the words Aiden whispered to me. Endearments? Like maybe he thought me beautiful and not a nuisance. I couldn’t concentrate because the bastard was right—I was going to come for him. I was already close.

“Come on, Jase,” Aiden said, closer to my ear so I could hear, “give it up! Come for me.”

If so many sensations weren’t tearing me apart, I might have right then, just from his voice ordering me to. But I was overwhelmed. By everything.

Aiden slowed his powerful thrusts enough to yank my chest up off the bed. My quivering thighs spread wide, falling outside of his. He dragged me back against his hot, sweaty chest and crushed me to him as I sat on his thighs, his long cock seated so deeply inside me I thought it might come out my mouth. He made me ride him. Like a piston, his cock drove up at the same time he shoved me down on it.

“Aiden!” I cried. “For the love of—”

His hand found my slick, dripping dick and pumped. Too slowly. I was dying—he was killing me.

“Are you going to run on me again?” Aiden asked me before slamming me back down on his iron-hard shaft.

“No!” I yelled—I’d surrendered completely. Days ago.

“I meant to punish you for it,” he added, panting.

I could barely form words. “I’m s-sorry!” I wailed, “I was scared. P-please, Aiden.”

“Will you tell me the truth from now on?”

I was falling apart, and he was fucking talking. “I will! I d-did!”

Aiden’s words were harder to take than his stiff cock pounding the life out of me. I thrashed wildly, speared on the weapon between his legs, and unable to escape. His powerful thighs drove his cock into me relentlessly. Finally, when I thought I couldn’t take any more, Aiden jacked me so perfectly I saw stars.

“Come now, Jason. Give it to me,” he growled and shoved me down on his cock as he leaned back. The fat, swollen head of his cock stroked over my gland. My body convulsed, and I came—and I hollered, probably loudly, but everything sounded muted with my ears ringing and my blood rushing. Hot jets of my own cum splattered on my legs and the bloodied covers. I came so hard it hurt—like he said I would.

Aiden fucked me through my orgasm, but loosened his grip on my dick—it didn’t matter, I kept coming. It was torture. Aiden almost pulled out with each thrust and on his way back in, the head of his cock kept hitting my prostate.

I knew then Aiden was in full command of my body, not me.

When Aiden climaxed, he didn’t scream, he went still and silent. His thrusts stuttered. A hot wetness flooded my ass. His fingers dug into my hips. As he slowed, he bit me, little nips across my shoulder. Under me, his powerful thighs trembled. He pressed his face into my back, then with me cradled against his chest, he let us fall forward to land in a sweaty, cum-smearred heap.

Aiden’s full weight crushed me, and made me gasp for air, in ragged, noisy, half sobbing breaths I couldn’t control. Although softened somewhat, his cock remained parked in my ass.

After a moment of panting all over me, Aiden said, “I’m sorry for this.” Then he slid his dick from my ass.

What was left of the ruined shell of my body shuddered violently. My fingers twitched. The sharp, burning pain returned for several long, stuttering heartbeats and then morphed into a throbbing, dull ache deep inside. I chewed on the tangled blankets crammed into my face and waited for it to pass.

When Aiden finally slid to the side of my sweat-slicked back, I realized I was trembling. My emotions were firing wildly, but mostly I was... scared. But as mad at me as Aiden was, he wasn't a total sadistic pig and he stroked my back, my hip and even my arms until the horrible shaking gave way to exhaustion. I hurt. Everywhere.

As I started to slide unwillingly into a semi-unconscious state, Aiden turned me on my side and ignited a fresh burst of agony. Wetness oozed from my abused ass and my legs slid together with cum—his, mine. Ours. I couldn't even force myself to be disgusted.

"It'll be okay. It's safe to go to sleep now," Aiden whispered in my ear. I slumped into the duvet, wanting so desperately to believe him. I wanted everything to be okay, but I'd learned not to trust. Not to let people in.

Tucked against Aiden's warm body, I dozed fitfully. Not for long stretches—I felt anxious about something I couldn't put my finger on. As I drifted, it hit me, and I jerked awake, sending a sharp bolt of pain up my ass and across my injured ribs.

Sounding sleepy behind me, Aiden said, "What is it?"

"Condom," I rasped. "You didn't wear a condom." Fresh horror started my body trembling all over again.

"Be quiet and go to sleep. You worry too much about everything."

True—but this was important. "But we..." I guess it was kind of late now, wasn't it?

"As if I would catch any of your disgusting human diseases. Quit worrying and go to sleep."

Aiden yanked up some of the disordered coverings and tucked them around me, making a warm cocoon. Human diseases? I wanted to ponder his comment, but abruptly crashed into oblivion.

When I woke, I was alone in the messy bed. And disoriented. Where the hell was I? I cracked open a bleary eye and blinked. Milky light peeked through

the curtain edges—and I knew this room. I was at Aiden's house. And I was in Aiden's bed. Somehow, I'd made it under the covers—I couldn't remember when. A delightful pocket of warmth enveloped me, and I sighed in thanks because I hurt everywhere. In fact, I was somewhat afraid to move and inflame some protesting body part.

My ribs were tender. My lip smarted when I tried to lick the dryness away. *Big deal.* They were minor irritations compared to the way my ass felt. Raw, and thoroughly used and abused. Goddamn Aiden. I ached inside, deep under my tailbone. Even though he'd been making a point, he didn't have to fuck me so hard. I was honest-to-god afraid to move. Sticky substances had practically glued my legs together. Cum had dried and crusted on my thighs. Cuddling myself in my misery, I tucked my arms under my chin and winced as I stretched my legs out.

Jesus. *What do I do now?* I sorted through the confused mess that was my head. Time. I needed some serious time to think things over.

Unfortunately, I wasn't going to get it. Aiden was in the shower—I could hear the spray through the open door. I scowled into the pillow, hating him all over again. Hating New York State all over again. And missing the freedom that had once been mine. That I had relinquished, by choice.

Except... Aiden would have found me sooner or later anyway, I didn't kid myself. Giving up was not a concept he understood. Despite Aiden's completely human appearance, he was only half-human, and his alien half possessed a far more predatory nature. Why had I thought I could outlast him? Or outwit him? It was ridiculous. The T'El Vish'En, the Vish, lived a hell of a lot longer than us lowly humans, and Aiden, who looked to be maybe thirty-five—a very healthy thirty-five—had once told me a sad tale of what it was like in America during the Great Depression. So yeah, I would never outlast him.

At night, huddled in whatever hidey-hole I'd stumbled on in my travels, I knew that. But...

The problem with running is that once you start, it's really difficult to stop. Fear gets to you. Loneliness gets to you. I knew he was closing in on me, yet I kept going, kept hiding. After my grandfather's death—the event that started all of this—I didn't have much family left. My aunt, my dad's ding-a-ling sister who'd never had anything to do with me, refused to help me when I called her in desperation, hoping she'd wire me some money when all my bank cards and my credit cards had been cancelled. Nope. Denied. *Aiden just wants to protect*

you, Jason—come home. You're being stubborn and ridiculous. I'll buy you a plane ticket, but that's all you'll get from me. The bastard! Turning my one and only family member against me so easily.

Aiden didn't want to protect me. He wanted to wring my scrawny human neck. Would probably get right on that when he got out of the shower. I shifted uncomfortably, trying to find a position that made both my sore ass and my ribs happy. When I found it, my arm bitched at me—Aiden had twisted it up behind my back as he wrestled me up into his bedroom.

I can't believe I punched him.

And why didn't he have a fat lip like me? I didn't hold back with that first punch.

Long before I finally gave up on the running and hiding, I spent a few wretched, water-logged days wondering if I was indeed going mad—or loco as they called it down there. Aiden had gotten to my best friend as well—Dusty. Told him I was having a depressive episode, was not myself and needed help. The lying fucker. Okay—maybe I was a little depressed. But Dusty only wired me a hundred bucks, probably behind Aiden's back, and told me to get my ass home before I failed out completely and ruined my permanent record. The college would only buy my bereavement leave for so long—two months was pushing it.

Over those two months, I'd traveled from my home near UCLA, down into Mexico and then, when I could practically feel Aiden breathing down my neck, I slipped into Guatemala, thinking to lose him there. Aiden excels at technology, and I thought taking that from him would even the score. Ha-ha.

My Spanish is passable, but I stuck out like a sore thumb. Guatemalans are a short, squat sort for the most part and I, at well over six feet, towered over most of them. Plus, I just look American, right down to the blue eyes and big white smile courtesy of regular dental care. My wavy brown hair is nothing like theirs either. And I have freckles.

The only thing that saved me from being murdered and dumped in a watery jungle ditch somewhere was that I was obviously poorer than the lowliest of beggars. They were the ones who were charitable, occasionally feeding the poor, starving, wandering village idiot. I'd felt guilty taking their food.

Three days ago—I blinked at the window—*four* days ago, I finally admitted defeat. I had eight dollars left of Dusty's hundred dollar emergency gift and

sore feet from walking aimlessly. Sunday is market day in the city of Chichicastenango, Chichi for short, and I'd made my way there with visions of squash, corn and beans in my, by then, empty head. I was so tired that day—Christ, was it only four days ago? I'd almost fallen asleep in church. I was so lonely and pathetic, the only place of comfort was a Catholic church. Knowing what I know, that we are not alone, I'm not all that big on religion. I would love to believe... I just can't.

So while I was being my bedraggled self, curled into the corner of the pew and trying to keep up with the sermon—or whatever you call it—I had an epiphany. I was done. In exchange for my life, I'd given myself to Aiden O'Rourke—his human father was Irish—in partial restitution for my grandfather's unspeakably malicious crime.

The Vish have virtually no crime, and the reason they don't is because they have very barbaric punishments. Even by human standards. They do not murder each other. They are quite capable of raining destruction down on their enemies if required, but they are terribly civilized. Except when it comes to justice.

My grandfather—and I still cannot fathom this—committed such a heinous and cruel series of acts, that he was sentenced to their harshest judgment. The death penalty. I was not surprised. I had been summoned to the trial, the need for which boggled me up to the very end, because I couldn't figure out why they'd hold a trial for a dead man. Ah, but that's the Vish for you. Always got something up their sleeves.

Even before the verdict came down, everyone had stared at me with unconcealed hostility, like I was somehow guilty by default. It wasn't until they cuffed me that I panicked. One of their Chief Justices had to explain it to me. Twice. The first time I'd almost fainted. Their death penalty stretches over three generations. My parents are deceased so that left me next in line for the burning knife—I'm the third generation. I can't get past the horror of that. They do not care if you are innocent or if you had nothing to do with the crime. They wouldn't have cared if I was a baby.

Their rationale behind their reprehensible law is that they are a long-lived people, and if you don't cut the seed of criminality from the family line, the convicted's descendants could eventually rise up in vengeance. Barbaric. And effective, or so I imagine.

I'd be dead meat right now if it weren't for Aiden.

Even though I hate him.

Want him...

Want to suck it?

Hot fingertips on my cheek startled me, and I jolted, the sudden movement reminding me of all the places I hurt. I'd actually fallen back asleep.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

My lips were glued together again, so I untucked a hand from under my chin—the knuckles were scraped from Aiden's face—and gave him my middle finger.

"Ah, the Jason I know and love," he replied. "There's lots of hot water left." He gave me a lazy smile. "I imagine you'll need it."

My mouth tasted like utter shit. I poked my tongue forward and managed to unstick my blood-crusted lips. "Prick," I rasped. I had no intention of moving. Even if I could.

"I'll make you some coffee," he offered, most decently.

I've never been much of a morning person. He could cram his decency. I don't imagine I scowl any better than I glare, but I gave it a try. Felt vaguely... satisfying.

"If you aren't out of that bed and on your way to the shower in five minutes, I'm going to rip those blankets off your bruised and battered body and fuck you again."

My ass was already on fire. I took him at his word. I rolled over onto my stomach, uncomfortably, because I had a little morning wood—proof that the little head is really, really stupid—and pushed myself up. Every muscle I had protested. I slid a leg down to the floor. Jesus—the inside of my thighs felt like they'd been beaten with a stick. I collapsed back down on my face, and my dick, and groaned.

Aiden sauntered back over and yanked the covers off me. "Hey!" I croaked.

He ran his index finger down my spine to the crack of my ass. "A few war wounds, but you'll live."

A few? "You're a bastard." Because, really, he was.

He slid his finger in the sticky goo between my butt cheeks. I flinched. "Sore?"

Lying would get me nowhere. Or, it would get me fucked, and I wasn't enduring that again no matter what the little head wanted. "Yes."

"Have a hot bath, then. Soak your muscles. But don't be all day about it."

I was thinking up a smartass comeback when he stepped closer and grabbed my ass with both hands. "I'm going!" I hastened to reply.

"Glad to hear it," he said, as he gently pried my cheeks apart.

I tried to squirm away—fuck! Who did that? My whole face burned with humiliation. I swatted at him, ineffectually, arm backwards, as I was face down.

"Looks tender," he said, conversationally. "You're going to know I was here. *All day.*"

Aiden's finger drifted across my very sore hole, and I winced.

"I want you again though," he added, softly.

Again? Now? "Aiden, I—" My voice cracked.

"I know. And I'm not that much of a bastard."

But he was, because he eased his finger in. I groaned. Felt like a barbed spike. But even so, my dick perked up enough to be uncomfortable, squashed under me.

"Hurry up, and get out of that bed before I remember I really am that much of a bastard." He popped his finger back out.

Just the motivation I needed. My legs were hellishly shaky when I got to my feet. I wobbled, and Aiden settled me with a possessive hand to my hip. I wanted to get to the bathroom—I was starting to worry something disgusting might trickle out of my ass. But Aiden waylaid me by nuzzling behind my ear. Then he nipped the lobe. I shuddered.

"Can I go?" I asked.

"Not just yet."

Oh, hell. He nipped my jaw. My stubble, I hadn't touched a razor since Chichi, was probably prickly as hell. He cupped my ass. Maybe I wasn't going to escape a painful morning fuck after all. But instead of a fuck, I got a warning.

"Don't make me hit you again, Jase."

I sighed. I wasn't proud of myself. "I'm sorry, Aiden," I finally said. "I was an asshole." Apologizing to someone when you're still mad at them is not an easy thing. But I felt better already.

"Accepted." He gave my semi-hard dick a nice, long, sliding squeeze from the balls up.

"I can't fuck you, and with that lip you can't suck me off—but there's nothing wrong with your hands, is there?"

"No, but..."

Aiden snickered, and released my dick with a slow drag that handily dragged a whimper from me. I felt so gross and disgusting. Dried blood had caked in the creases of my hands. Opening my palm, I showed him.

He grinned at me. "That's not really a deterrent to me, you know." He swatted my backside. "But go on. I'll give your hands a workout later. Meet me downstairs when you're done."

Thank god! Before he changed his mind, I hobbled in the direction of the bathroom and shut myself inside.

The smell of coffee filled the kitchen. That had to be the most delightful aroma known to mankind. My mouth watered. The awful, lukewarm cup of airport coffee I'd chugged on the way home had been the only cup I'd had in over a month. I craved a fresh cuppa like a junkie craved a hit. And Aiden made damned good coffee. In fact, I could blame him for my addiction. He'd gotten me hooked in my late teens, before I tried escaping my life for a new one in which alien species didn't exist, and Aiden fucking O'Rourke didn't rule my every damned fantasy.

Aiden hadn't forgotten how I liked it. One sugar, two cream, and hot enough to scald. I folded my leg under me as I sat, uncomfortably, on the kitchen chair. I'd discovered sitting would not be happening today when I'd plopped down on Aiden's bed to dress. It's not easy to put socks on while lying down. At least jerk-face had bought me some things to wear—he'd set a change of clothes on the chair in the bedroom for me. I found them after I'd crawled out of the tub, feeling quite a bit better.

"Bless the gods of the almighty bean," I groaned, as I slurped a drink from the side of my mouth that wasn't swollen. "Thank you," I told Aiden. I pretty much meant it. The bastard.

He rewarded me with one of his real smiles.

“Don’t think you’re gonna win me over,” I muttered. “You’re still a sadistic bastard.”

“Wouldn’t dream of trying. And I know.”

Cuddling my coffee, I hunched over the table to ease the pressure on a certain sore spot. Aiden had the wisdom not to tease me too badly, he only chuckled softly at my distress. I sat quietly and had a bad case of the stares. There were cool things to stare at. Once upon a time, I had loved Aiden’s house. The Vish had a lot of money and the Bridgehampton house, while renovated to a modern standard, had retained every last bit of its heritage charm. They’d probably had it built in the first place—not Aiden, he was too young, but one of the others.

The microwave beeped me out of my stupor, and a moment later, Aiden slid a plate of scrambled eggs with cheese and bacon bits in front of me, along with a side plate of toast. I hadn’t realized I was starving until just that moment, and I wolfed it all down before Aiden had eaten half of his. He said nothing, just silently slid the fruit bowl my way and finished his own breakfast. Since when had apples tasted so frigging delicious? Kiwis still sucked though. Slimy.

After two cups of coffee and gorging myself on half the contents of the fruit bowl, I felt ready to deal with whatever Aiden planned to dish out. He had a gleam in his eye that I knew from times past—well, one time. The look said, *you will tell me everything*. Yeah, like I wanted to do that.

Aiden took my hand, and I limped along behind him to his study—I had no idea how painful it could be, getting hit in the back of the thigh. At least there weren’t any stairs. And there was a leather couch. Aiden let me fall on it while he retrieved his laptop from his desk. Yay, files to focus on. Pulling my feet up, I rested most of my weight on my hip and tried to not to get worked up over what I knew was coming.

Before I ditched Aiden and ran home to California, then skedaddled down Mexico way, I’d told the Vish Inquisition everything I knew. Which was absolutely nothing. Numb with shock, I’d spilled my guts. The shock of finding out about my grandfather’s crimes hadn’t really gone away for me, and my heart was still in denial.

My father disappeared under mysterious circumstances—yeah, right—when I was just a babe, and my mom never got over it. Years later, when I was

eleven, she'd accidentally-on-purpose offed herself. I've forgiven her—she was really messed up, and I loved her. I kind of understood her, too, even then. Our family business, working for the Vish, is hard on the soul, which is why I tried to escape it. Only it's like the mafia, and once you're in, you can never get out. Gramps finished raising me after that.

Gramps hated the Vish. I'm pretty sure they knew he did, but since they can't very well go out and about in public, they have human retainers who look after things—we're their face to the world, and they ignored his animosity. Vish wrangling is a hereditary position. Like royalty. Gramps looked at it as a form of slavery.

And on that point, we agreed.

Once you know something, you can never *not* know it. Which is why it was so easy to forgive my mother—she came from outside the family. Spiritual and devout growing up, losing everything she had believed in had slowly killed her. I'd been born to it. The Vish had always been part of my life. The older I get, the more I understand how big that loss was for her.

Aiden joined me on the couch. Really close on the couch. I didn't mind; he smelled clean, faintly spicy and wonderful. I sort of melted against him. He let me. My emotions were still sparking crazy all over the place. I felt jittery. My dick wasn't hard, but I was mentally horny. Maybe I was sick, or something. Some weird jungle disease had eaten parts of my brain...

The screen loaded up a familiar face. Morgan Kelly, my grandpa, was not what you'd call a nice man. He had rough edges. A gruff personality. But I had loved him, and he had loved me from the day I was born. He'd been gone for three months now, and it felt weird, knowing I could no longer just phone him up for a chat. All that force of will... just gone. I would never have any closure. I could never ask the burning *why*.

"Jase?" Aiden asked.

My attention snapped back to the picture, one taken from a video feed. "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

Hell, no. "Yeah." I shrugged. "But I still can't believe it." I think Aiden had liked Gramps, once. After all, he'd known my grandfather for Gramps's entire life. That long-lived thing can sure fuck with your head. But Aiden had suffered most by what Morgan had done, and was still suffering. The Vish, for all their

supposed civility, had a real class divide thing going on, and Aiden had three strikes against him.

First, and foremost, he was a half-breed. Prejudice is not just a human thing.

Second, his mother's family is from one of the northern clans, and I have no idea why this matters, I don't get their politics, and this freaks out the rest of the clans. The northern clans are self-reliant and mean as stepped-on snakes, even Aiden admits this; he calls them honorary Texans, and their main occupation is war. The Vish have a terrible enemy. Guess who lives closest to the gate that lets them in?

Sure as hell isn't the snooty clans from the south.

Like Gramps, I don't really like most of the Vish, either. Mostly snobs. Except the northern born ones. I could get on good with them.

Thirdly, most of the Earth-trapped Vish are scared of him. He has, to them, what is a sacred gift, an affinity for the gate and weapons made from the same stuff, and for that talent to surface in a half-breed northern bastard of questionable loyalty... yeah, Aiden gets a lot of shit from every direction.

"Are you lonely, Aiden?" I had a sudden need to know.

He heard me, but stared at his laptop for a moment. That was probably a rude question. "Not anymore," he answered.

Like he'd admit to it if he was.

Aiden cranked up the volume on the video of what was my grandfather's deathbed confession. I made myself watch it. I knew it was real, and had not been tampered with. He'd been streaming it live to multiple, and opposing, parties, so no one could manipulate it. Gramps wanted me to get out, and, true to his ornery disposition, had hid his cancer diagnosis from me so I wouldn't leave school. No closure again—I never got to say that last goodbye.

Morgan had practised his little speech. I didn't understand a word of it, as I didn't speak the Vish high-tongue. Not many humans did. Aiden, presumably, had added the subtitles.

I, Morgan David Kelly, hereby confess to thirty counts of premeditated murder...

That was just a guess actually, since nobody knew how many people were in transit inside the gate when he killed the two guards and stole the Shalash

glyph key and sentenced them all to death. The Vish had been expecting twenty-eight travelers. Eight arrivals had been in the final stages, and they'd been horribly mutilated—whatever body part was Earth-side stayed, and whatever part was on the T'El side, stayed there. Random body parts had arrived through the gate. Two Vish had been completely bisected down the middle, cut by an invisible knife. Aiden's beloved uncle had been one of those two.

I'd never seen the gate, but I'd been treated to pictures of the autopsies during the trial. Bits of hands—lots of swinging hands had made it through to our side—and a few feet had tumbled onto the arrival pad in a bloody, (and other bodily fluid) flood. Faces and noses. Not even the Vish had a brain-bleach that could scrub those images from my memory.

Gramps had timed it well. He'd waited for a transfer with lots of Vish—it had been some holiday or other. And, from his confession, not just any Vish would do. He'd specifically targeted a certain southern clan with an unpronounceable name, and wanted to get as many of them as he could. Gramps sure knew how to hold a grudge. In the video he went on to explain his hatred for the Vish and their superiority complex, and how he wanted them off our planet. It was quite the rant.

But in the end, it all boiled down to love.

Once upon a time, before he met my grandmother, Gramps had wanted to marry one of them. Ha-ha, as if they'd go for that. The scandal must have been of epic proportions. I saw her picture once. If I liked women, I would have agreed she was... sexy? Drop-dead gorgeous at any rate. Delicate and fragile looking with that porcelain skin they have, stunning lavender eyes, and a little pointy chin.

I had this unpopular opinion that the Vish spawned the mythology of the Elven race. They did not flat-out deny it, either. When I first saw the Lord of the Rings trilogy, I almost had heart failure. Take one of those actors all done up in make-up, narrow the face, enlarge the eyes, add some scaly ridges along the hairline and a thicker ridge up the spine, and you'd be pretty damn close.

You'd also have to be some kind of moron not to realize we had a common genetic ancestor. The Vish lived in full denial on that subject. How could you maintain your superiority ideology otherwise? My curiosity on the subject never waned.

As things finally came out at the trial, I learned she scorned his offer of marriage, or rather, her family did. I think she might have been game, from the rumors. Morgan was movie-star idol handsome and charming when he wanted to be. But her family didn't want to sully their name or bloodline—which, believe me, is everything to them.

So yeah, thirty counts of first-degree murder over a spurned proposal made from the heart.

But that wasn't the horrible part.

Gramps proceeded to pocket the Shalash glyph key that operates the gate, and their only ticket home. So, in the cruellest twist imaginable, since August 8, 1968, every Vish on planet Earth has been stranded here. They are not a happy lot.

Resisting the urge to gnaw on my nails, I watched the rest of the video, until almost the end. I didn't read his final words, but I knew them by heart.

I hate you all... I've watched your suffering year after year, decade after decade, and you never had a clue, did you? And you thought you were so smart, but you never suspected, not once. I wish I could stick around another twenty years just to watch you suffer some more. But my time here is up.

I'll leave you a few clues. If it's meant to be, you'll find it. If not, I hope you all rot. And if you do find it, leave. Get off our planet. Go home. I hope the G'Reth eat all of you!

Things got noisy after that. Alarms sounded. A violent explosion shook the house. Paintings fell from the walls and a lamp crashed to the floor. I closed my eyes at the next part, knowing what would follow. Looking almost unconcerned, my grandfather turned, glanced back at the door, looked back at the camera, pulled a handgun from inside his wheelchair, smiled coldly, and shot himself in the head.

Wish I hadn't seen that the first time, but of course, nobody warned me.

The video ended shortly thereafter when the power went out. The identity of the intruders remains a mystery.

Yeah, right. A mystery.

I gave Aiden a dirty look. "You gonna tell me who raided the house?"

"You going to tell me where the key is?"

Because Aiden was pretty much a pariah here on Earth, and dangerous to boot, I suspected he wanted to go back to T'El more than anyone else. The northern clans respected him. He was welcome there. Maybe I hated him, maybe not, but I wanted to send him home. "I have no idea where it is, Aiden. I would give it to you if I knew."

"Would you?"

That pissed me off again. "I can't believe you'd even ask me that." I thought he knew me better.

Aiden's shoulders slumped, surprising me. I'd never known him to show even a hint of weakness. "Then why'd you run?"

"Because they'll kill me anyway." And torture me first. *And I'm scared of you and the power you have over me, whether you know it, or not.*

I liked how he didn't argue.

"Whoever was in that house, they're going to want to watch me suffer. They hate you for pulling rank and stopping my execution. They want their pound of flesh." Kind of like those pounds of body parts splattered about on the arrival pad.

"Over my dead body."

Aiden meant it. But I wanted him to live. "Don't say that. Please."

Maybe I surprised Aiden for a switch. He twisted, gave me a strange look, leaned in, hesitated for a moment, and then kissed me. It was wonderful, swollen lip and all. Our mouths fit together perfectly. He tasted heavenly. The real thing was better than any fantasy I'd ever had. He did a thorough job of rendering me senseless, and for a minute, I forgot my own name. When he pulled away, I chased after his mouth. So many years I'd waited for that kiss, never thinking I'd ever get it.

I didn't think there was much I could do to save myself, despite Aiden's stated desire to protect me—he was just one man. But maybe I could save him. If I was going to die, I'd make sure Aiden benefitted from it. "I'll help you find it."

His slouch disappeared. "Thank you."

I shrugged. "Welcome." Least I could do.

He set the laptop aside and smiled, that sarcastic smile that made me want to punch him in the face all over again. "But you're still mine."

As if I didn't know. Or want it any other way.

My non-stop yawning had nothing to do with the subject matter. All my running over the past couple months had simply worn me out. I had jet lag, bad. And pain in places I didn't know there were pain receptors—you'd think I would, being in med school, but apparently not.

At first, my escape had felt more like a vacation. An extended holiday. I had money. Vish retainers are well paid, and I'd inherited a hefty pile of bucks. My grief didn't slow me down, it just made me act strangely, and one of those actions precipitated my getting most of my stuff stolen in some puny little Mexican town whose name I forget—plus they'd all started to look the same. By that point, my paranoia was in full swing. I had suspicions of being watched, that I'd turn a corner, and Aiden would be standing there, smirking at me. I slept in dangerous and unlikely places. Took huge risks.

How in the hell had I managed to survive?

Fear led me into Central America. Aiden had gotten tired of my shit around then and hacked my credit, cancelling my cards and leaving me with only the cash on my person. I shudder to think how much it had been—really, I'd practically begged to have my throat slit. But money goes fast, no matter where you are—especially when I kept giving it away. There's lots of hungry kids down there. And sick babies.

The persistent loneliness finally did me in. Guess I'm far more social than I thought.

Holding the pack of photos Aiden had given me to look at against my chest, I closed my eyes. Yeah, needed this. Leather couches are cold, so I crammed my head into the corner, tucked up my legs, and pressed my back against the expanse of dead cowhide. Five minutes. Then I'd get back at it—Aiden was yammering on the phone and it lulled me, that low, sexy voice of his. I let my mind drift, searching for answers.

No one knew what clues Morgan had been referring to in the video. Obviously, he'd thought he'd have more time. Maybe he planned to explain it before the alarms and the intruders and his brief date with a bullet cut things short. A collection of maps and postcards littered his desk. And photos. Of me.

No wonder the Vish thought I was dirty. *Thanks, Gramps.*

I pillaged my memories. The key would not be hidden in New York. So where, then? I contemplated all those days of sunshine and road trips eating up my spring breaks and summer vacations.

Or was I just remembering the summer heat because I felt cold?

It rains a lot in Guatemala...

But... something picked at me. Morgan probably wanted me to know, without knowing I knew.

Why had we gone to Nevada that second time? And later, crossing all those states, stopping most in Arizona and New Mexico? *I get my kicks on Route 66...*

Morgan's 1965 Mustang was the coolest ride ever invented. I loved that car.

I recalled all those miles with Credence Clearwater Revival blasting out of the speakers. *Bad Moon Rising* had stuck in my head for days—goddamn *days*. Morgan had corrupted my youthful innocence, the dog. I actually *liked* that sixties and early seventies shit. Half asleep, I started humming *Lookin' out My Back Door* and dug up dusty lyrics from the past.

Huh. They must have been really stoned when they wrote that one.

A deliciously warm hand slid up the back of my shirt. Aiden pried the photos from my hands before I bent the crap out of them. I wanted to complain—they were the only thing keeping me warm.

"Saw them in concert once," Aiden said, as he rucked up my shirt.

How unfair was that? "You suck."

"Sometimes," he said, with a chuckle.

Now, what did that mean? "What are you doing?" I asked, as he hovered.

"I want to touch your skin."

"Okay," I breathed. Because, yeah. The last inches of available space on the couch disappeared as Aiden lay down beside me. He insinuated his knee between mine. Hooking an arm on the back of the couch, he pulled himself closer and turned me into the filling of a couch-Aiden sandwich. My dick perked up, and I snapped instantly back awake.

"Such a pretty mouth," he said, then proceeded to kiss the hell out of me. His tongue invaded my mouth, not that I put up a fight. I tongued him back. We

took turns with the tongues. It was wet and sloppy and hot. The faint sting of my healing lip only made every lick and suck more intense.

As Aiden kissed me, he worked his hands all over me. My nipple eventually fell victim to a merciless assault from his calloused thumb. He rubbed it and flicked it—tormented it. Made me hornier than hell. My dick wanted some of the action and strained against my new jeans. Apparently Aiden's cock had the same idea, and after rubbing our respective boners against each other, we started into a slow grind.

“Unzip,” he ordered.

Didn't have to ask me twice. I unzipped and shoved my underwear down. Aiden snagged a back pocket and yanked down the waist, exposing the top of my ass. As my dick sprung out, he caught it. Swirled the slippery fluid on the tip with his thumb. If he wanted to plow my ass again, I'd bend over willingly. He made me so hot. Always had. And yeah, I did used to watch him.

Wiggling in the tight space, I boldly unzipped Aiden. His thick slab burst out and thudded into mine. “Commando, eh?” I teased, a little breathlessly.

“I like to be prepared,” he teased back. Then he grabbed both our cocks in his fist and pumped, rubbing them together.

Jesus. At least I'd done this before. Frottage is such an ugly sounding word for such a delightful activity. It had never been this good though, because it had never been with Aiden. He watched me, eyes half-shuttered and unreadable. I fed off his intensity. I made all the noise, moaning and rudely shoving my dick into his hand, seeking more than my share. To settle me down, he slowed his hand movements and fucked my mouth with his tongue. I controlled myself—barely. My leaking dick provided most of the lube, and we slid together again, finally finding the perfect rhythm.

“Aiden...” I moaned, when he moved from savaging my mouth to nipping my jaw and the tip of my chin.

“Gonna come?” he panted in reply. “Better ask for my permission.”

Permission? I groaned loudly and jerked as he bit my neck. His knee between my legs started rocking up and down, jostling my painfully hard balls and pressing the seam of my jeans into my perineum and my sore asshole—ouch, tender. I hissed in a noisy breath. It still felt kind of amazing.

“Ask me.”

I have no shame. I started riding his leg and making incoherent noises, part bliss and part suffering. Even the uncomfortable tugging of my not-down-far-enough jeans failed to dampen my enthusiasm. "*Aiden...*" I groaned—I wasn't whining, exactly. Since Chichi, when I pleaded for his forgiveness, down on my knees, begging Aiden for an orgasm seemed easy as pie. "Wanna come..." My balls were tightening and tingling, with Aiden's knee spurring them on. "May I? Please?"

"Yes," he answered. His voice sounded a little shaky. "Then you're going to suck me off."

Fuck. I'd suck anything—just give it to me! Aiden gave my crotch a good root with his knee, pumped our tangled cocks deliciously fast and furious, and sent me spiralling into the orgasm I begged for. I cried out in time with the first hot spurt and whimpered through the rest, the jets landing mostly on my naked belly. My face hit his jaw as I collapsed against Aiden's shoulder and panted, trying to catch my breath.

Aiden didn't permit me more than those precious few gulps of air. He most impolitely pushed down on my shoulder. "Get sucking," he ordered.

My hips gave a convulsive jerk. I slid down the couch as he moved up on it. My jeans, fallen to my thighs, hampered my effort, but I pushed my butt up and found his shaft, and the ripe, red glans with my mouth. Ugh. Tasted like my jizz... and under that... *Aiden*.

"Like the taste of your cum, Jase? Suck it off my cock."

My mind was still reeling from my own orgasm, and I was flying—I gobbled him down in one greedy gulp.

"Son of a..." he groaned.

I wanted to pleasure him as much as he pleased me. I gave him the best blow job I had it in me to give. My body felt loose and my mind peaceful. My throat muscles relaxed easily, and I took him deep. His hands went in my hair, guiding me—not shoving, I already had all I could take—and he fucked my mouth, my throat, my *soul*. When he came, his cock was so far down the back of my throat that he barely choked me. But the supply seemed limitless. My gag reflex activated. My throat protested. Aiden, feeling generous, pulled back and finished coming in my mouth. Then aimed one last, thick spurt on my face.

I lowered my forehead onto his rock hard abdomen. I had spunk on my face, clogging my throat and tasting bitter on my tongue. My pants were hanging off,

and as I moved, my wet dick slimed my leg. I felt thoroughly debauched. And blissed out. I sniffled, swallowed and smugly enjoyed Aiden's meltdown. I think I pleased him.

Once I caught my breath, I smiled up at him. "Did you get enough skin?"

He gave me my favorite, lazy smile, the one I'd hardly seen the past few years. God, I loved that smile. "No. I'll never get enough."

He ruffled my hair and ran a thumb through the sticky slime on my cheek and the corner of my mouth. "I have a few calls to make. Why don't you go crawl in bed for an hour and have a nap?" He picked a strand of hair out of a cum smear. "Then we'll talk."

I was set to argue until a huge yawn cracked my jaw, making one eye water. I was wiped. All those lousy sleeps and two and a half months of non-stop fear had caught up to me. Not to mention... *Aiden*. I'd let my idea percolate for an hour while I napped. Besides, nobody liked a cranky Jason. Not even Jason.

The bed was already stained and filthy, so I dropped my pants and underwear and fell onto it without even washing the crud from my stomach. I wiped my face on the pillow, haphazardly covered my naked ass, and instantly fell asleep.

Chicago!

I woke with a start. Jesus. I scrubbed at my face and wiped away a bit of drool on my chin. Must have been snoring my head off. The light coming in through the curtains looked surprisingly dim. Damn it, Aiden had let me sleep a hell of a lot more than an hour. Although groggy, I felt good. Rested. Guess I'd needed to crash for a while.

I shoved the pile of covers down to my waist, feeling prickly and overheated. Fuck, yeah—warm at last. My legs were just the right temperature, but I still had my shirt on. No wonder I was cooking. I yanked it off and sent it sailing. My chest wasn't the only thing hot and irritated. Once again, I had a hard-on. When had I turned into such a randy bastard? I scratched myself in a few secret places and tried to remember what I had been dreaming about.

I was a lucid dreamer. My brain often solved my hardest dilemmas in that strange land between awake and asleep. One time, I suddenly remembered the names of all the bones in the hand with no effort whatsoever. Chemistry

questions that had stumped me all term came together in those few minutes before I fully awakened. Biology, Physics—I rocked them all when I first stirred. I'd taught myself to take full advantage of that listless, dreamy state.

So... Chicago. Fast car. Old time rock 'n roll. Route 66. I'd been fourteen on that trip, and tall, gawky, geeky, and harboring the sneaking suspicion I was more than a little queer. Gramps had been having an aging crisis of his own and harboring a serious case of nostalgia. Too caught up in my own problems, I didn't pay much attention to his odd behavior, or the funny absences from the hotel room at night, or that one time he split for an entire day. I thought he was out gettin' some.

Maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't.

Maybe he'd been checking on his hiding spot.

I grew up a lot on that trip. Got plastered for the first time on that trip—really, Gramps was a bad influence. I even drove the car a few times. By the time we got home, I accepted the fact I was totally gay, that Morgan had questionable ethics, that it was fucking hot in the desert, and that I loved the open road.

Excited and awake, I leapt out of bed, immediately tripped over, first, the sheet, and second, my discarded jeans, then fell, almost landing on my face. Ever graceful, is me. I scrambled forward and kicked at my jeans, freeing myself, only to be confronted by Aiden's bare feet. Fuck.

"On your knees, at my feet. Again." He sounded smug. "I'm really beginning to like that."

"Don't get used to it," I snapped, and got up, giving my dick a surreptitious whack before Aiden noticed.

"Are you hard? *Again?*"

"No," I muttered.

"Liar."

Aiden reached between my legs and found me half-hard and three-quarters wanting. After the earlier hand-job, my dick felt a little worse for wear, the skin chafed. Aiden fondled me for a few moments, until my erection poked him in the hip. I stifled the moan.

"I'll fuck you tonight."

“The hell you will!”

“If I want some lip out of you, Jase, I’ll wiggle my zipper.”

“That line is even older than you.”

“And yet, so profound.”

Hardly. “Profoundly lame.”

My dick bounced against my abdomen when he released it. I couldn’t believe I’d gotten that hard. He worked his hand between my legs. “If I want to have you later, I will. It’s not open for discussion.”

Well, shit.

“But you’ll wash that dried cum off your face first, and then we’ll have dinner, and you can tell me all about what you were muttering in your sleep. Sounded interesting.”

What? “I mutter?” Since when?

“More like speak whole sentences.”

Jesus—how come no one ever told me?

“‘65 Mustang, eh? Good choice.”

“I said that?”

“You want Morgan’s blue one.”

“Goddamn.”

Aiden shoved me towards the bathroom. *I talk in my sleep?* Charming. Good thing I never slept with anyone. I did not hookup. Or date much. Mostly, I studied. Shit. What about school? I was going to have to write off the semester. Hell, I’d probably get kicked out of med school to make room for a student who would be there instead of slinking about Mexico being chased by packs of stray dogs.

My future looked bleak.

My *present* looked bleak. When I saw myself in the mirror, I cringed. The stray dogs had got me in my sleep—or at least my hair. Is that really what I looked like? And Aiden still wanted me? I’d never had hair this long, and the waves had started spiralling into ringlets. I hadn’t really looked at myself this morning, just enough to shave without slicing open an artery. I also had a black

eye, just in the corner by my nose, not a big shiner, but yeah. *Embrace your inner thug, Jase.* My lip looked good—blowing Aiden earlier hadn't done any harm. But how had I not noticed I was covered in bruises? Seriously. And finger-shaped, purple smudges.

Aiden's fingerprints. That was kind of... *fucking hot.* Yeah.

Jesus. What the hell was wrong with me? No way did I have an inner submissive dying to get out—and if I did, I was going to kill him. With fire.

I looked so disreputable, I had another shower. Shaved my chest. Stole a really expensive shirt from Aiden and scrambled downstairs to look for food, and that stack of photos and maps. Something spicy cooked on the stove while Aiden paced, phone in hand. Hard-ass soldier, my foot. More like Mr. Congeniality.

I spread out the map on the table and generally ignored him as he prattled on in one of their languages that sounded like two snakes hissing. When I was a kid, I used to jokingly call it Vichyssoise. I smiled. Still funny.

Chicago to L.A.—over two thousand miles. Talk about finding a needle in a haystack.

Impossible odds.

And Route 66 doesn't exist anymore, at least not officially. It didn't when we went on our trip. I knew it was still a big thing for history buffs to drive it anyway, and Morgan had been one. His sweet Mustang had made the trip when it was brand-spanking new, and he'd said it was due for a repeat performance. Did Gramps have an ulterior motive, a sinister one, for taking me along with him? Did he mean to confide in me and changed his mind? Or was I nuts, like Aiden told everyone, and just jumping at the first weird dream to pop into my head?

What were those damned clues?

After stirring the pot contents, and hissing an abrupt snaky adieu to his phone contact, Aiden joined me at the table.

"I assume you searched his house? All his stuff?" I asked.

"About five times."

"What about his car? The Mustang?"

"Just one damn fine automobile."

The car seemed a stretch, even for me. “And this was everything from the room in the video? Whoever broke in might have taken some of the clues.”

Aiden gave me the evil eye. “Trust me, they didn’t. This is everything.”

Uh—yeah. Best not ponder that *trust me*. “Safe deposit box?”

“One. The deed to his house, and some jewelry and a watch that belonged to your parents. I have them here for you.”

My mom’s stuff? Dad’s? Fuck. Didn’t need to think about that right now. I shuffled through the stack, avoiding Aiden’s gaze.

Their wedding rings? And that brooch with the pretty emeralds—is that where they went?

“I’m sorry, Jason. About Morgan.”

Dad, Mom, Grandma, and now Grandpa. Gone. How could Gramps be... gone? And a cold-blooded killer of thirty people? And a liar? I would have labeled him a psychopath, but he had some feelings—I knew he loved me. *He did!*

My eyes suddenly felt hot. Stinging. That pot on the stove must be full of cayenne peppers and jalapenos mixed with hot sauce.

My throat tightened. My irrational anger barged back into my head, feet stomping. And I never did know when to shut up. “Sorry? What the fuck are you sorry for?” I snapped, still unable to look at Aiden. “That the last person I had left in the world who gave two shits about me turned out to be a mass murderer? That I’m related to him and now you’re stuck with me? How can you even stand to touch me when you know I come from his tainted bloodline? Or are you sorry you never figured out the great fucking mystery? That it was him all along, laughing at you? Or maybe you’re sorry the bullet got to him before you did?”

I plucked an antique postcard from the pile. Why was I being a shit to Aiden? None of this was his fault. But I couldn’t seem to stop myself, or the bitter words that tumbled out next, the second I thought them: “You don’t need to fuck me to get me to tell you where the key is. You can quit pretending because I don’t fucking know! I don’t even know what the damned thing looks like.”

My chest ached fiercely. It hadn’t occurred to me until just now that Aiden might... that he would... use my stupid, childish infatuation as a weapon against me.

I couldn't breathe.

Of course he would.

Why else would he save me, if not for information? And what better revenge than to fuck the grandson of the man who fucked you over?

Must have been satisfying.

All the excitement I had for solving the great mystery evaporated. I wasn't hungry anymore. I wanted to curl into a tiny ball and die.

"Jason."

Yes, I was stupid, naïve and gullible for thinking, even for a second, that Aiden had saved me for *me*, but I didn't deserve this level of cruelty. My heart broke and all the little pieces cut me from the inside. Why did I ever think we were friends?

Because I wanted us to be?

But the Vish think we're lesser beings, and Aiden, despite his human skin, is Vish. You're making the exact same mistake Gramps made—thinking you're good enough for one of them.

Maybe I was, and maybe I wasn't. But I sure as hell wasn't Morgan. I would show them I was better than that, better than my grandfather. I wouldn't turn Aiden's cruelty back on him. Aiden couldn't take my compassion from me, couldn't beat it out of me, or fuck it out of me. I knew what it was to be lonely, to miss your family with an ache that never left. Like the Vish, I knew how it felt to lose everyone I loved. If I could help the stranded Vish, and even Aiden, the manipulative bastard, go home, I would.

"Jason Kelly, *look at me!*"

Fuck you, Aiden. I couldn't face him. Seeing his proud, satisfied smirk would kill me. "I said I would help you, and I will." The old-fashioned cars in the photo on the postcard blurred. "So you can give it a rest. You don't need to shame me anymore."

Something wooden splintered—a chair—breaking the silence in the kitchen. I flinched and jumped backwards, avoiding the broken bits of the chair Aiden had kicked. He came flying around the table so fast, I almost tripped. I was operating on autopilot only. The crushing pain of Aiden's betrayal numbed the fear I should have felt. I backed up until the window sill jabbed into my lower back.

I did look up then, only to see that Aiden was furious, and not smirking.

Reflexively, I curled in on myself and raised my forearm to protect my face.

“Don’t you dare cower from me!” he yelled. “Like I’m the bad guy. I can’t believe you just said that. Accused me of that!” Aiden grabbed my wrist and yanked my hand down. I looked through the blur from my wet lashes and into the cold gleam of his troubled eyes. “Now that you’re looking me in the eye, tell me you believe that. Tell me that you think that little of me.”

I couldn’t speak.

“C’mon, Jase. Say it! Say it to my face!”

My tongue wouldn’t do it.

“Say it!” he yelled. His shoulders trembled with something other than anger.

You either believe it, or you don’t... “It only m-makes s-sense,” I stuttered.

Aiden glared at me for the longest moment in history. “Makes sense?” he sneered. “You don’t make any fucking sense!”

Keeping the crushing grip on my wrist, Aiden dragged me off the window and back over to the table. He kicked out a chair and shoved me down on it. My legs couldn’t hold me anyway, so I didn’t resist. Aiden booted the remnants of the broken chair across the kitchen floor, grabbed an intact one, and placed it directly in front of me. He sat down so close to me, our knees touched.

Fuck. Another Vish inquisition.

Aiden would only get the same answers. “I don’t know where it is,” I blubbered. If he didn’t let me go curl up alone in my misery somewhere soon, I was going to have a nervous breakdown. A person can only take so much.

“Shut up about the fucking key! Jesus, Jase. I know you don’t know where it is. You think I don’t know you? Better than you know yourself?”

“Then why...?” *Did you fuck me?*

“Because I wanted you.”

That wasn’t possible. I reminded myself this was a Vish mind-fuck, nothing more. “Aiden, please, you had no interest in me—”

“I was waiting for you to grow up.”

“What?”

“For fuck sake, Jase. I’m more than eighty years older than you. I’ve known you all your life. And I’m a piece of shit, half-breed soldier not good for much, except killing. You honestly think it would have been right for me to show even a hint of interest?”

It’s just a mind-fuck—don’t believe him. Just a mind-fuck, Vish style—Aiden style. But my defective brain-mouth filter let me down again. “Yeah, well, I’m all grown up now, and you never said anything. Not once. Not even this past Christmas. I was here for a week—you had lots of time.” And we spent most of those days alone together—Gramps had been... sick with the flu... of the cancer variety. He’d had plenty of chances. “You’re full of shit.”

My hands must have been icy because when Aiden grabbed then between his, they almost burned me. “I didn’t because... I promised Morgan. Back when we were friends.”

I slid sideways on my chair. Would have fallen to the floor, but for Aiden’s hands on mine. “You what?” My ears were kind of ringing. What was that a symptom of, again? “You... promised him what, exactly?”

“That I’d give you time to grow up—become a man. Be sure of what you wanted. He wanted me to...” Aiden looked uncharacteristically puzzled. “He wanted me to back off. He thought I would... well, he wanted you to have the opportunity to date other men, get taken out for a few test drives, I believe is how he put it, before I...”

“Before you *what*?”

“Nailed your queer, lovesick ass to the wall.”

That sounded exactly like something Gramps would say. “Asshole,” I muttered, sniffing up a bunch of snot.

“He was right, Jase. How would you know if you even liked me for me, if you never had the chance to compare me to someone else?”

They were all assholes—Aiden included, scheming like that, behind my back. Talking about me—was I that oblivious? “I knew what I wanted.”

“Did you?”

He didn’t mean it sarcastically. Perhaps he was curious. Yeah, it was true I thought Aiden was gorgeous, and he turned my crank like nobody else I’d ever met, but my infatuation went deeper than his pretty skin. “You are the only person on this earth who knows what it’s like to have a foot in both worlds.”

“Oh, Jase.” Aiden looked horrified. “I’m so sorry.”

“I could always talk to you, you know—I never had to hide anything, never had to keep the big secret when I was around you. I could be me. Geeky, dorky, lonely me. But it was honest. Not for show.”

“You sound just like your mom. She hated the big lie just as much.”

I didn’t need to hear that—right now, my wounds were still too raw. “So how am I supposed to move on, huh?”

One of the main reasons I got into pre-med, and then applied to medical school was because the courses were hard as hell. I wouldn’t have time to think. I picked the hardest subject I could think of—medicine—that I thought I could enjoy and be good at. I knew I’d have only empty years ahead of me. I needed something to make up for what I could never have, which was Aiden. Or any man of my own.

There are other Vish retainer families, but what were the odds of one of them having a gay son around my age who wouldn’t think I was a helpless dork? And no Vish would ever touch me. True, there are lots of human men out there, and nobody had beaten me with an ugly stick, but after what my mom went through? No way would I bring another outsider in.

How could I explain it to Aiden so he’d understand?

“How can I have a proper relationship knowing what I know? How can I live with someone knowing this whole other world exists—these other *worlds* exist—and can never talk about it? Never share it? Can never talk about the people from that other world? I could never mention you.” I doubt Aiden would get it. “How can I live a life of lies?”

Besides, if I was with any man but Aiden, it would all be lies anyway.

Aiden sighed deeply. His shoulders shook. “No wonder Morgan hated us.”

I sniffled. “No hate is greater than the hate you feel for someone you once loved.” Or so I suspected. I’d never hated anyone. Not really.

“Come here, Jase.”

What was he talking about? I was *here*. Knee to knee. I glanced at Aiden, but sideways. I couldn’t look him full in the eye yet. He patted his thigh and then yanked my hand forward.

“F-fuck off!”

I struggled weakly as Aiden tugged me off my chair and forward to straddle his lap. Maybe to him I was a baby, but I was twenty-four fucking years old and therefore old enough to know better than to be a willing participant in my own mind-fuck. I wouldn't hand a torturer his weapon of choice and I sure as hell wasn't handing Aiden fucking O'Rourke the knife to finish hacking my heart to bits.

Regardless of my wants, Aiden persisted—he never takes no for an answer—and in seconds I was mashed against his chest, his arms around my lower back. Damn him to hell.

Since I was trapped there anyway, I hunched my back and twisted my neck awkwardly so my head could rest on his shoulder and the back of the chair. "Please don't mind-fuck me," I pleaded.

Aiden smoothed his hand up and down my back. Petted me, for fuck's sake. "I like your mind just the way it is. Even if it's not working worth shit, right now. So, body-fucks only. Zero mind-fucks will be given."

I snuffled into Aiden's neck for a minute and tried to catch my breath. My legs were too long for this. I didn't want Aiden to keep me on his lap, hands absently stroking my back like he felt he had to comfort me. So why couldn't I move?

"It's okay to grieve him, Jase," Aiden said as some of the tension left my body.

"I loved him," I admitted, then, unexpectedly, burst into tears. Big, wet, snotty, humiliating tears. All over Aiden's shirt, neck, hair, and my own hand where I was gripping the chair back. Aiden let me soak him. And he never stopped stroking me with his hands. I fucking hated him, the bastard.

But I didn't move. I couldn't remember the last time anyone held me.

I don't know how long I blubbered on him. I felt horrible. Drained, embarrassed, and lost. Sick to my stomach. My eyes hurt. "I'm sorry," I choked out. "For that." I wasn't quite ready to trust him again, either.

"I'm not," he replied. "You needed to let go." His lips brushed over my temple.

That almost made me start up again with the ridiculous waterworks. Then he gently kissed my mouth. My chest heaved with one of those shuddery sighs.

"Jason?" he said softly.

“What?”

“Just so you know, you’re the only person I have who knows what it’s like to have a foot in both worlds, too.”

Fuck. I was such an asshole. Worse, I didn’t know what to say or how to fix the rift I made between us. I slid off his lap and back onto my own chair.

I needed some time to sort things out—five minutes. Instead of saying something that would make my mess even bigger, I said the only other thought in my head. “You’re gonna burn your pot of hot peppers.”

After Aiden turned off the stove, he steered me back into his study, laid us down on the couch, and made a sandwich filling of me again. No sexual acts this time though, just a long, soothing cuddle—I don’t know why he thought I needed one. He didn’t talk and didn’t make me talk.

Eventually I warmed up—Aiden kicked out heat like a furnace. Everything seemed so damned confusing. I wasn’t ready to talk about us, about our new relationship dynamic. Nor did I have the words for the apology I owed for that vile accusation. My head was messed up. Whenever I felt like this, I usually kept busy while I sorted myself out. Probably what I needed right now.

“I have an idea. About the key.”

“Jase...”

“I’m ready.” Shit. I probably couldn’t be vaguer if I tried.

“What you’re ready for is a week of lying around the house and sleeping until noon, and eating more than once a day.”

“I can still do all those things, it just wouldn’t be here. We’d be—”

“No.”

“Aiden...” I sighed. I’d eaten more than once a day. Sometimes.

Freeing me from the uncomfortably hot crack in the couch, Aiden flipped me onto his chest. “Tell me what’s been rolling around in that head of yours. But don’t think for a minute we’ll be doing anything about it soon.”

“Don’t you want to find the key?”

Aiden snorted a laugh. “Nice try.”

Damn. I slumped back down across his chest. "We need to go on a road trip."

"I figured. Where we going?"

"Chicago to L.A."

For a second Aiden tensed, and then relaxed. "Okay."

Was he worried about being stuck in a car with me for that long? "Morgan and I went on this road trip once—when I was fourteen. Gramps wanted to hop in the Mustang and take the old Route 66 all the way to L.A. So that's what we did. We packed up our stuff and went."

"I remember you going."

"I... we had a good time, Morgan and me. Except he kind of... acted weird on that trip. Wasn't really himself, you know? Like he had something big on his mind."

Aiden made a contemptuous sound in his throat.

I couldn't blame him for that. "Anyway, I think maybe... the real reason we went was so he could check on it. Make sure nothing had happened to it. And it would seem perfectly natural for him to take me on a trip—it was summer holidays. If anyone was watching him, they'd think nothing of him taking off for a few weeks because I was with him."

Aiden raised one of his perfect, strawberry-blond brows. "True."

"It felt like a holiday to me. I mean, we didn't rush it. We stopped when we felt like stopping, we ate when we wanted, and if we saw a cool road, we went down it. We stayed a couple nights in a few places, did all the touristy things. It was nice to get away, just the two of us."

"So what happened?"

"Huh?"

"Well something must have gone down at some point. Something interesting enough that it stuck in your head so that ten years later, when you had five minutes to think it over, you instantly remember that trip and connect it to this pile of stuff?"

Fucking Aiden. Always had to point out the obvious. "He was just... I dunno—weird. Secretive. Preoccupied. Three times, he left our hotel room at

night and didn't come back until almost dawn." Which was not like Gramps, at all. "At the time, I thought maybe he was out boning some waitress or other, and I didn't think much of it."

"He did like the ladies," Aiden agreed.

"But he wouldn't have left me alone like that for some easy waitress. He left the room for hours, and more than once." Gramps was a little overprotective. Now I knew why. "And then one night he checks us in at this really crappy motel and tells me he has some business to attend to in the morning, and I'd have to amuse myself for the day."

Since I was splayed all over him, I felt Aiden's muscles tense. "That does sound... odd."

That had been the most boring day from hell. I finished the book series I'd been reading and then had a good wank session thinking about what it might be like sucking cock—Aiden's cock in particular. Yeah, I still remembered that. And later, I got sunburned hanging too long in the motel's disgusting, over-chlorinated excuse for a pool. The water had left my skin feeling slimy afterward. I remembered that, too. "He was gone all day. Got back around seven, I think. He seemed... depressed. Down." Gramps wasn't the kind to show his emotions. *Probably because he was a psychopath*, my brain chimed in. "Shut up," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just talking to the little devil on my shoulder."

My arms and legs went flying—and I suddenly found myself underneath Aiden instead of on top of him. "And what did the devil just whisper in your ear, Jason?"

I swatted some of his long hair out of my face. "Nothing important. Private thought."

"Until you're yourself again, nothing is private. You will tell me everything."

I gave him a shove. "You expect me to tell you every thought I have?" Aiden wouldn't be able to take five minutes of listening to what went on in my head. And what did he mean, be myself again?

"No. Just the ones where you have to tell yourself, out loud, to shut up."

No more frigging muttering, Jase. I had to quit a habit I didn't know I had, and fast. "Fine," I huffed. "I wondered if Morgan was one of those high-functioning psychopaths."

"Obviously. All those years—and he never batted an eyelash. Talked to me and everyone else, smooth as you please. He was... my friend. At least I was his friend. I had no clue he hated me."

Did Aiden feel some of the betrayal I felt? I pushed the thought aside. I really didn't want to start bawling again—my eyes ached enough for one day. "After dinner, we stopped at a liquor store and stocked up."

"Morgan?"

"I told you he was acting weird." Morgan didn't drink. *Yeah, very well couldn't, could he? Couldn't risk blabbing about what he'd done in a drunken rant...* "Then we went back to the room, cranked up the air-conditioner and started drinking."

"He did this in front of you?"

"Hell, no. I joined him. He wanted me to. You wouldn't believe how incredibly fucking drunk I got—absolutely wasted."

"Jesus Christ."

"After I had a few, I told him flat-out I liked guys. I'm pretty sure he knew by then... but, yeah." I probably grossed the poor man out—I'd just been wanking myself to heaven that morning thinking about cock, and Lord knows what I said. "I think I had a touch of heatstroke." I'd gagged on the first sip. "Never drink wine coolers when you've had too much sun. I spent half the night and most of the next day puking. We had to stop every five miles so I could open the door, lean out, and puke some more."

"Idiot."

Well, I was just fourteen. "I spent the night listening to Gramps bitch about everything. The Vish. The shitty economy. Women. When I came back from puking in the gross bathroom, he'd start all over again. Mostly about the Vish." I snorted at one memory that stood out. "Gramps finally told me maybe it was a good thing I was a fag—that way I wouldn't have to deal with getting screwed over by lying, faithless women."

Neither of us said anything for a while. In hindsight, the signs that Morgan had big problems were becoming more and more obvious.

Aiden broke the uneasy silence first. "You remember where you spent that night of drunken debauchery?"

"Not a clue. I wasn't paying much attention. One of the hotter states. New Mexico or Arizona, probably."

"Not much to go on."

"I know and I'm sorry. But maybe if we go, if we stop at the same places, something will come to me. I might remember things if I have some visual clues to tweak my memory." I felt like a failure and we hadn't even left yet. "Best I can do, Aiden."

He grunted. "I'll take your worst over most other people's bests."

Yeah? "I'll do some research."

"No, you'll rest."

"I will—"

"Do as you're told."

I wrestled with the urge to stick out my tongue.

"Can you eat now?"

"No."

"Try, anyway."

My stomach was still tied in one big knot. "You never used to be so bossy before."

"You were never mine before."

"Oh." What could I say? It was true. I'd even agreed.

Instead of dragging me to the kitchen for dinner, Aiden paused to run his finger along my cheek, and then my jaw. I closed my sore, puffy eyes. "This is never going to get old," he said.

With my eyes closed, I relaxed, almost smiling at the rumble of his voice in his chest, pressed against mine. Maybe he felt a little something for me? "What isn't?"

"Being able to touch you."

He kissed me then, long and slow and sweet. I couldn't help it—I'd wanted him forever—and I kissed him back. Then he dragged me to the kitchen to feed me the dinner I didn't want.

The hot pepper thing threatening to dissolve his pot turned out to be tasty, and not kill-you-quick spicy. Just hot and sour soup, with tofu, chunks of meat, and curious bits of... mushrooms? I chewed them with suspicion. Passably edible. The vinegar made the hot sauce he'd added smell stronger than it really was. As we'd cuddled on the couch, the fumes had had time to mellow.

Now that I had a clearer head, I picked through the pile of what might be the infamous clues. The postcards fascinated me. Some were old enough they should be in a museum. I started laying them out on the map, above their respective states.

"Finish your dinner. That can wait," Aiden said.

"I will. I just like to read while I eat." Especially cereal boxes.

Aiden mumbled something that sounded suspiciously uncomplimentary. The postcards had been tied together with a cheap silver chain with an even cheaper, clunky, but very pretty, turquoise pendant. I picked at the knots with the tine of my unused fork. Where did this come from? New Mexico or Arizona?

"That doesn't look like eating to me," Aiden commented.

"Shut up, I'm thinking."

What Indian tribe was famous for their turquoise? The Anasazi? The Pueblo? Or was the important thing the silver that held it all together? I tapped my foot and worked the tine until I freed the big center tangle.

"You're not thinking, you're fidgeting."

So? "That's how I think." To shut Aiden up, I dipped a huge chunk of bread in my soup and shoved it in my mouth. I didn't want to eat. I was mortified. Firstly, by what I said to Aiden, whose motives I still wasn't sure about, and secondly, for sobbing uncontrollably all over him like an idiot. A post-cry ache throbbed behind my eyes. I finished the bread and ate the tofu. Tasted okay, but the texture...

The last knot in the chain untangled with a jiggle of the fork. I spread it out on the table. Now that I could see it in its entirety, I wondered if it was as cheap as I thought. It looked... weathered. Worn. *Hand-tooled*. "Jesus," I muttered. I'd been assaulting an antique with a fork.

Aiden's chair scraped slightly as he leaned forward. "Find something?"

Yeah, he was keen, the bastard, and faking his disinterest all through dinner. If I had a brain, and an evil streak, I'd spin a tale for him. "I think this is really old."

"Oh? As in, what? Late twenties when they built the highway? The fifties? You could buy that touristy stuff along the entire route for decades."

I flipped it over. No secret code and no *X marks the spot*. Just small, blackened grooves made a very long time ago. I'd have to google the subject later, when I could get my hands on Aiden's laptop. "No. I mean really old, as in this might be an archeological relic, rather than just an antique. Except the chain—that's obviously newer."

Aiden gave up his could-care-less pretense and joined me on my side of the table. He examined it and ran the lace of connected stones through his fingers. "Maybe Morgan found it."

Gramps, you sly dog. "Maybe he did. When he was looking for something else."

Aiden shook his head and smiled. "You still like mystery novels, don't you?"

Who didn't? "That's beside the point."

"You think it's connected to the postcards? That it's a clue?"

"Possibly." I moved the dishes out of the way—getting a glare from Aiden for not finishing my soup—and smoothed out a wrinkle on the map. Pondering the necklace's significance, I finished sorting the cards into their respective rows.

Illinois only had one card, a tattered black and white one with an ancient typeface identifying the photo as being from the *Chicago World Fair*. That one kind of stumped me—it wasn't directly related to Route 66.

Missouri had only one card as well, of the ubiquitous Gateway Arch. The blatant coincidence of the name, *Gateway*, and the massive shape meant to pass through, had possibilities. Nah. Too easy. "Red herring?" I mumbled. "Or fact?"

Oklahoma had two, one of those motels with the cute old-fashioned signs with arrows showing you the way in, where I'd secretly like to stay, and a place called Quapaw, which held the oldest pow-wow in the States, every Fourth of

July. Aiden and I would be too early for the pow-wow this year, and Gramps and I hadn't been traveling on the fourth that year, we'd gone after.

Kansas had a photo of one of those state Historic Route road signs with the 66 designation written on it, and an arrow pointing the way. Go left? Right? Yeah, that card was helpful. The postcard said *Greetings from Kansas* and showed a tractor on an expanse of wheat field. Or something yellow, anyway.

When Aiden and I reached Amarillo, Texas, we'd have to see if either of the two motels or the cool fifties diner still existed. And what the hell was with the last card—a bunch of cars half buried in the ground? Cadillacs? Were we going to have to check each and every car?

New Mexico and Arizona had the most, and varied, cards and photos. Motels, restaurants, stops of interest, endless stretches of desert landscapes, silver mines, ghost towns, and a bunch of gas-guzzling cars from the fifties chugging along the open road.

California was pretty much the same. Motels, cars, bridges and dusty towns that time forgot. And here I thought every square inch of California was full of swimming pools and Kardashians. There was a yellowed, quaint, thing called a *Travel Mat* beseeching me to *take it with me!* So I wouldn't miss the *Recommended Places to Stop!*

Jesus. I flopped back down on my chair and didn't bother to smother my dejected sigh. "California alone would take a lifetime to search." I glanced over at Aiden who had the nerve to adjust my postcard rows. "A Vish lifetime," I added. Then, "You know anything I don't?"

"Nope. If Morgan hadn't made that video, we never would have known. The secret would have died with him." Aiden put his arm around my shoulder. No need, I had no tears left. "I honestly didn't think you'd make anything of all this stuff." He snorted softly. "You'd think I'd know better by now than to underestimate that brain of yours."

I slid out from under his arm. "What does that mean?" Over the years, my few friends had teased me for having some kind of attention deficit disorder. I don't—I just hate not having something to think about—and I've grown sensitive about the subject. "There's nothing wrong with my brain."

His arm went back around my shoulder and dragged me back. "I know. You're just smart as hell, that's all."

No I wasn't. But better that than Aiden thinking I was dumb. "I could be wrong. About everything."

"But you could be right. And we don't have anything else to go on." He rubbed the back of my neck under my hair, and I shivered. "Go up to bed. I'll grab the laptop, and we can plan how we're going to do this, and see if anything online seems familiar to you. You'll find fresh sheets and a new duvet cover in the hall closet."

I gave him a cross look.

"Your blood."

I had no problem with doing maid duty—later—right now I just wanted to mope at the table nursing all my sore body parts and sorting postcards until I couldn't think anymore. "I'm not tired."

Aiden looked at me, his expression one of slight surprise. "That was one of those direct orders you promised to obey."

He had to be kidding. Yeah, I promised, but... I had to obey all the time? What the fuck? I expected any applicable orders to only include the big stuff, stuff concerning the Vish, not every aspect of my life. Guess Aiden was still angry about having to go to Chichi and get me. And for running away in the first place.

"Don't think. Do."

Several good comebacks popped into my head, but I took one look at Aiden and his narrowed eyes and shutting up suddenly seemed the wisest option. He meant it. And obeying Aiden, as much as it chafed, was a hell of a lot better than being dead.

Didn't mean I had to like it. As I stewed and dealt with the impossible task of getting the comforter into the new duvet cover by myself, all the implications behind the word *obey* rolled about in my head.

My dick approved of some of those implications and swelled with unwanted interest.

That had to be the biggest mind-fuck of all—the one you perpetrated on yourself.

Sexual fantasies invaded my dreams. One of the advantages of a lucid dream is you can sort of direct them, and I sure as hell knew which way I wanted my current dream to go. Aching and hard, I shoved my dick into the warm hand surrounding it in a firm grip. It felt so real, not to mention good, that I must be almost awake—I took the opportunity to thrust into the squeezing fist again before I woke fully and the dream dissolved. My dick slid easily, as if lubed.

Lubed?

What the...? I startled, suddenly fully awake. Not dreaming... There was a calloused hand on my dick, expertly doing very naughty things to it. "Aiden... what are you doing?" I groaned. Yeah, okay I knew... I just wasn't used to waking up to an amazing hand-job. But I *could* get used to it. Seeking a faster pace, I planted my foot flat on the mattress and jerked my hips up.

"We have something important to do today. I want your mind on the job, not on how horny you are."

I wasn't horny—well, right now I was, but... oh, my god. To hell with arguing—I couldn't think straight. I reopened my eyes to find Aiden above me, not in bed beside me. He had one knee propped on the bed while he jacked me. His lazy, arrogant smile seemed to be all for me. Sunlight sparked the red highlights in his hair. *Why'd he have to be so beautiful?*

In response to the bucking of my hips, Aiden tightened his grip. Pumped at the perfect speed. His thumb did something amazing just under the head of my cock, and I gasped. Aiden occupied his other hand with my balls, tugging them upward, and rolling them between his fingers. They slid easily in his lube-slicked fingers. Holding the moans in only made them fiercer, and I clawed at my pillow and tried to suppress them. My orgasm built fast. As I writhed around on the bed and dug my heel into the mattress, the fingers on my balls moved lower, slipping down my perineum toward my anus.

"I want you to come with my finger in your ass."

My hips jerked wildly. "Jesus, Aiden," I gasped. "Don't say shit like that."

All the soreness from Aiden's previous attentions had disappeared, but I was still tight. My ass accepted his thick digit with reluctance. When it did, my balls tightened immediately. The tingle of my approaching climax spread rapidly until I felt the warning prickle all over my body.

"Give it to me," Aiden urged, reaching deep.

"Aiden!" I cried, and with a single thrust of that finger inside me, I came.

Hot cum splattered on my belly and up my chest. Aiden stopped jacking me before he made me oversensitized—thank god, because I was buzzing. After he eased his finger out of me, I slumped back into the mattress, legs sprawled. I'd lost my shyness damned fast, hadn't I?

"Don't get cum all over the sheets."

I had just enough energy to fold my fingers into a rude gesture.

He chuckled, and when I forced my eyes open, he smiled at me.

"You're dressed?" I said, stating the obvious. "You don't want me to...?" I nodded at his crotch and the thick bulge there.

"Later. I just wanted to watch you come with the sunlight shining on your face."

There could be worse reasons to give someone an orgasm. "Um... thanks?"

"You're welcome. Now grab a shower and come down for breakfast." He smiled hugely. "I'm taking you to see the gate."

Cum-smear or not, I bolted upright. *Holy shit*. "The gate? I get to see the gate? You mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. I promised you no mind-fucks." Still smiling, he walked into the bathroom to wash. "Hurry up and get in the shower, I really didn't want to wake you, but I'm starving."

"You could've eaten without me." I rolled off the bed as carefully as I could and followed after him.

"That's not a habit we're going to get into."

"What? Eating?"

"Eating alone."

Aiden dried his hands, and passing me, paused to deliver a surprisingly brutal kiss, at once both quick and dirty. My lips stung when he was done. Leaving me to stare after him, mouth open, he departed for the kitchen.

I'm going to see the gate! I stood naked on the chilly floor, utterly stunned. The gate! Morgan's attack had been the Vish's wake-up call, their 9-11, and since then, they guarded it religiously and relentlessly. How the hell had Aiden managed it? I felt almost giddy as I showered and shaved, intending to look my

best and show the Vish what I thought of their death penalty. My bruise collection looked even worse than it had yesterday—hopefully my shirt would cover most of it.

My pile of clothing was missing from the chair. I didn't think Aiden expected me to walk around naked. Or did he? I kept remembering the joy he took in taunting me with that scary word, *obey*. Where would he have put them? With no closet in the bedroom, two very large, antique armoires and a lovely maple dresser held all of Aiden's clothes and personal items.

I checked the first one—all Aiden's stuff—and stopped to admire the few ceremonial Vish tunics hanging there. They hung to the knee and were usually worn with leggings. Or a long skirt. They looked good on any Vish, and on Aiden? Sexy as hell. No wonder I crushed on him as a teen. He also had tailored suits. A hot man, well-dressed for a night out, did it for me. I like me some good suit porn, that's all I can say. But no clothes for me.

I peeked in the second armoire, catching a faint whiff of cedar. My few things were neatly put away on one side, the rest of the space empty. A single white dress shirt hung on the lone hanger, and I plucked it off and put it on. Perfect fit. The dress slacks hanging below were plainly tailored, and a deep grey. I dressed quickly—my stomach was now wide awake and growling. Why did Aiden empty out the entire armoire?

For you, idiot.

Why did I need the whole space, though? It wasn't like I'd be staying—

Oh, no.

No, no, *no*.

The bastard! I lived in California. Not here. I'd escaped from here.

You promised...

For once, my overactive mind went blank. My running off had been unusual for me to say the least. Maybe I had been in shock? If I didn't think I could keep a promise, I didn't make one. I'd agreed, and promised and... damn it, I would keep it. School could wait a few months. This was important, and for once, I was important, and Aiden was important to me.

"Jase?"

I startled at Aiden's words. I hadn't heard him on the stairs, and that one creaky riser hadn't given him away. "Yeah?"

“You okay?”

So what if my life wasn't exactly perfect at the moment? I still had one. From now on, anything was possible. “Yes.”

Not convinced, Aiden stared at me for a moment, his face unreadable. Probably just checking my sanity meter. Then his blank mask shattered, and he broke out in a really stupid, toothy grin—the mind-reading fuck. He also held out his hand—as if—but I simply sneered and gave him a wide berth as I angled toward the door. He grabbed for my ass. I did what any sane man would do. I ran.

My longer legs saved the day, and I reached the kitchen first, with enough seconds to spare that I was able to snatch up the spatula and threaten him with it. “Back off, O'Rourke, or I'll flip you!”

“You think so?” he teased. Then proceeded to disarm me in about three seconds. But that was only because I didn't want to get grease on my only nice shirt.

He shoveled a heap of some revolting substance onto a plate and handed it to me. “What the hell is this?” Were those potatoes?

“Hash.”

I sniffed it. Might be edible. “Hash? Well good, because I'd need to be stoned to eat this.”

“I said hash, not hashish. Now shut up and get us forks.”

Nobody ever got my sense of humor. Still eyeing the mixture with suspicion, I grabbed two forks and set my plate down by my map. By the time I found two glasses, and got the orange juice from the fridge, Aiden was at the table with a sizzling pan, sliding a raw egg onto the mush. Hash. Whatever. “I don't know why you went through all the trouble to piss off every single Vish on the planet and save me from their wrath, if you're just going to poison me.”

“It's an egg, and that's homemade corned beef hash, you ungrateful, picky shit.”

I shoved the salmonella-delivery-device to one side and dug my fork into the hash. Eggs were only edible if scrambled and cooked to a nice rubbery texture. Yes, I had heard of hash, and actually, it smelled pretty damned good. I ate a forkful. Huh. Delicious. The huge mound disappeared in minutes, as I

organized and reorganized the postcards and photos. Aiden kept touching them. Reading them. The nerve.

Between us, we finished every bite—I traded Aiden my runny chicken embryo for more hash—and were out the door and on the road by... whatever time it was. I hadn't seen my phone since Chichi, not that it had been working by then. Begging the favor of a nun, I'd called Aiden from the church. "You stole my phone."

"Stole is such an ugly word, Jase." Aiden gave me a cheeky smile. "I prefer confiscated."

"I need it back."

Aiden drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. For a minute, I wondered if he wouldn't give it back. I also wondered if I needed to kill him.

"It's in that bag on the back seat. Small zipper at the front."

"Did you charge it?"

"Yes." More finger drumming. "Don't make me regret it."

Asshole. "I have a life, Aiden. There are people who might be worried about me." Thankfully, he didn't say anything to that, like my life was now his, otherwise I might have been tempted to yank the wheel until we drove into a ditch. I reached back, plucked the bag by the strap and dug out my baby. My first call was to my academic advisor. I'd been worrying myself crazy over my standing with the school. For no reason, it seemed. We chatted, discussed the future, and when I hung up, I fully intended to murder Aiden at the first opportunity.

"You told them I was in rehab? *Rehab*? You fucker!"

"For grief counselling, Jase, not a raging drug habit."

Same difference. But she'd been pleased by the proactive stance I'd taken. Idiot. If she only knew where I'd really been. My permanent record was salvaged, but I would have to reapply to get back in. I refused to ponder just where I would be reapplying. That would have to wait.

I also checked in with Dusty, who'd been worried sick and wondering who the hell this Aiden person was. I texted all my study buddies and told them I would be back at some point and wished them well.

Unwinding my life disheartened me, as if I had a terminal illness and was busy making final preparations. It really hit home when I called my upstairs

neighbors, Bruce and Linda, to let them know I hadn't died. They'd been saving my mail for me. After the last call, I slumped down in my seat and stared morosely out the window and pointedly ignored Aiden's comforting hand on my thigh.

For once, I didn't blame Aiden. I blamed Gramps.

How could you do this to me?

How could you? Why did you...?

I must have drifted off, because next thing I knew, we were in Queens, and my neck was killing me from being bent at a bad angle. I wished I could go back to sleep because the traffic instantly drove me nuts, and I wasn't even the one driving. Slouched in my seat, I concentrated on the cityscape. "Must look a lot different nowadays, huh?" I finally ventured. Ignoring Aiden wouldn't get me anywhere. Besides, I liked his company.

Aiden glanced over at me. "I don't know about that," he said. He cocked his head. "I guess because I've watched it evolve, the changes don't seem all that startling. I like seeing the same old buildings when I come here, and I hate when they tear down something with character to build something modern and uninteresting—it's like losing an old friend. I will say the place is more colorful now. Even though there's a hell of a lot more people getting in my way, it's always been a busy place. That hasn't changed at all. The vibrancy."

Interesting. "Any changes you like?"

"Cars. Can't tell you how glad I am you finally invented them." Aiden paused for a moment to pass a few trucks. "Horses are such contrary beasts. They never seem to like me."

"You have cars back home?" Funny, I'd never thought to ask before.

"Not like this, but yeah. In the cities we have public transit—only it's automated and picks you up where you tell it, and it drops you off where you want to go. Nobody has a vehicle in a city."

"No hover cars?" Sometimes I had the mind of a twelve year-old. Sue me.

"They're all hover cars—well, hover shuttles."

"Get out."

"I'm serious. And by hover, I don't mean fly. They follow an underground grid and the magnetic propulsion system pushes them off the ground a few feet. It's also used for forward thrust."

I was suddenly ready to ditch med school and take engineering. “So, nothing gas-powered?”

“Not a one. And when you guys burn off all your fossil fuels and have no choice but to get creative, you’ll invent it, too.”

For the next half hour, I tried prying more information from Aiden, without much success. The Vish would not reveal their technology to humans—and humans were not allowed on T’El for the same reason. On that front, they were united, curse them. “How come you told me about the shuttles, then?” I needed.

Aiden flicked my ear. “Because if you suddenly opened a company for the express purpose of making mag-lev cars, nobody’d look twice. In fact, you’d probably have investors lining up at your door. You already have the technology. Rudimentary, compared to ours, but you have the basic knowledge. I’m not telling you anything that isn’t already known.”

“Damn you.”

His lip twitched with mirth. “We’re here.”

“What?” I gaped out the window at the... plain, old, stone apartment building. A big, posh, and architecturally interesting building... but, yeah. It fit right in. “The gate’s in there?” I tried not to sound unimpressed. Guess you really could find anything in Manhattan. The only thing odd about the building was the garage door which promptly opened for us. Good thing—there was absolutely no parking on the street.

Hard to believe a gate to another world was right in there. How was such a thing possible? I’d been expecting... I don’t know what the hell I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t this.

If it had been me driving, I would have hit three pedestrians, a dog, the tree, and the curb—both sides—backing in. Not Aiden, he piloted the Audi like a pro. Someone had parked a Mercedes in the spot behind ours, but that was it for cars in the tiny garage. Aiden retrieved his small bag from the back, and I took a few seconds to stretch my muscles. He set the bag down beside me and dug something out of the main pocket.

“Jase,” he said, standing back up.

“Yeah?” I replied, instantly suspicious at his stern tone.

“Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

My suspicion turned to disbelief. "Oh, come on, Aiden!"

"This is another one of those orders to be obeyed. Immediately."

I looked into his cat-green eyes. My stomach tightened into a knot. Ruthless Aiden scared me. Shuffling my feet, I turned. Nice of him to warn me.

"Hands."

Goddamn it. The handcuffs came out of a small cloth bag—and weren't what I expected. They were leather, not metal, and suspiciously like bondage cuffs. A long clasp dangled from one, and would soon join them together, locked with a tiny padlock. I craned my neck and tried to get a better look at this newest indignity.

Over my shoulder, Aiden whispered in my ear. "We're going to have so much fun with these later."

Aiden had to wait a few seconds before fastening the first one around my wrist—I shuddered so violently, my back rippled and my limbs twitched. Including the one between my legs. My dick hardened and my breath hitched. I trembled as he reached for my wrist.

No. I could not do this.

Not only was I afraid of being cuffed, there was a distinct possibility I might actually come in my pants—no wonder he gave me that hand-job this morning. I snuck my hand back around to my chest, out of Aiden's reach.

"Obey me," he growled in my ear.

My knees went weak. Shaking, and praying to god my dick wouldn't leak madly and soak through the dark pants, I twisted my arm back behind me. "Please," I begged. "Not this. What am I going to do? Huh?" Alas, no mercy for me today. The second cuff went on, the buckle cinched up tight, and then he linked and locked my wrists together. Aiden spun me back around and leaned in close, as if to disguise the fact he was speaking to me.

"I promise I'll fuck you later, with these on. As soon as we get home."

"No," I said, voice trembling. "I don't want... *fuck*." I did.

"Until then... behave, and keep your mouth shut. As hard as that is for you." Shielding me from what was obviously a camera at the one and only door, Aiden reached between my legs and skimmed a hand down to the base of my cock. He squeezed my shaft painfully, until my erection deflated. I hissed in

a pained breath. “You won’t be welcome here, but it’s important you see what the gate material looks like so you’ll recognize it if you see it. We won’t hang long—it’s safer if we get out of here as soon as possible. Keep your head up and back straight, Jase. You didn’t do anything wrong. Just think of them as mean dogs. Don’t show them any fear.”

“I’m not afraid of them!” I snarled under my breath. Now, Aiden was another matter altogether. I was afraid he might resort to one of those ruthless acts in my defense.

“Good.”

“Don’t do anything stupid!” I said into his ear.

“Don’t you! You’re far more acquainted with doing stupid things than I am.”

With a hand around my waist, Aiden led me to the door and keyed in a code on the pad. The door slid open, but it only led into a small antechamber with two more doors. The Vish have gotten paranoid. Can’t say I blame them. The second set of doors had teeth where they closed in the middle. Yes. Very paranoid.

Through the second door, there were guards. Of the Vish variety. It’d been over two months since I’d laid eyes on one of them, and for the first time in my life, their unusual appearance startled me. They looked... *alien*. And, yeah, their expressions told me I definitely wasn’t welcome.

Aiden had a hissing Vichyssoise argument with them—one full of fury on their part and patient intractability on Aiden’s part. Aiden, of course, won. Anything remotely connected to the gate fell under military jurisdiction, and by pure happenstance, on account of that big holiday after the key theft, Aiden became the highest ranking Vish military officer on Earth. I returned the Vish guards’ joint glares. *And that trumps any opinion you might have, assholes.*

A new set of four guards arrived to follow us—I think they trusted Aiden less than me. But nobody argued with him, and after a confounding journey of halls, rooms, and more locked doors we arrived in a dim room with a concave wall. Something on the other side must be round. The air seemed to come alive, as if charged, like the moments before a violent summer thunderstorm. I trembled, and this time it wasn’t with fear or arousal.

Excitement and curiosity hummed in my very bones. The marble floor suddenly moved, and I jerked, feeling off-balance with my hands tied behind

my back. Aiden grabbed my waist and held me in place. The floor wasn't moving, it was that rounded wall. A crack appeared at the top and the wall continued to rotate while lowering, and eventually disappeared into the floor.

I stared. What the... hell!

Four columns of dull black, twisted... *something*—metal?—rose from the floor and created a partial archway over a floor made of similar material. The space underneath the arch had to measure several hundred square feet. I shuffled closer, baffled by... an apparent optical illusion.

My brain knew the floor was solid, but my eyes kept insisting it was liquid, and ever so subtly rippling. The four columns shimmered as if a thin layer of water flowed down them, but if I looked from the corner of my eye, the effect disappeared. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Jesus," I muttered. In unison, the four Vish guards scowled at me.

I balked when Aiden applied pressure on my lower back, urging me forward.

"It's not active and perfectly safe," Aiden said.

"But I... don't want to... fall in!"

"You can see that?" Aiden asked in surprise.

"It's... solid, but not solid. What the hell is it?"

Now the guards looked at me suspiciously. I preferred the hateful glares. They congregated closer to each other and whispered among themselves.

"You won't fall in—you can't. Not even when in transit."

"It's liquid, then?"

"Well, I'm not a scientist, but I understand it's more like an artificial superfluid that shifts between both states. The posts both contain it and keep it in that altered state. When it's charged, from the Earth's energy itself, it does amazing things. You'd need to talk to a Vish physicist about it. I think it acts as some kind of coolant."

I was vaguely—then not so vaguely—horrified. My only interest in chemistry was as it pertained to biology, so this was my weakest area, but I was quite sure only liquids and gasses could become superfluids, and then only if very cold, as in cold on the Kelvin scale. My brain whispered *Bose-Einstein*

Condensate, but supplied nothing more. “And what if it does? Escape? Is it dangerous?”

“If it escapes, it will soon return to, and join with, the posts. It’s artificially compelled to bond with it.” He leaned closer and said in my ear, “Or it can be manipulated. By people like me.”

“You don’t seriously touch that!” I gasped.

“Let’s just say... we’re friends.”

He nudged me to the nearest post. As we drew closer, the dark substance pulsed. Was it breathing? “It’s... it’s...”

“It’s just reacting to my presence. Don’t get your boxers in a twist.”

The chill in the room made my skin clammy as I broke into a sweat. This thing—the gate—and that strange substance, did not belong here on Earth. The Vish had to know the heights of our stupidity. We couldn’t even handle nuclear energy, and were irresponsible enough to build reactors in seismically active areas. This? My brain simply could not process it—I would never sleep soundly again. “W-where does the key go?”

“If you’ll come over here, I’ll show you.”

Get closer? Uh, no. But Aiden wasn’t concerned about the impossible-to-exist alien substance. Neither were the guards. I shuffled forward, my eyes glued to the undulating surface. I didn’t trust it. I blinked, and for a second, it appeared solid. Fuck! I had a hard time dragging my eyes up from the floor. “Can you... will you untie me?” That way I could possibly save myself from falling in.

“No.” But he slid his arm through mine and walked with me.

Slightly better. Now that I was in front of it, and not eyeballing the freakshow that was the gate’s arrival pad, I noticed the post wasn’t smooth. It seemed to be comprised of separate pieces almost seamlessly welded together. I marvelled at the construction, for it surely was a manufactured thing and not natural—how had the Vish made it? They didn’t seem quite smart enough, despite what they thought. As I stared in amazement, I spotted an irregularity. A hole. Roughly a foot long, four inches wide and a half inch deep—smaller than all the other sections. “How did he get it out?” I asked.

“Like this,” Aiden said, then walked me over to the next closest post. This movement alarmed the guards, and Aiden scolded them with a few nasty hisses.

Ignoring them, Aiden tapped a matching square embedded in the post, and the substance changed shape and retracted along the sides, until Aiden could fit his fingers in the crack and pull it out.

“Oh, my fucking god,” I muttered.

Finally, with a key from his pocket, Aiden unlocked the annoying cuffs. “Touch it.”

“The hell I will!” I shouted.

“You should also know how it feels, Jase.”

“No, I think I’ll pass.”

The guards closed in. Aiden had another argument with them—they were on edge, ready and able to tear me into itty-bitty pieces if I made even one suspicious move on that piece of... whatever the fuck it was. Aiden held the... *key* in his hand. Nothing happened. He seemed fine. Morgan had been fine. Damn it!

My knees were weak, but my promise was not. Tentatively, and prepared to yank my digits away fast, I raised my newly freed hand. Then dropped it—hell if I was going to sacrifice my dominant right hand. I used my left. And only the tip of one finger.

The unearthly material felt like oily stone, rather than metal. And cold as hell. Wet, although dry. Underneath those ordinary sensations, an alien one prickled my skin. A pulse, a hum, a vibration—I felt it, yet couldn’t explain it or even attempt to understand it. I snatched my hand away. Unaware of my distress, Aiden replaced the key in its crevice, and it instantly reformed to fit, creating the same, perfect seam, as if it had never been removed.

“Are we done?” I asked, my voice shaky.

“Almost. One last thing to do.”

Aiden reclosed the clasp on my cuffs and locked it—all it took was one stony glance, and I had my hands behind my back—much to the relief of the guards, who wanted me away from the gate. I concurred, but utterly mesmerized, I couldn’t take my eyes off that strange floor. *Stop it! It’s not going to chase you.*

Yeah, but how did I know that? For sure?

Digging inside the small bag, Aiden retrieved two metal pieces, steel and entirely man-machined. The guards shifted uneasily. One of them—from the

south, judging by all that fair skin and hair—threatened Aiden in a few short hisses. Despite the alien words, his body spoke the universal language of aggression. Aiden's posture warned them to stand down.

Only they weren't going to this time.

And Aiden knew it, also. Before any of the four decided on their next move, Aiden stepped backward, closer to the pulsing gate and tossed the metal fragments in the air. They fell—my eyes followed the sudden movement even though I'd been trying to watch both Aiden and the guard pack at the same time—but they didn't hit the marble. Something slithered along the floor and caught them.

My legs unfroze. Shocked and startled, I stumbled to the side, and away from the gas—liquid, whatever the fuck it was, now flowing over the floor. The fluid swarmed the metal pieces and then shot upward to spin around Aiden, the substance swirling under and around his clothing and disturbing his hair. The guards all drew their guns—but too late. The fluid had fused with the metal bits and turned solid, and then abruptly became a shape in Aiden's hand.

A weapon.

Although armed, and four to one, the guards froze.

"Put them away!" Aiden snarled, in English.

One set of eyes flicked my way.

"Don't be stupid and think you'll ever be fast enough."

Apparently, the guard agreed. Begrudgingly, they all slowly returned their weapons—simple human guns—to their holsters. "You can't take that with you!" the Vish said. "We won't allow it."

"I can and I will."

"The Council has forbidden it!"

"This is a military operation and completely within my jurisdiction, not theirs." The strange substance continued to swirl around Aiden as he stepped closer to me—and effectively placed himself between me and the guards' hostility. "Let's go, Mr. Kelly."

My heart thudded somewhere in the vicinity of my throat. Fear shackled my legs. I didn't want Aiden to touch me, not covered in that... alien whatever, so I moved, body stiff with terror. The door loomed an impossible distance ahead.

When I arrived within a few feet of the door, it opened automatically for us, enticing me with safety. But I halted. No! I must refuse to step through. Not with that... alien fluid stuff on the loose. Some of it was already flowing up the walls...

“Jason! Move it.”

“I can’t!” I sputtered. “It’s following us!”

“Fine. I’ll put it back.” Ignoring my terror, Aiden turned on his heel, faced the four guards and levelled his strange, gun-shaped weapon at them. He spoke a few words in his Vish tongue to the guards, and then the flowing liquid began to retract. Not that it stopped my heart from racing. The creepy stuff had begun flowing along the ceiling, totally defying the laws of physics as I knew them, and it looked just as wrong when it flowed back down, like smoke. In seconds, the last tendrils returned to the gate floor, rippled, and finally settled.

Aiden gently shoved me through the door. Once in the hall, he hooked an arm through mine. My feet weren’t cooperating—what the hell happened to my flight reflex? Or at least my fight one? Aiden’s arm, where it touched mine, chilled me to the bone. I didn’t look back. I’m sure the four guards followed, keeping their distance. When we found our way back to the original two guards, I expected a confrontation.

Turned out I was wrong. Mostly. I would have preferred a firefight over coming face-to-face with Aiden’s remaining Vish uncle, T’Loren. I stopped short. There were probably many people, aside from Aiden and I, who would have preferred that T’Loren had been the one to be chopped in half while coming through the gate instead of the other uncle, the nice one, and the one I’d never get to meet. T’Loren and I shared a mutual, lifelong dislike. He looked upon me with disgust. As rattled as I was, I couldn’t summon my usual sneer in reply.

But it soon came back to me.

That bastard probably signed off on my death penalty—he sat on their interim ruling council. The way the last half hour had gone, maybe Aiden would find cause to shoot him.

T’Loren had a cold, ethereal beauty. His big eyes were almost black. Like his heart. His glossy brown hair reached almost to the hem of his austere, black ceremonial tunic. “Aiden,” he said, voice dripping disapproval.

“Uncle.”

"Is this necessary?" he asked Aiden, speaking English, presumably for my benefit. He inclined his head at the weapon, and its strangely long barrel.

"You know it is."

I waited for T'Loren's cold admonition. Huh. No argument? But why did Aiden feel he needed a Vish weapon?

"Why did you bring... *him*?"

Anger has a way of instantly subjugating fear—and my temper was on a short fuse these days. "Because I'm helping him!" I snapped. How I hated T'Loren. Sanctimonious prick.

"Are you, now?" T'Loren asked, finally condescending to look at me. That's who I should have saved my one and only punch for, instead of Aiden.

"Yes," I snapped. "The sooner we find the key, the sooner you can get your pompous ass back to T'El. I'm sure you haven't been missed, but it's their turn to have the pleasure of your company for the next fifty years."

"Jase, shut up." Both T'Loren and Aiden frowned at me.

Instead of the usual scowl, T'Loren looked at me with a calculating glint to his alien eyes. "I abstained from voting for your execution. Perhaps that decision may prove fortuitous after all." After that comment, he dismissed me from his existence and turned his attention to Aiden. "Contact me if you need assistance. Anything at all. If you need it, it will be yours."

Surprise, surprise... Then again, he *was* family to Aiden, and those northern clans were fiercely loyal to one another.

"Thank you, but as I told you, we have nothing definitive to go on. We're going to follow a hunch of Jason's. Morgan wasn't specific, as you know." They had a silent conversation with just their eyes. "I have hope, uncle."

"Then I shall wish you the speed and grace of the rising suns and their bountiful light to guide your way."

I rolled my eyes. But that had to be the kindest string of words that had ever come out of his mouth. "I will try my best to find your key, T'Loren. Morgan did a horrible thing to you, and if I can fix it, I will."

T'Loren looked at me curiously. "Then, as they say here on Earth, Jason Kelly, Godspeed."

I think I preferred their saying better.

“Come,” he said to Aiden, “I shall walk you to your automobile.”

Having T’Loren and all his political power on our side suited me just fine. If the guards decided not to let us leave after all, I’d be happy to let the man take a bullet for me. As false as my bravado was, it helped me make it to the car on my shaky legs. All these shocks were definitely taking their toll.

At the car, and once the security door shut behind us, Aiden freed my hands again—just removing the clasp, not the cuffs—and stowed his unnaturally crafted weapon somewhere in the trunk. Even though the thing was far too close to me in just the trunk, I sighed deeply in relief and yanked open my door. I practically felt T’Loren’s big Vish eyes slide over me before he looked back at Aiden.

“At least he’s a comely lad,” T’Loren said, back to his dismissive tone. “I trust you find it makes up for his willful nature?”

Aiden squinted at me, undecided. The bastard! I narrowed my eyes and glared back at him.

“He has much of his mother in him,” T’Loren said, then, without so much as a final goodbye, turned away and strode back to, and then through, the outer door.

Restless twitches plagued my legs. I couldn’t wait to leave. My nerves were shot. I had seen things I couldn’t explain, Aiden now scared the crap out of me, and I felt a panic attack waiting for an excuse to drive me to my knees. I had my butt in the seat and my seatbelt on before Aiden made it behind the wheel.

“Your uncle’s losing it,” I told Aiden. “He knows I look nothing like my mother.” And I didn’t—more than once I secretly wondered if I hadn’t been adopted. Or found on a fairy hill. Bought cheap from gypsies. Except I did have something of my father in me, my unruly hair and ability to carry a tune, if nothing else.

“That was rather strange,” Aiden agreed. “But T’Loren is an ally, Jase. You can always trust him—remember that. I wish you wouldn’t go out of your way to piss him off.”

I made no promises I knew I wouldn’t keep.

Aiden seemed pensive as he drove. Maybe he was as afraid to hope as I was. “Aiden?”

He glanced over at me where I sat huddled against the window. “I’m not going to like whatever this newest bug up your butt is, am I?”

Probably not. “Why do you have that... *weapon*? It is a gun, isn't it?”

We stopped at a red light. Aiden leaned toward me and stroked my cheek with his thumb. Partly from fear, and partly from thrill, I shivered. “Yes, it's a gun. A rail gun. And I made it because there are some people who'd just as soon we never found that key.”

Part 2

Aiden

Simply because I could, I watched Jason sleep.

Hopefully, he would continue to sleep soundly instead of having another episode of that weird muttering he did just before waking, not that it wasn't fascinating getting a rare glimpse into the workings of his mind. The funeral, the trial, and two months of being on the run had exhausted him and he needed rest.

But leaving him alone to sleep meant I couldn't kiss him...

Jase had the most sensual mouth I'd ever seen. Those beautiful, full, pouty lips didn't match the rest of his face whatsoever. Jase wasn't handsome in a classic sense, or beautiful, he was... cute. There really wasn't any other word for him, but that plain, silly word failed to do him justice. When he smiled that crooked, disarming smile of his, his whole face lit up. Over the years, I'd heard that expression many times, but until Jase came along, I'd always considered it a bunch of crap. When he smiled or laughed, strangers on the street stopped and stared, chatted him up, or gave him their phone number.

He had the same effect on me.

What in the hell was I going to do with him?

How could I possibly keep him safe?

The situation was deteriorating, and fast. I hated politics, human and Vish—especially Vish. I'd foolishly ignored the squabbling and infighting for far too long. T'Loren had tried to warn me in that oblique way of his, but I'd been busy hunting missing people and traitors and didn't want to hear his latest updates.

I'd also been busy hiding the fact that Jase no longer lived in New York State. Morgan had been my co-conspirator, and together we'd kept his whereabouts vague. Jase was always just away taking a course, a seminar. Something. Now that he was an adult, it was expected he'd assume certain duties for the Vish—that he'd be *retained*.

Every morning, I woke up wondering if that day would be the day I received the order to kill him. So every day I lied. Not that I would have laid a finger on him. Hell, I still felt guilty for smacking him. When he'd slugged me

in the face, I'd acted instinctively and struck back, landing four or five blows before I realized what I was doing.

I didn't, however, regret fucking him afterward. The tension between us had been building for years. I always knew when we reached the limit, the explosion would be spectacular.

Jason's barb earlier had been true. I should have said something—done something—at Christmas when he'd been here, but I'd still been... waiting. Making sure. Hell, I'd held him and marvelled over his perfection when he'd been only two months old—Anna had kept her pregnancy a secret from me, probably fearing she'd lose another one if she tempted fate by talking about it. Changing the nature of our relationship after so many years scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

Took me almost losing him to realize what he meant to me. Which was everything.

After the trial, I'd argued my ass off to save his life. The Judiciary couldn't see past the horror of Morgan's crimes to realize Jase's military significance. That's what I hated most about the Vish and appreciated most about humans. No respectable, or hell, disreputable, human military would have considered executing him if there was even the slightest chance he could lead them to the key. Doing what I had to do—I hated pulling rank—I declared him a military asset and thus spared his life.

But not his freedom.

For that, I'd also had to make him mine. Declared him T'Eth. A bond stronger than marriage. It meant he could now travel to T'El, once we found the key. Unfortunately, he'd be required to join me in battle, so no way in hell would I be taking him back with me. I couldn't picture Jase with a weapon in his hand, or dying at the hands of our enemy, the G'Reth, who really did eat our fallen.

Declaring someone T'Eth wasn't without a big caveat, which is why it was rarely done. You had to trust your partner implicitly. If Jase dishonored our bond, my clan, or the Vish, I'd share the same punishment. Even unto death. Needless to say, the Vish had a great many things they considered dishonorable.

Regardless of possible consequences, I hadn't hesitated.

T'Loren had thought up the whole scheme, not me. Ancient customs and rites had always interested him. Perhaps my uncle had an ulterior motive, perhaps he figured at some point he could be rid of both of us for the price of one—he really was a cold-hearted bastard—or perhaps he thought I'd be miserable, shackled to Jason for life. Hardly. *I'll have the last laugh, Uncle.* T'Loren didn't understand that I already had Jase for life—and that he was already shackled to *me*.

Best thing that ever happened to me.

Stranded by lies here on planet Earth, with no family other than T'Loren, who basically shunned me, Morgan, his wife Louise, and Anna and Marvin, Jase's parents, had become my surrogate family. When Jase finally came along—Anna had had numerous miscarriages—my family seemed complete, although I knew better than to get too close. So what if I had to appreciate them from a distance? I still had something to care about.

I really wasn't looking forward to Jase finding out what I'd done, why I extracted his promise to obey me. I should probably tell him. Sooner, rather than later. Springing things on Jase never worked out well.

"Aiden..." Jase whispered, disturbing my mental ramblings.

I brushed an unruly strand of hair from his eye. Still asleep. But he called my name! I hated how ridiculously happy that made me.

"Please... touch me," he muttered.

Oh, yeah? Sounded awake enough to me. I slid down off the headboard and dragged his warm body against mine. Surely, he'd awaken any second now. Our cocks were both already hard and seeking each other out.

I'd wanted to make love to him last night, but Jase hadn't wanted me anywhere near him for most of yesterday. I'd frightened him. The gate had frightened him. That, I hadn't expected. Actually, I thought he'd be thrilled.

Most humans, and more than a few Vish, didn't usually contemplate the gate enough to be afraid, most tended to be mesmerized by what it could do, and were taken by the romance of traveling between worlds.

Not Jase. His first thought had been *what the hell is that?* He wanted to know what it was, how it was made and whether or not it was safe—for others, not just himself. And T'Loren wondered what I saw in him, aside from his comely face.

Jase's pliant warmth pressed against me made me horny. Jase was sexy as hell. I cupped his ass and dragged him toward me until no space remained. I tucked his head under my chin and inhaled his scent. Kissed the top of his head. With a jerky start, he woke.

"Aiden?"

"Morning sleepyhead."

"Time's it?" he groggily asked me.

"Just after eight. You can go back to sleep if you want."

If his cock had its way, there'd be no more sleeping. Wriggling slightly, he tried escaping my embrace. Since his legs were tangled with mine, and I had him by the lower back, he didn't get far. "Hot," he complained.

"Yeah? Now that you mention it, I do feel a certain heat." I ground my cock against his. "Right there." When I told Jase that touching him would never get old, I meant it. I loved having him in my bed. Or threatening me with a spatula. Hell, I loved fucking up his orderly rows of postcards and photos just so I could watch him get flustered and glare at me.

"You're roasting me!" He wriggled and tried to shove me away. As I'd planned, all his squirming simply rubbed our cocks together in a very pleasurable way. Freeing an arm, he shoved the covers down. I moved my hand to his ass. He had a great ass.

A few more sweaty rubs later, and he was mine. I got a hand between us. Jason's hand joined mine. I really wanted to fuck him, but I was too impatient this morning to do it right. How only two men had made their way into Jase's ass was a mystery. Didn't mean I didn't want to kill both of them—I only needed their names. But that same inexperience meant no quickie morning fucks. At least until he got used to me.

I swirled my thumb around Jason's slit, collecting the slippery fluid, and Jason did the same to me as my foreskin retracted. I groaned and thrust up against his palm. Since I was uncircumcised, I was really sensitive. It wasn't enough. I wanted more. I jacked him slowly a few times until he started moaning, then I pushed myself back up toward the headboard.

"Blow me," I demanded. Sort of politely. While shoving my aching cock at his lips.

“I don’t think I like you anymore.”

I grunted. “Take a number.” We were going to have a bumpy road ahead of us, but I didn’t think sexual compatibility would be one of our problems.

My cock was so hard he had trouble getting his mouth on it. Fresh from sleep, and overheated, his mouth felt incredible, all hot and wet. Despite my impatience, I didn’t shove my cock down his throat. Instead, I directed his hand with mine as he pumped my shaft, tongued the head, and dipped his tongue into both my slit and under my foreskin. “That’s so good,” I moaned. “Now I know why only two men have had you.”

His big, dark-blue eyes popped open.

“They never need to make it farther than your mouth to find heaven.”

Closing his eyes again, he hummed some sort of reply, and the vibration went straight to my balls. In seconds, I was coming and making a lot more noise than was my custom. I rode the pleasurable waves of my climax and let Jason suck and lick me until I softened in his hand. I shuddered through several aftershocks before I could open my eyes.

Why was sex with Jase so amazing? *Because no sex is better than sex with someone you love.*

Jason’s lips were swollen, shiny, and dark-red. His eyes looked slightly glazed, as if he enjoyed that as much as I did. Smiling, I slid down and yanked him towards me, intent on kissing those lips before I sucked him off. Toppy bastard I may be, but I loved giving head as much as getting it. When I slid my tongue into his mouth, I tasted myself. I sucked on his tongue and his bottom lip. When I had him gasping for breath and his cock leaking all over me, I flipped him underneath me.

We were a tangle of elbows and knees until I settled between his long legs. On my way down, I scraped my bottom teeth against his small nipple.

“Aiden!” he gasped.

“What do you want?” I asked. But knowing, I kissed and licked my way down, finding, and then following the dark treasure trail to the base of his cock. Breathing hotly on his shaft, I licked my way to the crown.

“I want... please. Just... please!”

I liked the sound of his whimpers. And the taste of him as I sucked the slippery wet head into my mouth. A few hard sucks, and he’d probably come

for me. I wanted to get him to suck on my fingers until they were good and wet, and then I wanted to work them into his ass. But, too impatient even for that, I fondled his balls, stroked him with my tongue, and swallowed him down until he burst. I swallowed that, too, and exalted in the sound of his cries.

Yes. He should be noisier than me. I had an image to maintain.

His body trembled as I pushed myself up and wiped the back of my hand across my wet mouth. What a great way to start the morning. And for five whole minutes, I'd prevented Jase from thinking about anything at all. I was rather proud of myself.

I kissed the smattering of bruises on his skin as I climbed back on top of him. He grunted a complaint which I soothed with a kiss.

Simply because I could, I held him close to my heart.

Then he got to thinking again—funny how I could tell the second his brain reengaged. I sighed. “What’s on your mind, Jase?”

“We should get going. Soon.”

Ah, that argument, again. The same one he fell asleep arguing last night. Jase had a knack for debating—he had a tongue as keen as his mind. Knowing he was right, I gave it up. “Yeah.”

He seemed surprised, like he'd never won an argument with me. Not so. I remembered losing to him more than once, and one time in particular had involved a chartered boat, far more fishing tackle than ever needed to be invented by mankind, and a fish that had taken me an hour to get to the boat and in the net. That had been one of those perfect days I'd remember for life, but also one of the last, because after that, Jase decided the west coast had more to offer than me.

Although it stung, I'd let him go.

I sighed again and shifted so that Jase's head rested on my chest. I should've made my move on him then, during that boat ride or afterwards, when he kindled a fire on the beach and barbecued me that bloody fish. Having his spectacular smiles all to myself that day had only cemented how much I wanted him. But I'd wanted to do right by him.

No matter what anyone thought of me, and most of it simply wasn't true, I was a decent man.

"What are you thinking?" he asked me when I didn't say anything more.

The smile crept up on my lips. "That time you rented the boat and made me go fishing."

For a brief moment, Jason's fingers twitched on my waist. "That was fun." He chuckled softly against my skin. "I mean, after you got your sea legs, and your face wasn't that putrid green color anymore."

Ringlets had formed on a few strands of his long hair. I tugged on one. "Laugh all you want. My fish was bigger than yours."

"Oh? Are we comparing sizes now?" Jase laughed as he teased, and the rumble traveled through my ribs.

My heart lurched a little. The real Jason Kelly was finally making a reappearance. "Mine is bigger," I teased. So was my fish.

Jase snorted. "Sure felt like it."

God, I'd missed him. "So what's the plan, then?"

Jase tilted his head and looked at me with sleepy eyes. "You're going to trust me?"

I ran my fingers through his hair. We both needed a shower. "I've always trusted you. I got on that boat with you, didn't I?"

He smiled and kissed a spot just above my nipple. "I'm almost certain we can exclude all the states except Arizona and New Mexico. We could fly to, say, Albuquerque, rent a car, and go from there."

That made perfect sense. It did. But I wanted to be greedy for once in my damned life. If we drove, I could have Jason Kelly all to myself for a few weeks. The time together could be like a... honeymoon. We could spend hours just talking. Listening to music. Making love. Or me just bending Jase over every available surface. The key could wait. After all, it had been hidden for fifty years, give or take, whereas I wouldn't have Jason forever.

"No. Let's drive it." I smiled at Jason's surprised expression. "What do you say? Should we gas up your Mustang and hit the road?"

Jase grinned. Fuck. It was *that* smile. My heart did that crazy lurch again. "You sure you want to be stuck in a car with me that long?"

Jason didn't get it. We were stuck together for life. "Positive. We have lots to talk about. It'll be fun." I started to disengage our tangled limbs. "And if we

find the key before we hit the end of the road, I won't even have to look at the fucking ocean once."

"Dude," Jase said, sliding over the edge until his feet hit the floor. "You live on an island."

"Exactly my point."

Greetings from St. Louis.

Or so said my new postcard, based on the old design. Mimicking Morgan, I decided to create my own stash of Route 66 memorabilia.

Jason flipped through a handful of brochures while I contemplated the Gateway Arch. Even from this distance, I could probably feel the pull of the key if I tuned out the commotion around me and concentrated on its unique hum. The sight of three school buses nearby filled me with dread. I had a deep and abiding fear of gangs of kids. Their presence meant I could forget concentrating on anything at the moment, but at least they were leaving. *Please be leaving and not arriving...*

Waving a brochure, Jase gave me a wicked grin from across the car hood. "You sure you don't want to take the river cruise?"

Rivers didn't bother me. If it didn't have tides or swells that rose higher than the roof of the boat I was stuck on, then no problem. But I felt like teasing Jason. "Only if you're prepared to ride in the trunk the next few hundred miles." The devil seemed to have gotten into Jase somewhere between Chicago and the parking lot full of screaming, irritating kids. Either that, or he'd caught up on his sleep.

"There's no way I'd fit in the trunk."

"Oh, I'm sure I could make you fit. Just need some rope, which, as it happens, I have. Right here in the trunk. Why don't you come over here, and I'll show you?"

He had the audacity to waggle his brows at me. Now I'd have to make him pay. Oh, yes. I smiled back at him while mentally measuring how much rope I'd need for the job.

"Come on, Aiden. I'll bet the view is amazing from the observation deck." I joined him, and we walked toward the monument. "Plus, we'll be inside it. Will that be close enough?"

“Close enough? What do you think I am? Some sort of sniffer dog?”

“Nah. More like a really expensive tool everyone tries to swipe the second you put it down.”

Was that supposed to be an insult? “I’ve got a tool for you, Jase. When we get to the hotel, I’ll show you the secret spot where I like to hide it.”

I chuckled as he almost tripped over his own big feet. After two full days of driving, Jason had been too tired for me to nail his queer, lovesick ass to the wall, or any convenient surface for that matter. Once we were done here, I planned to remedy that. I let him get a few steps ahead of me so I could watch his ass and those nice long legs. Yeah, he’d grown up nicely.

On T’El, I lived with my mother’s family in the Shalash Mountains, the vast mountain range that had given the missing key its name. As such, I had no fear of heights, and I was looking forward to the view from the top. My love of the mountains probably explained my instinctual dislike of wide-open seas.

Acting the part of tourists, Jase and I read every sign and piece of literature. We stopped at the dedication plaque. May 25, 1968—several months before Morgan stranded us here. If the theft had occurred during any stage of the Arch’s construction, I’d have been far more interested in the Missouri clue. Instead, I just enjoyed myself.

Didn’t mean we couldn’t be thorough. Besides, Jase could make just about anything seem interesting. His enthusiasm was infectious. Didn’t people work, though? They crowded their way onto every inch of the observation deck. Worse, they were all bent over with their asses sticking out. Way too much inadvertent ass touching going on for my liking.

Except one. When Jase assumed the same posture to gaze out over the city, my cock got all excited. I peered over his shoulder and secretly groped him. He kicked my shin with the heel of his size thirteen shoe. Didn’t hurt.

The Mississippi looked different than the last time I’d been here, just as the war broke out. Sad times, those days. And not just for my human brothers. Jase seemed to think the Vish were cold and unfeeling, but that simply wasn’t true. Watching the world be torn apart by war and having to refrain from interfering broke our collective hearts.

Plus, we had problems of our own.

New York had boomed. There’d been talk about moving the gate to a more remote location, but with war looming, we couldn’t—everyone had gotten

suspicious. Moving the gate was a massive undertaking. After the war, the Vish had dithered and argued over how to handle it until it was too late. As much as I wanted to find the key, I also lived in terror of the day we did.

Human technology had become so advanced, we wouldn't be able to hide the powerful thrum it made when activated, nor could we pass it off with one of our usual excuses. People had also gotten too damned smart. I smiled to myself. How the Vish hated that.

But that was a worry for another day.

We wandered around, confirming to ourselves that the key was not in St. Louis. Or at least not within the Arch. I'd reconfigured the rail gun I'd made from the gate material, so now it appeared to be part of the trunk lining of Morgan's—Jason's—Mustang. I felt its secret pulse in my chest with every beat of my heart. It tugged at the edge of my conscience every second of every day. Not that I minded. It comforted me. If the key had been here, I'd know it.

Unless Morgan encased it in lead or buried it deep inside a mountain of solid granite. But even then...

"Something wrong?" Jason asked, as we returned to the car.

If our new relationship stood any kind of chance, I couldn't lie to Jase, or constantly keep him at a distance. His deep-blue eyes were filled with concern. Then it hit me. I didn't have to lie to Jase. Like me, he had a foot in both worlds. "Nothing's wrong. Just reminiscing."

"Yeah?" He didn't look entirely convinced.

"And worrying."

"About what?"

I fumbled the car keys from my pocket and manually unlocked the door. Seemed odd to me now, after driving my new Audi. "Hop in, and I'll tell you when we get to our room. Then we'll find one of those hole-in-the-wall rib places for dinner."

"Yes!" Jase crowed in triumph.

What must it be like to be so easy to please? I'd only pretended to dislike ribs to rile him up. Flustering Jase had rapidly become my new favorite hobby. Actually, I'd always enjoyed that hobby. Since I'd made a reservation for us at the Hyatt right beside the Arch, we had time to check in and relax, and for Jase

to google the shit out of suitable restaurants. A storm rolled in just as we made it to our room. Our timing couldn't have been more perfect.

I left my laptop to Jason's mercy and unpacked the few items we'd need before leaving in the morning—like our toothbrushes, shampoo and... lube. Definitely needed that. I toed off my shoes and went to stand behind Jase at the desk, to see what he'd come up with.

Which turned out to be... nothing to do with rib shacks. "You're not addicted to that game are you?"

He glanced my way and gifted me with his all-time best, mischievous smile. "Certainly not. I can quit anytime I want."

"They all say that."

"I can! Right after I—"

Cutting him off mid-sentence, I yanked him from his chair and pushed him over to the king-size bed. When he fell across the ugly hotel quilt, I crawled on top of him and smothered his complaints with my mouth. If he was a good boy, I'd let him play later. We rolled around on the bed, and I wrestled Jason's long arms and legs into submission. The few inches height he had on me didn't work to his advantage lying down, and I quickly had his wrists pinned with one hand.

And oh, how he liked that.

So did I.

That first night, when he'd punched me, I'd retaliated, and we'd finally settled the matter in my bed, I'd threatened him with several dubious sexual acts. I'd been mad as hell. So fisting? No. But I'd been serious about having my hands down his pants all the time. And the plug. There were things I liked. Jason would probably like them too—he had an untapped well of passion burning away underneath his cute exterior.

Squeezing a hand between us, I yanked open his jeans and tugged down the zipper.

"Hey!" he gasped. "Aiden..."

I loved the sound of my named moaned from between his kiss-roughened lips. "Yes, Jason?" I breathed against the curve of his jaw. I slid my hip down onto the bed and rolled us so we were both lying on our sides.

"I was... doing... something... you know."

His voice came out sounding desperate and breathless. He struggled against my grip. I had a feeling those cuffs were going to feature prominently in our lovemaking. "Yeah? And now you're going to be doing something different. Me." I stuffed my hand down the back of his pants and grabbed a handful of sweet flesh. "Actually, I'll be doing you. And I definitely won't send you to rehab if you get addicted to me." Asserting my intention, I squeezed his wrists tightly.

His hips jerked wildly, and he bucked against me, his shocked gasp going right in my ear. I wiggled my hand in the tight space until my index finger fit into the crack of his ass. Without lube, or even spit, I didn't push my finger inside him when I found what I was looking for; I just rhythmically nudged his tight pucker, hoping to make him squirm. When he shifted his legs to better accommodate my explorations, I knew I could have him.

"Get naked," I said. I'm sure he would've agreed, but I undressed him before he got the chance. I kissed every freckle on his shoulder as I uncovered it. I kissed every bruise, unhappily knowing I put them there.

When I started to shuck my own clothes, Jase caught my wrist. "I want to."

Who was I to argue? "Help yourself." Famous last words. His hands drove me crazy, as did the almost shy way he unzipped me and peeled me out of my pants. When my cock sprang free, eager for his touch, his eyes darkened. This trip was not just about finding the key, but about discovering each other—as lovers.

We had all afternoon. No need to rush. As much I wanted to pounce on him, I didn't. I let him explore. I even spread my legs for his questing fingers. Restraint wasn't a familiar concept to me and keeping my hands to myself proved impossible after about two minutes. I touched him back. Groped him. Roughed up his nipples. Eventually I flung him flat on his back, tackled him, and raped his mouth with my tongue.

I really didn't do restraint well. "I'm going to fuck you," I growled.

"And they say romance is dead."

Ooh. Sassy Jase. "It's not dead. I'm taking you out to dinner. I'll even let you slide all your vegetables onto my plate. And anything you don't recognize or hate on sight."

"Aren't you supposed to do that first? The dinner thing? Dessert? False promises?"

Uh...?

Jason's entire body shook with laughter. Damn him. "Let me start over," I said, keeping my voice to a growl. It came easy. I still wanted to pound the fuck out of him. "I want to make love to you." Sounded weird—I can honestly say I've never made love to anyone, except Jase, even if our first time had been violent and angry. "But first, I want to suck your cock for a minute or two. Run my tongue up and down your shaft, taste you, maybe suck your balls into my mouth. Not too much sucking though—I don't want you to come right away. And while I'm going down on you, I'm going to pinch your nipples until they hurt." His breath hitched. "Then, when I release them, and the blood flows back, they'll be so sensitive, every time I breathe on them, you're going to shudder and whimper and beg me to do something about it."

"Oh?" he breathed.

"They'll be red, tender, and aching. You're going to want me to suckle them, and I will. It'll burn, but you won't care—you're going to be desperate for me to put out the flames with my wet mouth. And just when you start to come, I'm going to flick them with my thumbs. I'm betting you'll scream. What do you think? Will I have to stuff your shirt in your mouth, so the guests beside us don't freak out and call security?"

"N-no." He didn't sound very sure.

"And later, all through dinner, every time your shirt brushes against those hot little buds, you're going to remember exactly what I just did to you."

Jason opened his mouth slightly, but no words came out. Would it be possible to dirty-talk him to orgasm? Fuck, I had to try that.

"But long before you get to climax, I'm going to finger your ass." Closing his mouth, Jason swallowed. "If I wanted, I could make you come from that alone."

"Y-yeah?" he stuttered, almost choking on the word.

"Oh, yeah. You'll find that out soon enough. But not tonight. Tonight you're going to come from just my cock up your ass. Might take a little effort on my part, but I'm willing to go the extra mile for you, Jase."

"You have such a fat head."

I laughed at that. "I know. And that fat head is going to find your sweet spot and drive you out of your mind. I'm going to work my cock inside you until I

find just the right angle, and when I do..." Jason's eyes were so big and shiny, he reminded me of a Vish for a second. "I'm going to pound the ever-loving fuck out of you until you explode and splatter us both with cum."

"Uh..."

"But I'm not going to stop, even then. I'm going to keep going, rubbing that sweet spot until you're shaking and whimpering and begging me to take my pleasure and release you." I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth, bit gently, and released it. "And then... I will take my pleasure. I'm going to pump your ass so full of my cum that when you can finally get your legs under you and stand, it's going to trickle down the backs of your thighs."

"No... you wouldn't..."

"But you know I will. And you want me to."

Maybe I was hopelessly unromantic?

He didn't seem to mind.

As I carried out each and every threat, rain pelted the windows, and the black clouds darkened the room. A peculiar fluttery feeling took up residence in my chest, at once both wonderful and frightening. We kissed endlessly. When I entered him this time, it was slow and easy, face-to-face, with our tongues tangled. Once I'd seated myself fully in his tight channel, I entwined his fingers with mine and trapped him—trapped us both. Murmuring a string of half-formed pleas, he wrapped his long legs around my back and urged me to move.

I took my time.

"Faster," he begged, a few thrusts later.

I'm not really an asshole—I gave him what he wanted. I shifted my hips, looking for that perfect angle. When he cried out, I knew I'd found it. "There?" I asked, as his cries grew more desperate.

"Yes!"

I clawed at his hips, adding more bruises, and nailed his gland with a few short, sharp thrusts. He turned frantic, almost shouting out and grabbing at the blankets, his back arching off the mattress. As promised, his nipples were red, inflamed points jutting out from his flushed and sweating chest.

He was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. That fluttery feeling in my chest spread all over my body, and I knew then what it was. Joy.

"Are you lonely, Aiden?" I'd told him not anymore—and I wasn't. He was with me. *I love you, Jason Kelly.*

"Aiden," he panted, "I need—please let me..."

"Give it to me, Jase," I demanded, but really, I was the one begging. My legs trembled as I thrust into him, controlling the angle so that the head of my cock rubbed his prostate with every stroke. Leaning down, I panted in his ear, released my hands from his abused hips and brushed my thumbs across his red nubs. "Give it to me!"

With a strangled cry, he gave it up, his muscles clenching tight around me, the pleasure exquisite, almost painful, as his body milked me. What was left of me came undone. I'd promised him I wouldn't stop, but surrounded by his pulsing, squeezing heat, I did. I gave myself up to him.

I wanted to give him everything.

I'd been lonely so long.

The Mustang guzzled gas like a fiend. Maybe seventeen miles per gallon. I didn't care—the car had won me over. Or maybe Jason's love for the damn thing had. Morgan would rather have cut off a limb than do anything to alter its pristine condition, and as such, Jason had purchased a transmitter device that allowed him to play songs from his phone on the old radio. We'd been listening to the Rolling Stones and discussing our upcoming stop in Galena.

"Did you know Kansas was the first state to pave their entire section of Route 66?"

I couldn't help but smile. In fact, I did know. Read that same piece of information just that morning. "Must've broke the state coffers paving all thirteen of those miles."

Jase smacked me with the piece of paper he'd been reading. "Asshole."

"I'd say *I try*, but truthfully, it just comes naturally."

I didn't deserve it, but Jase gave me one of his magic smiles, the one with the power to stop traffic. His fingers were tapping a beat to the song on his thigh, and I admired his leg for a second before putting my eyes back on the road where they belonged. If he sat closer to me, I could have my hand on that thigh. But that wasn't Jase. And it wasn't his fault he was like a drug to me, and I couldn't get enough.

We had plans to stop at both the power plant and the museum. I couldn't imagine Morgan hiding the key to another world in either place. Jason didn't think so, either.

"Morgan, he..." I paused. I hesitated to bring up his name when Jase was finally acting normally, but I couldn't keep dancing around the subject.

"Yeah?" The happy spark died from Jason's eyes.

Curse my foolish tongue. But what the hell—I had to know. "He wasn't a very imaginative guy, was he?"

Jason looked at the papers in his hands and began to sort them. I noticed he did things like that when stressed, but I'd hesitate to call it a tic. "No. He was... a doer, rather than a thinker. He'd rather be fixing something or doing some Vish chore or other than sit around daydreaming. He told me once he had no use for idle time." Jason finally looked up, and over at me. "And he only ever read non-fiction."

Oh, the horror. I kept my smile to myself. But reading fiction demanded a certain level of imagination to get anything from it...

Jason continued with, "Or maybe he didn't like having time on his hands because it might force him to think about what he'd done."

I cursed under my breath. Jase shouldn't have to live with this. *Damn you, Morgan.* "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up. I just wondered—"

"What kind of place a psychopath would choose to hide the most valuable thing in the world, where he could be certain no one would ever find it, unless he wanted them to?"

Sometimes Jase could be painfully blunt. "Right."

To keep track of the clues and things picked up on our trip, Jase had organized everything in a binder-like contraption complete with zipper. He returned everything he'd taken out to its proper place. "It would have to be someplace... secluded."

"You don't think he'd hide it in plain sight?"

"Not in a million years. He'd put it someplace no one would ever think to look. Where no *Vish* would think to look."

I snorted. "Not many places I wouldn't search."

“Yeah, but you think like a human.”

Of course I did. I'd now spent more time on Earth than I had on T'El. I almost always thought in English. Even considered it my mother tongue, although I spoke Shalash'En like a native. For all intents and purposes, I was American. “So how does a Vish think, smarty-pants?” As soon as I said it, I regretted it.

“That we are lesser beings.”

Hell. Blunt Jase had a sharp tongue. “And you think that blinds them to certain things?” Shit—I just did it again. Referred to the Vish as *them*, and not *we*. I shook my head. *Are you so surprised? They've shunned you your entire life—no wonder you think of yourself as more human than Vish.*

Jase occupied himself with picking imaginary lint from his jeans. “They wouldn't concern themselves with the mundane, day-to-day existence of their... staff.”

The word he meant to use was *retainers*. Or, as Morgan had said once, bitterly, *slaves*.

“So... somewhere personal?”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. “Some place *his*. Totally his.”

Son of a bitch. Jason was right, as usual. “Some place he had total control over.”

“A place he owns. Owned.”

Could be anywhere. “But where, damn it?”

“You know where I think.”

I did. “And how many square miles are New Mexico and Arizona combined?”

“But couldn't we—I mean, all we have to do is search for deeds in Morgan's name in the state records, right? Or wherever they're kept.”

Ah, Jason. Definitely more than a comely face. Excitement rushed to a spot deep in my belly. “I think I know just the anal-retentive man for the job.”

Jason gave me a sour look. “T'Loren.”

“He said *anything*. All I have to do is call.”

The volume on the radio was low, but Jase turned off the music. "Do it. Although he'll probably just arrange for us to drive off a cliff in the middle of nowhere."

My cheek twitched with the effort not to laugh. T'Loren wouldn't do that. Not until *after* we found the key.

We'd been making good time from St. Louis; the Mustang had a lot of horsepower, and we were already coming up on Joplin. We had no plans to stop there, despite Jase having made a comment about a local natural wonder. "Didn't you say something about some big waterfall, near here? Why don't we head there, and I'll call T'Loren. You're officially in charge of giving directions."

"Ooh, I get to be in charge?" he taunted.

"I just changed my mind."

"Too late!" he said gleefully. I hadn't seen Jase's playful side since that horrid boat ride. I liked it. Seizing on his new task, he rummaged inside a flap in his binder and pulled out a paper map.

"Really? I finally let you be in charge, and you're going to rely on a fifty year old paper map?" I glanced over at him and gave him a narrow-eyed squint. "Don't think I don't know where Mexico is, Mr. Kelly. You can't fool me."

Jase flumped his head back on the seat. "God, Mexico." He sat back up. "Some of those dogs are probably still looking for me."

"Dogs?" *Goddamn it.* "Were you chased by dogs?"

"Don't ask." He smoothed out a non-existent wrinkle on the map. At this rate, he was going to rub away all the ink. "Turn's coming up soon."

I couldn't grill him. He'd apologized, I'd accepted it, and that was that. But now, I hated dogs. And Mexico.

As a result of Jason's excellent navigating, we arrived at Grand Falls without a single wrong turn. They were worth the detour. Before I settled my mind to call T'Loren—his favors were never without cost—I did the touristy thing with Jase. I held his hand. Who said I was unromantic? Funny enough, no one has ever called me a fag to my face. Mind you, I'd never held another man's hand in public before. We got a few looks, but fuck 'em, they could leave if they didn't like it.

I left Jase to his picture-taking endeavours while I called my uncle. Our conversation lasted less than ten minutes, and in that time, and public displays of gay affection notwithstanding, I found Jase already deep in conversation with two young women. Lovely young women with short-shorts and even shorter tops. It was that smile of his. Damn him.

They extended their appreciation of the male sex to me when I walked up beside Jase. I smiled politely, told them, "Mine," and, taking Jase by the bicep, dragged him to where we could talk in private. I could hear them laughing as we walked away.

"That was rude."

"What was rude was them pouncing on you the second my back was turned."

"They were nice."

"I'm sure they were." Everyone was nice to Jase.

"What did T'Loren say?"

"He's on it. I think I might have given him a brain orgasm. I never ask him for help." Since we'd already shocked the other sightseers by holding hands, I leaned in and gave Jase a kiss. His eyes went big with shock. "He'll call as soon as he has any information. He said two days, but I bet he'll have an address to us by tomorrow, if Morgan does indeed own anything. Hell, he'll probably have a list of every owner going back to the confederation, the GPS coordinates, a topographical survey of the area, and the name of the neighbor's cat, by noon tomorrow."

Jason just stared at me.

"What? Did you even hear a word of what I just said?"

"You kissed me."

What? He was stuck on that? And with that idiot grin on his face? "I did. And look, the Earth is still turning." I grabbed the front of his shirt and sidled closer. "Want me to do it again?"

"N-no..."

"You sure?" I closed the remaining distance and kissed him again. I even slipped him a little tongue before pulling away.

Not too far away, the girls giggled. Jase smiled. *That* smile.

I took his hand again. I wasn't being spiteful to the girls, not at all. "Let's pick up a souvenir for your wee book and hit the road. I'm starving. You think you might resort to Google for a place that makes a good burger?"

Jase switched his grin to the wicked one. "I dunno—there were some restaurants listed on the side of the map. We should see if any are still open."

My father, rest his kind soul, always told me to pick my battles. His advice had kept me sane while tap-dancing between two worlds. "Whatever you want, Jase." I handed him the car keys. "Try not to get a speeding ticket."

Jase smirked, and gave me the middle finger.

Was it any wonder I hadn't yet summoned up the courage to tell him about the T'Eth bond?

After Joplin, we stopped at every spot with a clue, all the way to Oklahoma City, where Jase told me to stop being a fucking sadist and check us into a hotel already. I had road hum buzzing in my head. Jason had run out of things to fold, organize, or read. We were both tired and hungry. Bad combination.

After dinner, we checked into a nice hotel we didn't enjoy, because we both fell asleep without so much as a grope. I must be getting old. Ancient or not, I slept curled around Jase all night, the sheet our only covering because, god forbid, I should overheat him.

A strange sense of urgency had us out the door at an obscenely early hour, without even a good morning snuggle. Or grope. While I took first turn at the wheel, I formulated plans for later, ones that would take place under a warm Texas sun and involve a pricey set of leather cuffs and Jase at his horniest.

A large storm front darkened the Oklahoma sky, as far as I could see. Like Earth, T'El has its own tornado alley, and I didn't like twisters in either world. Keeping an eye on the sky for funnel clouds, I let my lead foot have its way, and we hit the highway.

A few miles out, Jase, back to his good-natured self, turned on the radio and his phone, and the first strains of *Bridge over Troubled Water* began playing on the speaker. Memories rushed in and for a moment, time stood still. Back then, I'd known some good times. "You're cheating, you know."

“What?” he asked, perplexed.

“I thought we were only going to listen to music from the sixties on this trip?”

“But... this isn’t?”

“1970.”

“You have their entire discography memorized, or something?”

Only because I’d lost a good friend that year—to old age—and I think of him every time I hear that song, which had been all over the radio at the time. “I’m kind of a fan. Saw them in concert.” Jason scowled at me. “Twice.”

“Oh, come on!”

“We could take in some concerts, if you’re interested. As soon as we... are back home.” I was going to say, *find the key*, but I didn’t want to jinx anything.

“It’s not the same. Everyone sucks these days. All they do is lip-sync.”

One of the few constants in my life has been my love of music. On Earth, or T’El, I loved it all. My father could play just about any instrument and after only three notes of his singing, could have you in tears, weeping for your lost love, even if you didn’t have one. “Lots of bands play live. You’ll find us some good ones.”

“Maybe.”

“And you can make up these little pie charts showing their level of suckability so we know who to avoid.”

“Fuck you, Aiden O’Rourke! Fuck you.”

We talked, bickered, and stopped to take an occasional picture until we reached Amarillo. Jase loved the flat, barren land. I loathed it. No mountains. And nowhere to bend Jase over the car, hands cuffed behind his back, and properly salute the great Lone Star State.

“Do you want to check out the Cadillac graveyard and carry on, instead of staying the night?” I asked him. “Or did you want to explore that canyon you mentioned?”

The weather had turned hot, and we both had our windows rolled down. “Would you be mad if I wanted to keep going? You seem to be having a good time. I don’t want to ruin this for you. I just...”

“Want to find it.”

“Yeah.” He slouched into the corner between the door and seat. “I can’t get my mind off it, knowing it’s out there somewhere. But we haven’t heard from T’Loren, and I don’t know what we should do. Maybe we should’ve got him to check Texas while he was at it.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure he will anyway. Once he gets something in his head he doesn’t let it go.” Jase’s long leg was within grabbing distance, and I caressed his thigh. “Let’s drive to Albuquerque, then. We’ll have to make a left turn there, just to make sure we don’t regret not doing it later.”

“What?”

Kids these days. “Never mind.” Jase probably didn’t have a clue who Bugs Bunny was. “Pull out your map. I want you to find a secluded road that leads to nowhere.” Puzzling that one out would likely drive Jase nuts.

“Um... why?”

“You’ll see.” I left him to stew over that as we drove, checked the Cadillac Ranch, and found nothing but Caddies and graffiti, and chowed down on a late lunch. After we crossed into New Mexico, Jason quite noticeably became more excited by our surroundings. His eyes grew animated. Uh-oh. That was usually when he got into trouble.

“Look familiar?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Nothing in particular, but I have this,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “I dunno—prickle. Here. Down my spine.”

That meant we were close to whatever memory was trying to surface in Jason’s amazing brain. I drove, and he searched out the window, fingertips silently tapping on his leg. I watched for a second—was that Morse code?

A few minutes later, he bolted upright in his seat. “There!” he exclaimed.

We passed a road sign. “Tucumcari?”

“Maybe... I think so. Take the bypass.”

I exited the highway onto the bypass and watched Jason’s face light up as he sorted through some of Morgan’s postcards he’d secured in Mylar sleeves in the binder. “Tell me where to go from here.”

“Tucumcari Boulevard.”

I turned where he pointed, and history did this weird unfolding. I'd spent most of the fifties in T'El fighting the G'Reth, but this place, coupled with the old-fashioned dashboard of the Mustang before me, had me wondering for a second if I'd suffered a head injury and only imagined the last fifty years. Then the image snapped, and we were back to the future.

"There!" Jason said, pointing. "That's it! That's the motel we stayed at."

"Let's take a look." I slowed, and pulled into the motel driveway. "This isn't too bad. I thought you said it was a dive."

"It was! They've obviously renovated the place. It definitely wasn't this nice."

"Wanna stay?"

Eyes twinkling mischievously, he grinned hugely. "Hell, yeah." His smile settled, and he looked at me almost shyly. "You inspired one of my first self-made orgasms, right here."

"I did?"

Looking a bit nervous, he added, "Maybe we can... re-enact it?"

This was the first time he'd come on to me. I liked it. A lot. "You could convince me." My cock stirred in my tight jeans. Even if it meant bottoming, I'd do it for Jase. Mind you, he'd be tied up, and I'd be riding him the way I wanted to, but I could suffer through it.

I parked and Jase flew out of the car and across the lot on his long legs before I got my seatbelt off. He pointed at a room, I noted the number, got out, stretched, and went inside to book us in. It must be fate. The room was vacant.

We didn't have much stuff to carry into the musty room, nicely redone in mid-century style. Our meager pile of belongings disappointed me. I'd wanted to have the trunk half-filled with touristy junk and T-shirts by now. Morgan's desk, where the clues had been in the video—and which I'd rather violently had to steal back—had been home to many photos of Jase, several from that Route 66 trip. God, that kid had been photogenic. Still was. He'd had a T-shirt on in one of them—from that place right across the street. We'd have to go there after we settled in and see if they still sold them.

I checked for messages from T'Loren while Jase stripped. Stripped? I dropped my phone onto the desk. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Hand on his sock, he paused. "I thought I'd take a quick shower. I feel like I'm covered in grit from having the windows down."

"Don't get dressed when you're finished." That plan I had for Texas could still be salvaged, and we probably had enough time before T'Loren interrupted us with about eight hundred reports.

"Don't... huh?"

Might as well get him into the right mind-set right now. "That's an order to be obeyed."

Several expressions flitted across his face before he sorted himself out and dropped his pants. I looked. Semi-hard. We were so perfectly matched. Why had I waited so long? With a last confused glance over his shoulder, he disappeared into the bathroom for his shower.

I felt... strangely nervous. I wanted to explore Jase's submissive side, but what if I ruined things? Scared him? My aggression didn't always work in my favor. But I had remarkable self-control. I'd keep it simple.

While Jase showered, I filled the ice bucket, stuffed a couple water bottles down into the ice to cool for later, and after peeling the blankets down, slipped the lube under the pillow. I'd brought a small dildo from home—I'd found it in the bottom drawer of my bedside table, still in its box, unopened, whoever I'd bought it for long forgotten. What the hell—I opened it and tucked it under the other pillow. Didn't mean I had to use it.

Just as I finished shucking my socks and tucking the leather cuffs in my waistband at the back, hidden for now, the pipes rattled, and the shower cut off.

A few minutes later Jase emerged from the bathroom, damp and naked, as ordered. Saliva instantly pooled in my mouth. His long, lean body was beautiful. He'd never be muscular, but what muscles he did have were nicely sculpted and toned. Water dripped from the ends of his hair, down his chest, and over those tiny nubs I'd taken so much pleasure in tormenting that afternoon in St. Louis. A few drips rolled down over his flat belly and into the dark arrow of hair leading into the thicker patch surrounding his cock. My eyes lingered on his erection.

Yes, this could work.

Unsure of what I wanted from him, he moved shyly forward, eyes wide with anticipation.

“C’mere,” I told him.

When he got close enough, I went straight for his mouth, kissing him until his hands curled around my face, and he pulled me closer. His tongue thrusting into my mouth heated my already overheated flesh. My fingers twitched restlessly, but I kept my hands above his waist. Jason’s kiss felt, and tasted, so wonderful I was reluctant to pull away. But I managed.

“So,” I began, caressing his hip bones, “tell me about this fantasy you want to re-enact.”

His cheeks pinked up. His tongue darted out to lick his red lips. “I was... it wasn’t that big of a deal.”

The pretty cheek-blush slid down his throat to flush his upper chest. A drop of water trickled down his sternum, and before it escaped, I licked it up with the tip of my tongue. “No need to be shy. Tell me what you were doing in this not-very-big fantasy that made you come, thinking of me?”

“I was... sucking your cock.”

Naughty boy. Thinking about sucking my cock when he was but fourteen? Glad I didn’t know about that, then. “Just sucking my cock?”

He nodded. “I couldn’t imagine much beyond that—at the time.”

Well, he’d only been fourteen. Anything more than that would be kind of disturbing. But the answer he gave for my next question would reveal many truths. “And where were you when you were sucking my cock?”

He blushed furiously. Swallowed convulsively. “On my knees.”

Exactly what I’d hoped to hear. Even my earliest sexual fantasies had involved someone sucking *my* cock—not the other way around. I’d never gotten off fantasizing about being the one on his knees. I got off thinking about men on their knees for me. Jase and I were perfect for each other. “Turn around.”

Just like he had at the garage, Jase shivered hard enough that his shoulders shook. Seeking one last confirmation, I glanced down. Fully erect. Once the shiver passed, he turned and offered me his long, damp back, and, without twitching, both hands. The smooth, lightly freckled skin on his back rippled and then broke out in goose bumps as I buckled my cuffs snugly around his wrists and joined the rings with a simple spring-loaded clasp. No lock this time. But Jase didn’t need to know that, did he?

The carpet looked newer, and clean. Good enough. I turned his lithe, trembling body to face mine. His eyes were glassy with excitement, and his mouth hung open slightly. Quickened breaths escaped from between those lips of a thousand different smiles. A possessive smile tugged at mine.

“You said you were on your knees. So get going,” I ordered. With the barest hesitation, he eased down to the floor. The awkward position he assumed, legs together and feet crossed underneath his butt, confirmed what I’d hoped, that he’d never submitted to anyone on his knees, before. “Spread your legs.” He inched his long legs apart and looked up at me with trusting eyes. That rare feeling of joy suffused my body with a wonderful warmth. With the backs of my fingers, I caressed his cheek.

Did he know I loved him back?

Keeping my eyes on his, I moved my hand to the button on my jeans.

“Show me how you sucked my cock, Jason.”

Part 3

Jason

Aiden slowly lowered his zipper, pushed his jeans and Calvin Klein's part way down his hips and presented me with his stiff dick.

Nothing I'd ever fantasized about prepared me for this. My thighs quivered, and my mouth filled with spit. The smooth, leather bindings, and the lock holding my wrists together occupied most of my consciousness. I should've known Aiden wouldn't have forgotten my embarrassing reaction the first time he'd put me in the cuffs. Between the thudding of my heart and the excitement racing like wildfire in my veins, I felt lightheaded. Drunk. High. Something.

The ripe, purplish head of Aiden's cock butted against my bottom lip. With the foreskin completely retracted, the glans was visible in all its silken glory. His scent, musky, male, and promising sex, made my mouth water anew. I'd wanted this—asked for it, yet fear gripped me as tightly as Aiden's shackles. Kneeling subservient at Aiden's feet, hands tied, and body completely at his mercy, forced me to confront certain facts about myself and desires I wasn't quite ready to admit.

But if not now, when?

"No," Aiden snapped. I flicked my eyes up to meet his striking, cat-slanted ones. Nothing sinister lurked in their green depths. "Don't think. Do."

Did I trust the man, or not? Did I truly believe that hateful accusation I'd hurled at him in his kitchen? That I thought my body and my heart were only a path he'd tread upon to get to the key?

Or did I believe in the man who stared down an entire room of vengeful Vish, and told them they couldn't have me? That same man who sprung me from my cold Vish jail cell by invoking an ancient custom that bonded him to me for life, thus relinquishing his own freedom until I drew my last breath?

The answer came swiftly. I'd pick the second Aiden—the man who chose to save me at great cost to himself.

Are you lonely, Aiden? I'd asked. *Not anymore...* he'd answered.

I wasn't lonely anymore, either.

Letting go of my insecurities and fears freed me to give my trust to Aiden. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth.

The salty, bitter taste of pre-cum exploded on my taste buds as his weeping slit crossed my tongue. Arousal made me greedy, and I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him in. Without the use of my hands, my lips, tongue, and throat were forced to service him. Being Aiden, he worked me to the limit.

“Is this how you imagined it, Jase? All those years ago, lying right there on that bed with your hand in your pants, is this how you saw yourself sucking my cock?”

Aiden popped his cock from my mouth to allow me to answer him, and a thread of drool went with his saliva-coated organ, dangling from the tip. “No,” I answered, truthfully. “This is... much better than any fantasy.”

His length re-entered my mouth with a forceful thrust that rocked me back on my knees. Jesus. I shouldn't have admitted that; he already had such a fat head. And knew how to play me. His thumbs skimmed along my cheeks, and his fingers tangled knots in my hair. Holding my head in place, he proceeded to fuck my mouth until I couldn't breathe, and my eyes watered. As I sucked his shaft and took his inches into my throat, my dick bobbed and bounced, painfully hard and neglected. Slippery fluid from my slit slimed everything it touched as he dragged my face forward to fuck deeper into my throat.

Desperate for more than just air, I fought him. I struggled against his hold, just like I had the first time he fucked me. I was so turned on. Grabbing a handful of hair, he yanked my head back and pulled his dripping-with-saliva dick from my mouth. Choking on my own slobber and gasping for air, I finally coughed out, “Bastard!”

“Yeah, but I'm your bastard.”

He didn't bother to disguise his smug tone. That arrogance reminded me why I hated him. Twisting my shoulders, I tried to free my head from his unyielding grasp.

“Don't think so, baby. I'm not done with you.”

Keeping one hand on my hair and catching me under my arm with the other, he jerked me to my feet. My knees almost buckled. Overtaxed muscles burned as the blood rushed back into my legs. Unaccustomed as I was to kneeling with my legs spread wide, my thighs ached. But not as badly as my mistreated jaw.

Despite those sparks of agony, my dick remained at full attention, thudding painfully into Aiden's jean-clad hip as he pulled me roughly against him.

Almost as brutally as he'd fucked my face, he kissed me. He scraped his teeth along my jaw, sucked up red marks on my skin and bit my neck. "Fuck!" I hissed, and kicked his shin, hurting only my toe. He didn't take kindly to that kick and kneed me back. Not hard, but, yeah. That was a warning. His tongue invaded my mouth. I couldn't help myself—I'd wanted him forever and would never get enough—and I kissed him back. The combination of anger and lust made me wild. Kisses suddenly weren't enough; I needed to sink my teeth in to flesh. I tried to bite him.

"Nice try, darling," he growled after he tore his lips away from the reach of my teeth. Then he spun me around, aimed me at the bed, and gave me a shove. "You're not going to win round three, either, Mr. Kelly."

"You prick!" I cursed, after bouncing once or twice on the firm motel mattress.

"Yeah, yeah, you told me that already." Holding me down by the clasp between my bound hands, Aiden used his knees to push on the backs of mine which helped me get my legs up onto the bed. Once there, he held me in a most undignified position: Arms chained up behind my back, face down, ass in the air, knees spread wide, and balanced precariously at the edge of the mattress.

He could do anything to me. Anything at all. The bastard.

After letting go of the clasp between the cuffs, his big, rough hands landed on my ass. Then pulled my cheeks apart. As I tried to squirm away, he dug his fingers in and split me open. "Hold still!"

I stilled. I knew what was good for me. The ache of unrelieved arousal spread out from my groin to the pit of my stomach. *Please fuck me*, I prayed. *Please shove your fingers in me, and open me up for your long cock...*

Not so long ago, he promised to have his hands in my pants all the time. Granted, there hadn't been much time since then, but I'd wanted that. I craved the rough penetration of his thick, calloused fingers. Arching my back like a wanton, I did my best to encourage him. Instead of fingering me, Aiden pushed my ass higher and licked from my balls up to my crack, his tongue gliding right across my hole.

"Holy Jesus, fuck!" I shouted.

“Like my tongue licking your ass, Jase?”

I might have squeaked out a string of incomprehensible gibberish. Then his tongue returned, warm and wet on my hole—then *in* my hole—and I couldn't even sputter gibberish. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* It felt amazing. So filthy dirty. His tongue, pointy, soft and wet, dipped into me repeatedly. Oh, my god. Whimpers and moans escaped with every stab of insane pleasure. No one had ever rimmed me before. Jesus.

Aiden ate me out thoroughly, but his tongue, as incredible as it was, wasn't enough to bring me to completion. The need to come, to empty my balls, made my head throb as well as my dick. “Aiden...” I moaned.

“You need something more? A tongue is never quite enough, is it?”

How the hell would I know? Lying wouldn't get me what I needed—that I did know. “Yes,” I mumbled into the sheet.

The wonderful, stabbing tongue disappeared, along with the hands, but I could hear Aiden undressing behind me. The mattress dipped as he climbed up behind me. Taking me by the hips, he moved me so I lay bowed down lengthwise on the bed instead of across it. I had no idea what he would do to me next. Anticipation curled deliciously in my gut. I admired his forearm, the corded muscles covered with that golden skin and pale, reddish hair as he reached under the pillow and pulled out the lube.

Thank god.

After my first two tries at anal sex, especially the disastrous cherry-popping one, I never thought I'd ever like getting done up the ass. My desire for it now embarrassed me. Aiden had only fucked me a couple times, but already he could easily make me grovel for it.

Aiden's hand snuck under the other pillow. I followed the movement in confusion. A dark purple object came into my line of vision. For a second, my heart stopped. That was a... what *was* that? *A dildo, you nob—what do you think it is?* A powerful wave of arousal tightened my abdominal muscles, and my dick jerked.

Was he going to stick that thing in me?

Apparently not. He spread me open again and melted my brain with another hard lick, tongue spearing into my eager hole. Even while shuddering with pleasure, I couldn't take my eyes off the silicone toy in front of me.

"I know you see it, Jase. Tell me you want it. Tell me you want me to fuck you with it. Tell me you want it buried in your ass."

Not in this lifetime! His tongue dipped in again, and then swirled around and around, driving me insane. I don't know how long I hovered on the edge of orgasm. My eyes focused and then unfocused. It didn't look all that big. Smaller than Aiden's cock, for sure. *Did I want it in me?*

Did Aiden want to cram it in me?

Reading my mind, Aiden answered my unspoken question. "I would love to stick that inside you. I want to watch it slide in and out, and then in and out, again. I want to fuck you with it."

"Oh, god."

"Tell me you want me to fuck you with it."

The evil bastard. And why was I hesitating? There was no need to feel embarrassed. Aiden sure as hell didn't. Working on convincing me, he sent a flurry of little tongue jabs into my aching hole. It begged to be filled. I ground my forehead into the mattress. Yes, I wanted it. His tongue had loosened me, and it would slide right in. "Please?" I asked, scrunching my eyes tightly shut.

"Say it."

Holy Jesus. He was going to make me beg for it? Of course he was. Aiden rolled a ball of spit onto his tongue and worked it into me, making me even looser and wetter. My body began to shake. "Please," I moaned. "Fuck me with the... the d-dildo."

"Anything for you." His tongue thrust into me again. "I love how you taste."

I'd forgotten the cuffs while he tongued me. Totally forgot I had hands. Now that I remembered, I twisted my fingers together until they hurt.

Reaching a hand on either side of me, Aiden retrieved both the lube and the dildo. A second later the cool, slippery tip of the toy prodded my entrance, and coated me with cool lube. The dildo disappeared only to return a moment later, but lengthwise, pressed into my crack and against my hole and perineum. Aiden leaned over me, squashed me into the mattress, and swivelled his hips so that the dildo pressed into several places at once. My arms and wrists complained, the weight uncomfortable, but all my nerves lower down flared to life.

As I groaned, he reached between us and removed the long, hard shape.

“Kiss me,” he demanded.

I craned my neck as he leaned in and we shared a wet, dirty kiss full of tongues. The tongue that had been in my ass. Some med student I was. I didn't care. I only cared about getting more.

The kiss ended abruptly, and on Aiden's terms. He then pushed on my thigh until I tucked one leg underneath me. The tip of the dildo, hard and unmistakable, wiggled, and pressed into my unresisting entrance. “Tuck your other leg up.”

As I did, Aiden nudged the lube-slicked silicone harder, working the inflexible material into me. It was warmer than I expected.

“Oh, yeah,” Aiden said. “I love you all trussed up and spread open for me to do with as I please.” I noticed his breath hitched a little. Possessive bugger. But it only made me hornier, knowing he was getting off shoving that thing into me. Twisting and pushing, he worked the length of the dildo into me, and I rode the burn as I strained around it. “Look at your tight hole stretching to take it.”

His words shocked my fingers apart, and they smarted where I'd crushed them. I moaned into the sheet. Aiden levered himself up behind me and began rocking the object in and out, slowly fucking me with it. I bore down against the intrusion and my clenching muscles finally relaxed.

“That's it,” Aiden whispered. “Take it.”

As if I had a choice. It didn't feel as good as Aiden's cock, despite being smaller. It was colder. Impersonal. But I was desperate and rocked back against it, forcing it deeper.

“Yes... Fuck yourself on it, Jase. C'mon, do it.”

I'd never been so horny. Or perverted. Using my shoulders and knees, I rocked, helping the dildo fuck in and out and making myself crazy. As good as it was, it wasn't enough. Not even when Aiden worked against my momentum to drive it deeper and thrust it faster.

“Aiden!” I cried, barely holding on to my sanity. “Please! More—need more. Need you to fuck me.”

“You want my cock?”

“God, yes. Before I—I can't take this. You're killing me!”

“You beg so pretty.”

After the next thrust, Aiden pulled out the dildo, leaving me empty and bereft. Missing it, I whimpered. A second later, he sheathed himself inside me to the root in one, brutal thrust. Shocked, I cried out at the fusion of pain and pleasure and jerked violently. The added stretch of his wider width both hurt and felt incredible. He didn't give me time to get used to him. He simply proceeded to fuck me with long, powerful strokes that battered me body and soul. Taking me by the hips, he pounded relentlessly as I cried my pleasure with each fiery drag of his cockhead across my prostate.

My secret desire was no longer secret. I was his. Tied, dominated, and used. My body wasn't mine anymore, it was Aiden's.

This time, he didn't command me to give it up to him. After a few breathless seconds, I climaxed explosively, shooting ropes of cum to soak the sheets as he pounded my ass, and kept on pounding me until finally, as my overstimulated body shook and trembled, he came, yelling my name and dripping sweat onto my back.

In my blissed-out head, there was no room for embarrassment. Tremors wracked my fucked-out body. No fantasy could touch this. I loved everything he did to me.

Before collapsing on me, he released the thing that held my wrists together behind my back. My arms thudded uselessly to my sides, limp and aching. Aiden fell on me, panting hot breaths across my sweat-dampened back. The breaths were followed by kisses. Squeezed inside my channel, his cock remained half-hard and defiant. On powerful arms, he levered himself up, and I braced myself for the burn I'd feel when he pulled out.

Instead of pulling out, he thrust into me a few more times until his dick finally softened. Then, without warning or apology, he pulled out. Bastard! I gasped and winced, but the kisses traveling down my spine took the sting from the sharp edge of our pleasure.

“You're so fucking sexy,” Aiden whispered against my tailbone.

I startled when Aiden worked his thumbs back between my cheeks. “What are you doing?” I sputtered.

“Having one last taste of you.” He pushed up on my thighs with his shoulder, raising my ass up slightly, and then, prying me open, swiped his tongue across my sore, gaping, cum-soaked hole.

A violent aftershock rocked me, and I collapsed, unable to move my arms or even hold my head up. “Jesus,” I moaned.

Forcing sharper moans, Aiden worked two of his fingers into my slick hole and pushed himself along the length of my back. He firmly thrust into my fucked-loose channel a few times before sliding his digits back out and wiping his sticky ejaculate on my buttock. Unable to coordinate my limbs enough to move, I slid in the puddle of my jizz coating the sheet, while his groin slid in the juices leaking from my rear.

The bastard had totally undone me. I was so physically sated and mentally delirious, that, with Aiden nuzzled protectively behind me, I sank into sleep without thinking a single negative thought.

For once, I woke first. We’d unglued our sticky bodies from each other in our sleep and my waking hadn’t disturbed Aiden. Sunlight still shone through the middle crack in the curtains. I hadn’t slept long, just enough to make up for our early start. A stray beam of light glimmered on the red in Aiden’s hair and eyebrows—I’d always been partial to gingers. *Wonder why?* A few silky strands lay across the pillow, and I gently ran them between my thumb and fingertip.

Me and Aiden. Together. Unbelievable, really.

Especially some of that... togetherness.

I should be embarrassed. Well, more than I was. The things he’d done to me! Raising my hand into the sunbeam, I eyed the thick leather cuff and steel ring with a secret rush of thrill. The way my ass felt, raw and filled with Aiden’s cum, definitely demanded a cool soak. Did I need permission to take the cuffs off? Was there a protocol for this? Rules to be followed?

“They look good on you,” Aiden mumbled beside me.

Damn. I’d hoped for more than a minute of quiet contemplation. “Can I take them off?”

“No. Never.”

“But—”

“I put them on, I take them off.”

“Oh.” He rolled to his side and covered my legs with his heavy thigh.

“Make with some cuddles, and I might release you.”

My lip twitched. “Big, bad Aiden wants to cuddle?”

“Yes. Get over here.”

I liked how he was man enough to ask for what he wanted. “Okay.” *Such hardships were best endured with grace, right?* Ignoring the painful twinge in my ass, I rolled to face him and met his lips for a sweet, lingering kiss. After the kiss, he freed me from my bondage.

While kissing the inside of my wrist, he examined me for damage. A faint red smudge remained; a pleasant reminder. “Were you scared?”

“A little.”

“And now?”

“I...” *What was I?* “Not sure. Tell you later?”

Smiling, he kissed my nose. “Okay, but don’t stress yourself over it—talk to me.”

I wasn’t stressed—confused maybe. A bit alarmed by my reaction. Nothing a little time and contemplation wouldn’t sort out.

Of course, I didn’t get that time right then, I had to make with more of the promised cuddles and a few kisses before Aiden dragged me into the shower instead of letting me hog the tub. For the first time in my adult life, hands other than mine washed me. Thoroughly, and with no regard to private body cavities. “You have no shame,” I complained.

“None whatsoever.”

His soapy hands lathering up my dick had me hard in seconds. He jacked me for a minute, teasing me, then left me hanging when he moved on to wash my hair. He graciously permitted me to wash his back, but nothing else, the lout. Before he nudged me out from under the spray to rinse off, I snuck in a few hasty gropes. Aiden had a very fine ass.

Would he let me, one day...?

Sharing the bathroom, drying each other’s backs, seemed casual, yet intimate, like we’d been lovers forever. Falling in love with Aiden would be dangerous. Already loving him as a person, as a friend, wasn’t the same as loving him as a man. And what about Aiden? Being stuck with me wasn’t the same as wanting to be with me.

Was it too late to guard my heart?

Ruining the easy intimacy of showering together and dressing together, Aiden's phone pinged, announcing the arrival of a text message. I froze.

Aiden snatched up his phone and read the message, a frown creasing his brows.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. T'Loren wants me to check my secure email." He set his phone down. "Where's my laptop?"

I handed it to him from where it lay on the unused bed. Catching the motel's WiFi and logging in only took a moment, and when he was done, I peeked over his shoulder. For a second I thought the message was coded; I'd never seen written Vichyssoise—Shalash'En—before. Looked as snaky as it sounded.

"What does he say?"

"You were right—I'm going to be saying that all the time, aren't I? Morgan owns a rather large chunk of New Mexico scrubland—including mineral rights for both silver and turquoise. T'Loren says he doesn't know how Morgan managed it. There's some sort of state trust the land should be part of, but isn't."

That was Gramps for you. Always wheeling and dealing. Bribing. "Nearby?"

"Couple hours in a fast car. Just outside of Santa Fe on the outskirts of a place called the Cerrillos Mining District. He's attached some files and links for the area. Apparently a mountain there is the site of the largest known prehistoric mining operation and the largest single deposit of turquoise ever found in North America."

A tingle of presentment ran along my spine. "That would explain the necklace."

"Sure would." Aiden contemplated the screen and shook his head. "GPS coordinates. Didn't I tell you he'd dig those up?"

"Yeah, but anyone can find that out. What I really want to know is the name of the neighbor's cat." I refused to be impressed by T'Loren's obviously thorough job. "I have a GPS app on my phone. We could go right now."

Aiden opened and skimmed through an attachment. A scan of a legal document complete with stamps and seals. "Let's wait until first light. We

shouldn't go anywhere unprepared—I have no idea what this country looks like. Tonight we can see about finding some hiking boots, backpacks, and maybe a Garmin so we don't get lost. We could be ready to head out early."

Leaving in the morning was probably the smarter idea. Didn't mean I wasn't dying of excitement. "Why don't you go out and hunt up your Garmin thingy and find a place that sells boots, and I'll read all the stuff he sent you?" My curiosity was piqued, to say the least. Hopefully, he'd agree. My fingers twitched, eager for the keyboard.

He turned on the swivel chair. "You'd like that? Reading all that stuff? By the looks of it, he was very thorough."

"Hell, yeah."

He gave me the eyeball inquisition as he thought it over. "If I find a place with some decent Chinese, do you want to eat in? Or go out?"

Sure, ask the bookworm if he'd rather stuff his face with take-out and read up on a very interesting subject, or drive around aimlessly looking for a restaurant that would only be full of strangers? Gee, let me think about that. "Read every word, eat dinner in bed with you, and watch a really bad movie." Would that bother Aiden, staying in? Would he find me boring? More boring? "Unless you'd rather go out?"

"Are you kidding? You're my perfect date." He vacated the chair of power and grabbed the car keys. "I'll try not to be gone too long. Any food items on the banned for life list?"

Only too many to count. But Chinese was pretty safe. "No dumplings. Does anyone know what's really in them?"

"Pork? Shrimp?"

"Cats. Executed political dissidents..."

Aiden sighed and shook his head in disgust. "You'd starve to death on T'El."

From what I'd gleaned from my childhood pestering of any available Vish, they were mostly vegetarian. They did favor a large chicken-like bird they raised, but otherwise ate disgusting things, like huge grub worms they farmed *on purpose*. No wonder I turned out to be a picky eater—it was all their fault, grossing me out like that. "I am never eating those worms. Never."

“You don’t know what you’re missing. They’re tasty.” He made a slurping sound. “Especially raw. You ever had sashimi?”

I almost threw up in my mouth. Now I didn’t even want Chinese. “Fuck off. Seriously. Don’t you have things to go find?”

After he finished putting his shoes on, he kissed me. Not just a peck goodbye, either, but a real one, slow and dirty, and I forgot all about wriggling, puppy-sized alien worms. For a bad-ass, half-alien, rail-gun-making soldier of ill repute, Aiden was awfully touchy-feely and affectionate. At the door, he paused to check the size of my shoe before opening it. “Lock this behind me and make sure you don’t open it for anyone but me.”

In the car, out on the open highway, it had been easy to ignore Aiden’s comment that day when he’d taken me to see the gate. Here, and now, with T’Loren sending coded messages to Aiden in an alien language, I realized, again, that hiding from the truth never made anything better. Mexico and Guatemala had reinforced that lesson. Reaching behind Aiden, I pushed the door shut.

No more prevaricating. “Just who are these Vish that would be just as happy if we didn’t find the key?”

For a moment, I thought Aiden might try darting out the door to escape my question. Then his shoulders relaxed. “Do you remember every damned thing?”

“Pretty much.”

Tossing the keys back onto the desk, Aiden sat back down in the swivel chair. “Things have... really gone to shit the past few years.”

“Troubles between the North and South?”

“As always. And I’ll tell you, there’s a hell of a lot more of them, than us.”

“What’s with them, anyway? They should shut the hell up. It’s not like they’re the first line of defense. Not like they’re gonna be the next dinner course for the G’Reth.” Other than being somewhat reptilian in appearance and twice the size of a Vish, I had no idea what their horrible enemy looked like. And I didn’t want to.

Distress clouded Aiden’s features, and I sat down, uncomfortably, on the edge of the bed. “I’m... afraid, Jason.”

What? Aiden afraid? “Of...?”

"It's been almost fifty years since I set foot on T'El. Even for the Vish, that's a long time. I'm afraid of... what I might find on the other side of the gate, if we should actually find the key. I'm afraid I'll find there's nothing to go home to."

"But how can that be? Don't you have... weapons and technology and stuff? You're so advanced—"

"We may be advanced, but so are they. Maybe more so. They have weapons like you couldn't imagine, not to mention their bodies are like weapons in themselves. And they—" he sucked in a breath. "They're... *evil*. I don't know how else to put it."

Had Morgan known this? I sure as hell didn't. "Evil?"

"Not in the biblical sense. But remorseless and conscienceless. You know there are other gates on other worlds, right?"

"Yes." Not how many, but T'El wasn't the only one, obviously. The G'Reth had to live somewhere.

"You saw the keys. You know they're meant to come out." I nodded. "So what do you think happens if you switch the keys around in the posts?"

Oh, hell. "You go to other places?"

"Exactly. And the reason we're here, the reason we've always been here, secret visitors to Earth, is so we can make sure that doesn't happen."

I had a sick feeling in my stomach. Like I'd eaten grub worms. "Because...?"

"You might open a gate to a place you wouldn't much like."

Letting myself go limp, I fell backwards on the bed. "Such as the G'Reth home world?"

"Yes. Or other places not particularly hospitable to delicate human anatomy. With life forms and pathogens that could destroy your world, because you don't know how to deal with them. Humans don't appreciate the Earth. You have no idea how blessed you are—you have this amazing fucking planet, nicer than T'El, and you treat it like shit. There are beings who would just love to take over the job of appreciating your pretty, fertile, water-world if you're not going to."

Ashamed of humans as a whole, I covered my face with my arm. "Like the G'Reth."

“Oh, no. Not like the G’Reth. They don’t want your planet. What they don’t want is *you*.”

Once you know something, you can’t not know it... If I were as smart as my IQ test claimed, I’d plug my ears. But curiosity killed the cat, and more than a few humans, and likely me, one day. “So what do the G’Reth want?”

“Best we can tell? They want to be alone in the universe. Or universes—we’re not sure we even share the same one.”

“You mean—”

“Their goal is extermination, Jase. They have no quarrel with us. We have never done anything to them, other than try to negotiate with them, which is impossible. We don’t even know if we’ve successfully communicated our peaceful intentions to them. Some scholars, and not just on T’El, speculate that they have some sort of belief, or religion, that demands they be the only ones to exist—they really are that single-minded.”

“Jesus.”

“They have destroyed other worlds—killed every sentient being on them. Destroyed the environment down to the dust that coats the bones of the dead. They want to destroy T’El. And as soon as they discover Earth exists, that there’s another world infested with insignificant mites, they’re going to do everything they can to get here.”

As I lay there feeling sicker by the second, the information sank in. If they could defeat the Vish, then yes, we’d be like... *mites* to them. “Why don’t you destroy the gates, then?”

A harsh, merciless sound came from Aiden’s throat. “Because we don’t want to be cut off from everyone else who is not G’Reth. Because if we isolate ourselves, we also isolate any other world that might need help or could offer us help. And mostly, because we don’t really know how, not without destroying the world it’s on.”

Forgetting my achy backside, I sat up. “You don’t know how?” Had I heard that right? “If you made them, how could you not know how to dismantle them?”

Aiden stared at me. “What makes you think we made them?”

My head throbbed. “You didn’t make them.”

“No. We know how to operate the gates better than the G’Reth, and have *evolved* the ability to use the gate as a weapon, which are the only two reasons we’re still standing. But we are deathly afraid they will, one day, figure it all out, before us. Or one of the other civilized planets. We have never opened the gate to the G’Reth home world, but they keep breaking through to our side—somehow.”

The next logical step to that reasoning almost made me stop breathing. “Then they could, maybe, break through to... *here*, right?” Now Aiden’s comment in the garage made sense. “So that’s why... *whoever*... doesn’t want us to find the key.”

And maybe they’re right?

Did I agree with that? Because if I did...

“Don’t fall into that same false sense of security, Jase, like they have. The G’Reth have managed to come through to T’El when *all four* of the keys have been removed from our gate. They will eventually find you.” Aiden looked unbearably sad, head hanging down. “Find *us*.” He looked me in the eye. “And when they do, we want you to be ready.”

“But if we figured out how to destroy the gate...”

“We haven’t managed that. We barely know how to move one, and it takes an extraordinary effort—we’re talking hundreds of Vish with my talent. No other world that we know of has ever moved one... *successfully*.”

“So removing the keys, hiding them...?”

“Only cuts you off from those who would help you. And I believe you’re ready now—you humans, *us* humans—to access all the worlds full of knowledge.”

“The knowledge Morgan locked away on the other side of the gate.”

“They’re fools, Jase. They’ve never fought the G’Reth, never seen the worlds they’ve killed for no reason other than that they exist. It’s easy to believe an ideology when you’ve never seen the reality of it. The Vish radicals think that by hiding their heads in the sand, Earth will remain safe. But you won’t. You just won’t be prepared when they find you. And they *will* find you.”

We stared at each other, Aiden and I. He waited for me to pick a side and I waited for my brain to catch up on processing the big bundle of information it had just been given. What did I believe? Strangely, I didn’t have to think about

it for more than a minute or two—I simply couldn't imagine not learning new things and trying to hide my head in the sand.

Suppressing knowledge had never served us well. Never. Just think of all those great minds that had been put to death for blasphemy just for saying the Earth revolved around the Sun. With a jerk of my head at the chair I wanted for myself, I stood. This time I kissed Aiden goodbye. "Then we better get busy if we're going to find it before them."

The old mining road had washed out in several places. Deep gorges and gullies of loose rock left behind from decades of flash floods made our hike slow and precarious. We'd left the Mustang behind what felt like miles ago. We'd been plodding along since the crack of dawn, with backpacks full of water and lunches and wearing new hiking boots that looked and felt more like heavy-duty running shoes. Mine fit so well, I didn't think I'd get a single blister.

Aiden reveled in his foul mood. So he couldn't sneak off without me, I'd hid the car key. Good thing too, or I'd be fuming in the motel room right now and plotting ways to kill Mr. O'Rourke the next time I saw him. With all the walking I'd done in the past two months, I was in pretty good shape. Still had to hustle to keep up with Aiden, though, and my legs were going to pay for it later.

"You should have stayed at the motel," he griped at me, as I slid on a patch of loose scree.

"Sorry, no. We're in this together."

"Jesus, Jase. How am I going to keep you safe out here? Couldn't you just do what I asked?"

Out here, was rocky, exposed, and secluded. Nobody'd ever find our corpses. T'Loren had called Aiden at about three in the morning to warn him to expect company, hence his attempt to leave me behind, sleeping in ignorant bliss. Since I'd barely slept before T'Loren's call, and not at all after, my cranky bomb was primed to explode at the slightest provocation.

Right now, it was ticking fast and leaking steam.

When his sneaky plan to leave me behind at the hotel failed, Aiden tried to convince me to hide in an old, abandoned gas station from the heyday of Route

66, but I wouldn't have it. In the midst of our blistering argument, I told him I knew about the T'Eth bond—how could I not? I'd had to agree, even if I didn't quite get the full import of it. I'd been in shock. That asshole Vish Chief Justice took particular joy in telling me all about it from the outside of my jail cell. That's why I'd run. Mostly.

Gramps's moral compass may have been shot to hell, but mine wasn't. The Vish weren't the only ones who valued their family name. Restoring the honor to mine meant a lot to me. I wanted to be the one to return the stolen key and right at least one of Morgan's wrongs.

So I'd told Aiden that we'd go into battle for the key together, on the rocky mountains of New Mexico, and if he didn't like it, too damned bad, he should've thought twice before making such a life-altering vow. He was still livid. I wondered if his shiny red hair could spontaneously combust into open flame.

Stopping to take a drink from my water bottle, I pulled out the tiny, folding binoculars Aiden had bought me last night. The topographical survey and the Google Earth picture didn't show up well on my phone, but I'd seen evidence of buildings when I'd looked at them on the bigger screen of Aiden's laptop. An abandoned silver mine—how perfect was that for hiding the key?

Aiden spotted the mine camp at the same time as I did, through his own binoculars. We were quite high up, and after examining the mine, Aiden reversed the binoculars to check back the way we'd come. I didn't see anyone following us, and we had a bird's-eye view.

"I don't suppose I can convince you to stay here? Hidden?"

"Nope."

"Jason—"

Returning my water to the side pouch of my pack, I stomped past him. "We're wasting time." Although truthfully, I was nervous and on edge. Would this *company* T'Loren spoke of be armed with good old human guns? Or those creepy gate weapons made from strange alien substances like Aiden's, presently humming a secret tune inside his pack? When I stood right next to Aiden, I could *feel* it.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I sighed deeply. Some days I wished I'd been born into a normal family.

No you don't...

By the time we reached the old mine buildings, my legs felt like overdone spaghetti. Being a prick, Aiden didn't speak to me the entire way. Granted, he was always close by to lend a hand, help me over rough spots, but he was clearly sulking. Probably worrying as well, because that's what Aiden did—worry. Took this joyful hike for me to realize that.

“You will stay *right here* while I look around.”

Seemed a safe place. My back was up against a massive bolder in a pile of huge rocks, with a handy crevice to duck into, if needed. Plus, I had shade. Aiden wouldn't ditch me now, not here, so I dug out a granola bar to restore some of my flagging energy, and one for Aiden to have later. *Looking around* was actually Aiden-speak for *wander around trying to detect alien relics with my secret Vishy superpowers*. Since I wouldn't be of any use to him, I leaned on the rock in a tired daze and ate my snack.

He returned a few minutes later, a frown creasing his brows.

“Anything?”

“I'm not... sure.”

Which meant *maybe*. Could it really be here? After all these years? Almost instantly, I felt reinvigorated. I handed Aiden his granola bar. “What did you feel? Is it here?”

“I can't tell if I felt something, or if I'm imagining I did, because I want it so desperately.”

“Can you show me where you felt it?”

“Over here.” He glanced around, checking the area, before leading me from my safe spot. Really, the Vish did paranoia like no one else. He ate the bar in two bites and led me to a flat area beside the largest of the sagging buildings.

Broken boards, bits of rusted metal and old chains littered the ground as far as I could see. Did they just drop everything and leave when the silver played out? The wooden silo-shaped building looked ready to fall down on us at the first sharp breeze. The ragged mountainside was dotted with mining holes. The ground could also have holes anywhere and everywhere—the Bureau of Land Management said people fell in them and died from time to time. We'd need to watch our step.

Slipping off his heavy pack, Aiden got down on his hands and knees and actually put his ear to the ground. Trying not to make a sound, I held my breath until he got back to his feet. "I could almost swear..." he said, letting his words trail off.

"Well, this is a mine. If it's here, it would be underground."

"Fuck."

"Isn't that why you bought those headlamp things?" We each had two. "So we could go in the mine?"

"Yeah. But these tunnels could go on forever. We could easily get lost down there."

Aiden didn't normally sound so defeated. "Should we—is there anyone we can call to help us?"

He shook his head. Of course not—they were aliens. Sort of. How could I call them aliens when they'd been here almost as long as we had?

There had to be a logical way to solve this problem. "Then let's make a map, a grid, and search them one at a time. We can mark our way inside with that roll of duct tape if we need to."

He stared at the mountainside, at the endless holes dug everywhere for a moment, then looked back at me. "Is that something you could do—make this grid?"

"Sure," I said with a shrug. "I have my binder."

"You packed that heavy thing all the way up here?"

Duh. "We might have needed it." And no way in hell was I going to let anyone else take it—it was *mine*. I unslung my pack from my aching shoulders. "Let's find some shade." It wasn't overly hot yet, being only spring, but neither of us were used to the sun and Aiden, well, he was a redhead. We sat on a rusty piece of equipment of some sort in the lee of the mountain, near what I speculated was the mine's main entrance. That, at least, had been boarded up, unlike the series of death traps dug all over the place. I unzipped my binder across my knees and flipped to the tab for New Mexico.

There, pinned to a piece of cardboard, safe inside its clear sleeve, lay the necklace. The turquoise, in the bright light, was stunning, the silver just enough to hold the stones together. My heart did a little flip. My toe tapped a steady

beat into the dirt. Morgan wanted me to know, I was sure of it. Forget the postcards, had the pendant really been the clue all along?

“You’re brain’s going a mile a minute, isn’t it?”

“What?” I answered Aiden absently, and pulled the cardboard from the sleeve. The stones were beautiful, shot through with threadlike seams of other sparkly minerals, perhaps even gold. I untwisted the ties that held it down and once free, handed it to Aiden. “We’re looking in the wrong place.”

Dangling it by the chain, Aiden looked at the... artifact. Because that’s what it was—an artifact. Then he looked at me.

“Put it on me.”

Giving me a little shiver as his fingers ghosted on the back of my neck, Aiden clasped the chain and the solid weight of silver and turquoise settled against my upper chest.

“Suits you,” he said.

“Once we’re done here, it’s going where it belongs. In a museum.” Feeling almost shaky with excitement, I returned my binder to my pack and zipped up the pouch.

“If this is the wrong place, where’s the right place?” Lost in my own excitement, I hadn’t noticed Aiden’s. His fingers were twitching, and his eyes were bright.

“The caves.”

“There are caves here?”

“I think so.” T’Loren, bless his cold, alien heart, had documented the subject to death. There were maps upon maps, including some from the Bureau of Land Management. Since they were all gleaned from public records, Aiden let me email them to myself, and I’d saved a folder of goodies on my phone.

I flipped through the images until I found the one I wanted. It was hard to see, but at least I could make out the general direction. The reason I’d even noticed it, was because some long-ago inquisitive person had scribbled notes on it. *Indian village? Caves. Dig here.* That’s what I think the scribbles said, because they’d been written with a splotchy pen and old-fashioned ink by someone with poor penmanship.

Passing Aiden my phone, I said, “There—I think.”

He stood up, studied the scanned image, oriented himself to the map and handed me back my phone. It would be a long walk, but my mom had always said, *if you can see it, Jase, it's not too far to walk to*. She said it did not apply to the moon. Boy, had I been one disappointed kid.

When we set out this time, Aiden talked to me. About everything and nothing in particular, but it was nice. Who cared if we were avoiding all the big issues? We ate our lunch, and afterward, Aiden used the binoculars to pick out the best route, all the while consulting the map.

By the time we stumbled upon the long neglected path, I almost didn't see it. My legs ached. My back and shoulders ached. I didn't mention it, but my ass ached. No more letting Aiden fuck the hell out of me before undertaking any form of strenuous exercise. Ever.

Unlike the mine, the place looked devoid of recent human interest, as in the last century. No rusty metal bits laying around, no broken glass, no tire marks. Once again, my interest perked up.

"Look at this," Aiden said, standing by a pile of rocks.

Only it wasn't a pile. It was too orderly. Like all the other piles nearby. And there were crumbling, handmade bricks mixed in with the rocks. "I'm getting a bad feeling about this."

Shaking his head, Aiden bent down to take a closer look. "They destroyed, or at the very least hid, the existence of an entire archaeological site so it wouldn't interfere with any mining rights."

Coming up behind him, I touched his shoulder. "We'll report this as soon as we get back with the key."

We didn't linger, which was fortunate, because it took us an hour to find the cave, it was that well hidden. Not by man, but by nature. The cave, a long, narrow slit, went down into the mountain at a sharp grade, and unless you wound your way through the labyrinth of the small canyon, you'd never see it. Without the map, we never would have found it.

We did linger outside the cave, to catch our breath and rehydrate. Aiden, once again, grew quiet. His ear listened for something only he could hear. I left him to it. Every muscle I had burned from exertion—and here I thought I'd been in good shape. Aiden slid his pack from his shoulders and lowered it to the ground. I expected him to dig out the fancy headlight gear, but he strode over to me instead, grabbed the sides of my face and kissed me.

Okay. I went with it. What can I say? My mouth was a little dry, but the kiss still felt amazing. When he pulled back, his grin spread from ear to ear. "It's here."

My smile grew to match his. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

Even now, I was reluctant to leave my pack—okay, my binder—behind. The entrance looked too narrow for the bulk, and I'd be clumsy with it sticking out, always in my way.

"Leave it here. We'll take mine and only carry stuff we might need."

We spent a few minutes reorganizing Aiden's pack and drinking some of our lukewarm water. Rope, the extra headlamps, a small first-aid kit, and the two water bottles went into Aiden's pack, along with a lovely wooden box just the right size for a certain key.

"Where'd you get that?"

Aiden tucked the box in last. "A gift from T'Loren. It's Heartwood."

"He made that?"

"Don't be so surprised. He's not an ogre."

That was still debatable, but Aiden's uncle had a real talent. "Ready?"

"Forty-odd years ready, baby." Grinning madly, he adjusted my headlamp and switched both lights on. Shoulder to shoulder, we both peered down into the depths of the dark slit in the rock.

Great. A wooden ladder.

"Big, bad Aiden can go first."

"You chicken-shit."

So? Sue me. "We come across any packs of stray dogs, I'm your man. That," I pointed, "is all yours."

The rope came back out of the pack, and Aiden knotted a harness at one end and slipped it over his shoulders. "Think you can hold me if the ladder breaks? Or do you want me to brace it around that rock first?"

"Do the rock thing." Not that I didn't think I could hold him, which I could, but because if he fell, I worried I'd get jerked forward, fall on my face, and lose him.

A few adjustments later, and I had the rope secured around my shoulders, and Aiden was shimmying down the ancient Pueblo ladder. I braced myself, expecting to hear the sounds of splintering wood and a frightened scream at any second.

"You can let go," came Aiden's voice from not too far away. "It's only about ten feet down."

"Should I leave the rope tied up here somehow, just in case?"

"No, just come on down. You can always climb up on my shoulders if we can't get back out using the ladder."

I turned around, knelt, and placed my foot on the first rung.

"Jesus, Jase. You gotta see this."

I quickly scooted halfway down the ladder. Then sucked in a surprised breath. Aiden hadn't been kidding. Only a few rungs later, I was on the hard packed, long-dead animal bone-littered floor, letting my eyes adjust to the low light. When they did, wonder set my heart to thudding in awe. "Oh, my god."

"Archaeologists are going to have kittens when they see this."

There were petroglyphs. Everywhere. In pristine condition, the pigments as bright as the day they were painted. Deer, lots of deer—running everywhere. And a big cat with freakishly large feet. Funny-shaped heads with no bodies. Spirals and snakes and a collection of symbols whose meaning, I had no idea. "Hey—that's Kokopelli!" This was better than finding an untouched tomb in Egypt. "He sure has a big dick." Yes, I had the mind of a twelve year old, but really, he did have a huge schlong—even for a fertility deity.

"This is amazing," Aiden said, voice filled with wonder. "Look at them all."

There were a great many images of men with spears and axes, out hunting. I wandered along the walls, aiming my headlight from painting to painting. A few big-eyed aliens with long dresses showed up in a few pictures. "Now, you can't tell me that those people aren't Vish. I mean, come on. Look at their faces."

Aiden walked over to look in the direction I'd aimed my head, and the light on top of it. He put his arm around my shoulder. It was nice. "Could be."

"Could be? You suck, you know that?"

"Why yes, Jase, I do know I suck. I think I've proven that. More than once."

Despite knowing the key was here—right here, Aiden took his time. We explored the cave together. I snapped a few photos, but they came out dark and grainy. In the farthest corner, the roof shrank, leaving an opening that would require crawling. The walls back in this part were covered with the strangest petroglyphs of all. The humanoid shapes, with their weird eyes, were upside down. All the animals were distorted, too, with extra-long limbs.

“This must be where they came after they got into the peyote,” Aiden said, chuckling.

“The peyote den. I like it.”

We both faced the narrow opening. I reached over and squeezed his hand. “Go get the damned thing before your head explodes. Or mine.”

He squeezed my hand back, released it, and lowered himself down to peer inside. “Looks roomy on the other side. It’s a whole other cave. Wanna join me?”

No, Aiden, I don’t, my inner voice answered sarcastically. “Right behind you.” Being skinnier than Aiden, I fit under easier. No natural light reached here at all, and Aiden had turned on the other two headlamps to use as flashlights.

I thought I’d seen wondrous things in the previous cave.

This one blew me away.

The petroglyphs were extensive, vibrant, and the work of true artisans. Shelves had been carved in the stone, crudely, but they were all decorated with an astonishing collection of pottery bowls. More pottery made treasure trails over the floor, and there were baskets too, dusty, but mostly undamaged. A few nearer the entrance had been gnawed by rodents, or perhaps had just unwound with time.

Unbelievable. An entire museum worth of treasures in this one small room.

I gazed in wonder, as did Aiden. We were careful as we moved, fearful of damaging anything, especially the body.

Resting for eternity in a shallow depression, he lay in a fetal position, virtually undisturbed. His withered skin clung tightly to his bones and his hair, dried, fading with time and white-grey, lay draped across his shoulder in a long braid. His clothing, made from leather and something woven, had not stood the

test of time as well, but the thicker items, like the pouch beaded with turquoise and other beautiful stones, remained whole.

Reverently, and mindful of our feet, we inched closer and aimed our collective lights on him—I was sure it was a him—and crouched down to look upon his shrunken face. Time and death had not dimmed his beauty. It was as if, sensing his impending death, he'd come here, prayed to whatever gods he worshipped, and simply laid down and died. The journey had been a solo one. No one had remained behind to bury him.

"Be careful!" I urged, as Aiden reached his hand down to the dark stone sheltered between the bones of hand and chest.

"I will," he replied. Wriggling the rectangular object back and forth, Aiden slowly, and with infinite patience, withdrew the key from the withered hands. With some reverence of his own, Aiden clutched it to his own chest and closed his eyes. "I will see Shalash again, Jase. And my mother, all my cousins—the neighbor lady who never believed my red hair was real. And the twin suns rising over the snowy peaks just in time to shine in my bedroom window and wake me for a cup of Kef before it turns bitter."

The longing and heartbreak in Aiden's voice caused an unexpected tear to tickle down the corner of my eye. I cried for him, since I knew he wouldn't. Aiden could, at last, go home.

Sniffing, I wiped the wetness on my sleeve. I hooked my extra headlamp over my forearm, unclasped the necklace and removed the pendant from the cheap chain. I knew who it belonged to.

Still clutching the key to his chest, Aiden watched me. "What are you doing?"

"Trading."

"Trading?"

"Of course. Morgan traded the key for the necklace and now I'll trade him back the beautiful, finely made turquoise pendant for one creepy key to another world."

"Hardly sounds fair."

"Well, I don't think he'll mind. It's a good trade. Especially if we let him barter us into promising to quit disturbing his peace, in addition to the offer of the necklace."

A soft, sweet smile curled Aiden's lips. "He drives a hard bargain." The key fit perfectly in T'Loren's handmade box, naturally, this was T'Loren we were talking about, and Aiden slipped it back into his pack. "C'mon, Jase. Let's make good on our promise and get out of here."

Picking our way through the pottery maze, we left the way we came. At the ladder, Aiden tugged on my sleeve. I turned, and he pulled me into a rib-crushing hug that squeezed the air from my chest. Big, bad Aiden—such a softy. I wrapped my arms around him and he pressed his face into my hair, my neck. "Thank you," he whispered into my ear.

"As you always say, anything for you."

In the silence of the key keeper's tomb, we held each other, not letting go until my overtaxed arms grew numb, and Aiden finally pulled away. "Come with me, Jase," he said, as the last of the late afternoon sun began to wane, darkening the cave entrance. "Come home with me."

Go with him? "To T'El, you mean?"

"Yes."

The offer was so very tempting. I loved Aiden. Always had, always would. But I loved him enough to set him free. I shook my head. "You go. Be happy. You deserve to be free to love who you want, Aiden, not be shackled to me for life." My throat tightened alarmingly. God, I wasn't going to start sobbing and blubbering like a fool again, was I?

We hadn't moved far apart after the hug, and Aiden was close enough to reach up and caress my cheek. "Shackled to you for life?" I braced myself for an outburst of anger, but a slow, sly grin spread across Aiden's face, instead. "Couldn't have planned that better if I tried."

"What? You—what?" I stumbled over my own tongue.

"You're mine now, Jason Kelly, and I'm not letting you go."

My brain sputtered, dazed and confused. "But you—I—why? Why do you want me?"

"Because I love you." I suddenly found myself squashed back in his arms. "I was so lonely waiting for you."

Aiden O'Rourke loved me. I must've misheard that. "You waited for me?"

“To grow up. Like I promised.” In the last light of the dying day, he kissed me. Sweetly. Then roughly—ah, that was better. “And I’m nowhere near done nailing your queer, lovesick ass to the wall.”

What can I say? I’d loved him forever. Why not admit it? “I love you too, Aiden.”

Aiden kissed me so thoroughly I had difficulty climbing up the ladder with my stiff dick getting in the way. At the last rung, Aiden reached down and helped me to my feet. Walking took a concerted effort. *Aiden loves me*. I couldn’t get over that.

“You give me your answer when you’re ready,” Aiden said, opening his pack.

“Answer?” My brain had turned to mush.

“About T’El. I know it’s a big decision. I’d be just as happy to stay here with you,” he wagged his brows, “but wouldn’t you like to see it?”

The bastard. Dangling a whole new world in front of me like that. “Can I have five minutes?”

He laughed, low and rumbly.

Would that always give me that fluttery feeling in my chest?

“As I said, when you’re ready.”

Five minutes would probably do it. I smiled—I really should tease him while the opportunity presented itself. But a moment later, the smile died on my lips. While I was processing *because I love you*, Aiden had retrieved his alien rail gun from inside the pack.

Oh, yeah. I’d forgotten, lost in my wonder of this place, and in Aiden’s words and my own love-swollen heart, that the Vish always have something up their sleeve.

Company was coming.

And we now had the key.

The End

Author Bio

Finn Marlowe is a paralegal by day and erotic (M/M) romance novelist by night. She believes daydreaming is a vastly underrated pastime and probably spends way too much time at it. Her kids no longer ask what's wrong when they spy her staring off into space—they just assume she's writing a scene from her next novel, and they're probably right. Paranormal romance is her favorite genre to write, and the story's usually on the dark side because she still believes in things that go bump in the night.

Finn calls British Columbia home and when she's not enjoying the beautiful outdoors, she's inside reading or resenting the fact her kids are better video game players than she is. If there were more hours in the day, she'd like to become a better artist, a greener gardener and learn to speak Spanish. Since she believes all dreams are possible if you don't give up on them, she expects to regain her video game hi-scores, naturally vanquish all garden pests, and finally paint what lives inside her imagination. As for speaking Spanish, well, she'll settle for learning to pronounce all the good curse words.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Goodreads](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

STRANGE CHARM

By A. Phallus Si

Photo Description

Color illustration depicting two muscular youths posed midair, their legs form an "X". One bent over in front, the other directly behind him with his legs kicked up in a "V", their groins seemingly conjoined, present a mesmerizing but visually confusing tableau for assigning the appropriate limbs to face. The figures radiate intensity via severity of stance, expression and eye contact that make their performance more compelling.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I want the silliest erotic story you can imagine for these two. The plot can be whatever you like as long as it makes some sort of sense, preferably something fantasy/sci-fi.

Have fun with this!

Sincerely,

Adrian

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, science fiction

Tags: littermate-cest, m-preg(non-MC), mmmm, public activity, switch/versatile, spacemen/aliens, humorous, interspecies, road trip, soulmates/bonded

Word Count: 12,658

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Author's Note

Many thanks and much groveling go out to my beta readers for their patience and support during this rookie endeavor. Bree, Sunny, Jen, Jenni, and Ann you were a great help and more than I deserved.

I'd like to extend a special thanks to Bree Archer for her cover design. I loved all 12 incarnations of it! But this one made it real.

Bree Archer

breearcher@gmail.com

<http://www.breearcher.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/bree.archer>

STRANGE CHARM

By A. Phallus Si

Cache XXX

"I am not doing that again. Ever."

"Come on, Igor. It wasn't that bad."

Igor seemed to be of a different opinion as he glared at his companion while shimmying out of his suit. The material made a loud sucking sound as it separated from his flesh. Finally free, he kicked it into the corner near his boots as he ripped the cap from his head to join the rest.

Naked, he turned back to Jax. "I was just in the egress of a Flatula. Please, tell me. What could be worse?" He asked while wiping his face repeatedly to remove more of the violet grit and slime that coated them both.

Jax opened his mouth to respond...

"Shut up!" Igor's finger pushed his jaw closed. "Don't answer that. And, do not fucking touch anything before you sonic, Jax."

Clean, Igor grunted as he dropped into the adjacent seat while he was plotting coordinates. The aggravation rolling off of him had been in no way mitigated by his shower. Jax had tried to insist he go first, but Igor claimed that the sooner they left this system behind the better. Short, but thorough enough to remove all traces of their adventure, he surrendered the sonic shower, figuring the less time Igor spent encrusted in flatulence the better. While it had been unsavory, it hadn't been the worst thing they'd done to get a token.

"I don't think this was that bad." Igor gave him a death glare. Hiding a smirk, he continued, "You weren't thrilled with the stables on Carnarvon Moonbase."

"We had to impersonate grooms to find that token," he snorted.

"Not too horrible."

"Did we even grow up together?" Igor entered calculations in the computer. "I'm allergic to straw, idiot. Plus, we actually had to groom the horses."

Engaging the drives, "You like brushing." He leaned over to stroke Igor's head. He loved how soft his hair was, wrapping a length around his forearm and then releasing it.

Jerking away. "My own hair. I like brushing my own hair."

While he was distracted by the controls, Jax continued playing with the wavy mass bouncing down to Igor's waist. He loved it, but Igor always got cranky when he messed around with his hair. Sighing, "They were pretty ponies."

"They were humanoids, Jax. Not horses. That wasn't the kind of grooming I thought we'd signed up for." His littermate blushed. "*And...* I had to retrieve your token from a very agitated stallion's nutsack before his rider returned."

The panel seemed to be holding up against Igor's onslaught, beeping incessantly at his methodical hammering. The ferocity with which he did it clearly illustrated that he was definitely not done venting his displeasure at their latest adventure. Jax decided it was far better to provoke his outburst than watch it fester.

Spinning around, Igor continued, "Why is it I'm always the one deep in shit and nuts while you stand nearby?"

That was an unfortunate coincidence, but he doubted Igor would believe it was unintentional. It was funny though, and Igor was so irritated that he was huffing in frustration. Just a bit more and he'd snap.

"I was cornered by those two mares."

"You're a Feltoon military operative. How in the world could two fillies have you cornered?" It took everything Jax had to keep from laughing at the incredulous look on Igor's face.

"The roan took exception to how I was braiding her tail and pushed me into the boards while the other was nickering all over me!"

"Nickering?"

"Well, what do you call it when they run their muzzles up and down?"

"She was nuzzling you?" Igor questioned. His eyes narrowed then abruptly added, "She was sucking you off?"

"No! I managed to escape before she could figure out the fasteners with her teeth. I crawled over the side rail and came to help you!"

"Help?" Igor laughed harshly. "What help? You stood in another stall watching while I fumbled around with his testicles. And he was not happy!"

Between the outraged tone and his expressions, Jax couldn't help it. He fell off his chair laughing. "The look on your face when you couldn't pull it loose and decided to use your kravnar blade..." His words dissolved into raucous cackling.

"Dickhead." Igor tried to punctuate his point with his boot. "I still have a bite mark on my shoulder and a bruise where he kicked me in the ass—two weeks ago. They might look cute, but those glitter hooves are deadly."

Crawling over, Jax pulled on his leg trying to twist him around, "Here, let me kiss it better."

"Fuck off."

"I set the autopilot. Let's bunk and I'll show you how sorry I am." Igor begrudgingly allowed Jax to lead them towards the sleeping quarters.

"As long as it's your ass taking a pounding tonight."

"Whatever you want."

As it turned out that wasn't what Igor wanted. After extensive kissing, several bites, and then licking it all better—all over—Igor was mewling and begging, with his ass high and legs spread wide. Determined not to fall back out of his good graces, Jax was more than happy to oblige.

"Where is your lube?"

His head popped up and looked backwards, "What?"

"Lube. I'm all out."

Grumbling, "A whole case?" Pointing to a drawer beneath them. "There. Left-hand side."

Jax shoved things around and then stopped. *Are you kidding me?* "What the hell is this?"

Igor looked over his shoulder again and huffed, "A dildo."

"Duh. Why?" He hefted it then swung it around executing a few katas. "And purple, really?" He smacked Igor's ass with it. Good density. Might be useful for something.

"It was a gift. Now stop fucking around." His hand was ineffectually swiping at the dildo poking him.

Alright, that confused him. No one needed a toy like this unless they were going to solitary. He should know; he'd been stockpiling for his next assignment after they returned. Heck, it didn't even vibrate. Dubiously he asked, "From whom?"

"Valeris. His idea of a parting gift."

Of course, he knew there was something off about that pompous eight-foot salamander. "What, so you'd remember his schlong?"

"It is based on a mold of it."

"Presumptuous prick." He chuckled it onto the floor. "I got something better for you."

"More action. Less talk, Jax."

Fumbling the lube, he tried to squeeze some out. "It hasn't even been opened." He grunted and struggled with the top. He tried to imagine whom Igor had been playing with, considering the dearth of supplies and toys. His littermate was too young to be retreating to his den alone. Jax should get *Sirdar* on it, because all this was wrong in too many ways, and he was the only one Igor listened to on a regular basis.

Igor expressed his forbearance at the delay with a long groan, wiggling a bit more in encouragement, his heavy balls swaying. Sexy fuck.

"I'm getting there, baby. Be patient."

Finally! He managed a generous stripe. A couple of slippery tugs along his cock and then he was rubbing Igor's hole. Applying the lightest of pressure and pulling back, reveling in the eager moans. Teasing his littermate until Igor's pucker started kissing his cock. "So hot. Show me how much you want it."

"Jax," he keened. "Give me."

"That's it." Jax leaned in against the gentle resistance, and then was pushing in, one long, slow slide. The warmth surrounding him felt like coming home. "So tight." Two sets of moans echoed as Jax finally came to rest with their balls nestled together. "That's it. Squeeze me, baby." He pulled back just as slow, watching his cock reappear, Igor's anus a smooth ring grasping him. "So fucking gorgeous, baby."

Igor slammed back impatiently. "Only eight minutes older. So. Quit." Panting, he continued rocking deep onto Jax's cock. "With the baby... and fuck me!"

Expelled from the fluttering wormhole, the small space runner slowed as the black void gave way to an increasingly large object. Irregular and cobbled together from old freighters and assorted debris, it failed to inspire. Jax's fingers flew across the controls noting the sibilant voice's docking permissions. Easing into the assigned slot, he shut down the engines and grinned at Igor.

"Space Port Vector 7Z-218. Let's go."

"No." Negligently crossing his feet on the screen displaying the map visuals of the port, Igor reclined further into the seat. "I said I wouldn't do another one."

"But... this is the SPV7Z token. It's unlikely anyone else will find it. I get this one and I'm guaranteed the top circle, if not a win."

"Well, good luck with it."

"Igor," Jax whined. "You seriously cannot be backing out now."

"No. That's what we were doing out of that floriate creature's anus last week. Today, I am shopping for a new equisuit and eating something, no anything, besides reconstituted dried squid flakes. *Five weeks*, Jax. Five weeks of nothing but slightly chewy, gray mush."

"How was I to know that the Gralledar space station had been hit by an asteroid?"

"It's in the Schrödinger System! Nonzero chance it would be." Igor thumped his head on the navpanel in frustration.

"Yeah... I sorta forgot about that when I was strategizing. Still, those emergency rations were a blessing." Seeing the unflinching stare and raised brow, he offered, "I'll buy you a nice meal, anything you want." He tugged on a long lock of magenta, using it to pull up his obstinate copilot.

What had begun as a lark had become an obsession—for Jax. They'd always joked about galacticaching when they were growing up, and suddenly, with Jax's pending promotion, time seemed to have run out on youthful adventures. He wheedled Igor's participation out of him by playing on fraternal loyalty. The first six tokens they'd found garnered them a moderate ranking, but running around their own star system hadn't landed them any Bling tokens. He had convinced Igor to go after one in the Andromeda galaxy. That had led to another, even further from the core, and their first Bling. Jax was hooked and dragged an increasingly unenthusiastic Igor deeper into space. The last few had

been difficult and Igor's anger, while funny, was not without merit, as he seemed to bear the brunt of the tasks in retrieving the tokens. Seeing him irritable made Jax testy. He needed to find Igor a good meal and a good fuck, then things would be alright. His littermate just needed to relax.

"Fine. I'm going for the food. You're on your own with the token."

"Sure thing." He wrapped his arm around Igor's shoulder and herded him off the tiny space runner. "You'll have your pick of everything."

"More like what I can get," Igor said glumly, staring out across the deserted and battered platform. "From the looks of it, we'll be lucky to get simulmeat on SPV7Z."

Jax slid both their IDentchips across the scarred counter. A pair of pale green tentacles slid through the partition and grabbed them. After a quick insertion into the panel, they were passed back.

"Enter the chamber one at a time." The voice translator system stuttered and skipped a bit.

Igor pushed him inside, waiting patiently as the clear panel closed and the opposite one opened. Jax stepped out and smiled back, "Come on, baby. Gastronomic pleasures await."

Following him, Igor waited as the silent scan ran. And waited. The panels remained closed. Jax made faces at him until a series of lights ran across the top and a disembodied voice stated, "Biometric scans have identified a banned organism. Quarantine procedures are in effect." A beeping commenced. "Level IV safety standards apply."

Igor slapped his hand against the clear wall. The attendant ignored him. "Hey!" He slammed the panel harder. "You! Yeah, you! What is going on?" Still no response, in fact the cephaloid slid behind a partition and was no longer visible to either Igor or Jax. Turning back, "What is happening, Jax? Why aren't you infected?"

Shit. Igor's wide eyes made him want to reassure. "Just relax. I'm sure it's a mistake." He bit his lip. "Or something minor."

Then the floor gave out, and Igor was gone.

The Art of Persuasion

“I don’t care if I need an escort. I’m not waiting any longer.” Patience expended, Jax grabbed the Port Master’s attendant by the beak and mantle. “Where is my companion?”

Immobilized, his eight arms flailing and wrapping around Jax had no effect, and the pressure applied just behind the sentry’s head seemed to be having the desired result. The arms uncoiled from Jax.

Quaking, the cephaloid tried to reason, “Sir, you must wait.” The translator was still hiccupping, but the message was clear enough and Jax was having none of it.

Fine, how about this for a message. Increasing pressure on his mantle, he released the beak. “Give me the location where I can find him or I will start making you asymmetrical.” He waved a kravnar blade for illustration.

A puddle of ink discharged onto the floor beneath the trembling worker. “Here. Right here,” he squeaked. Pointing at a map, he circled a section of the station two levels down—directly below them.

“Where...”

Three tentacles waved madly in the direction of a drab gray panel.

After being led through a maze of back corridors by his hand intelunit, Jax barged into an empty room. Well, almost empty. There was a single human tapping on a panel along the far wall.

“Is this where Level IV detainees are processed?”

The blank look did nothing to assuage his concerns that he had indeed located where Igor was being held. If it wasn’t, he’d go back and tie that Cirrina’s tentacles into a Gordian knot.

“What?”

“Level IV procedure detainees.” Still blank—oblivious. “The bioscan at the docking entry detected a banned organism and then my friend disappeared through the floor.”

A large bubble snapped and stuck to his face. “Oh. You mean vaccinations and parasite removals. Yeah, you got the right place. Head through that door on

the left.” And he promptly went back to staring at the panel and tapping away again.

There were six doors: one black, two red, and three blue. There was a large nutrition center between the red and blue doors. Which left did he mean? The left-left, the black one? The red one left of the Chomp Bars’ dispenser or the blue one just to left of the attendant. Watching the systematic typing some more, and anticipating further useless assistance, he decided to just pick one.

Fine, the leftmost door—black. He tried the panel, but it refused to open. *Okay, maybe not. Screw it! I’ll go down the line.* The first red panel opened and he quickly stepped back and it shut. Frack! Best to forget he ever saw that. Ugh. He hesitated and then tried the other red door. It was dark and vacant, but the lingering odor made his stomach turn.

Next, a blue door. The color alone made it seem less ominous and the panel opened. A scream rent the hushed quiet as eight sets of eyes looked up at his interruption. “Ah... sorry.” He bolted backwards practically falling on his ass.

“The blue door, just to the left of *me*,” said the attendant.

When Jax paused directly in front of it he looked back, seeking and getting a nod of encouragement. He approached and it slid open to reveal a bright passageway, clean, the ambient temperature cool, and emitting only a gentle shushing sound. Optimistic, he ventured forward peering into a few empty bays, until he heard a familiar voice.

“They’re *WHAT?!?*”

Bent over with his jumpsuit down about his knees is how he found Igor. A man was prodding the hoof print bruise and bathing the area with a clear antiseptic just before grabbing a scalpel and making a narrow incision.

“Incubating, organic waste eaters.” The meditech, wielding a pair of tweezers, was pulling a long strand from the cheek of Igor’s ass.

Jax could see that the bruise was undulating.

“Useful in the stables of Carnarvon no doubt, but would probably end up seeking refuge within your intestines.” Another long, wriggling mass was deposited into a tall beaker.

“Can’t you just kill them? Zap them or something?” Igor’s voice squeaked.

“No, no. We’ll take them and use them in the recycling facility, to assist with the decomposition and regeneration. These will grow to be six feet in

length and consume a ton of waste. With any luck they'll multiply." Putting down the tweezers, he put a lid on them. Then picked up a laser and sutured up the opening.

"Are you done?" With the meditech's nod, Igor pulled up his pants.

Igor turned around, grimacing at Jax. He wasn't going to let him forget this, was he? Igor shoved his arms into the sleeves and started to pull up the closure.

"Oh. I missed one. Let me see." The meditech prodded the area just above his left nipple and, when there was no reactionary movement, raised the laser. "This one's just a bruise."

Jax unconsciously growled.

Igor glanced at him, clearly surprised, and then stepped back. "Leave it."

The meditech sighed, "You sure? Looks like it hurts." With Igor's nod, he put it back down. "All set then."

Jax was suddenly pissed. Hunger was getting the better of him. "Let's go."

Igor expressed no surprise at his surliness. One of the benefits of littermates; they were used to his occasional moodiness.

Be Careful What You Wish For

“Look at all of this!” Jax swept his arms wide, encompassing the bustling marketplace, then clasped Igor’s hand pulling him along and stopping at a vendor sweating in front of an enormous fire pit. Rotating items through the grills and plucking off what shoppers around them shouted out. “And you thought it would only be simulmeat. Ha!”

Igor browsed the list of Port Dishes with the slightest of smiles. Jax knew what he needed and he found it. Igor wouldn’t admit it, but that didn’t matter. Score one for him.

“So what do you want?” He asked, placing a hand on Igor’s nape, gently kneading.

“Ummm... well, the kraken sounds good, but not sure since the fraglock is marked as fresh.” Turning he asked, “What do you think?”

“The whole stall smells good and, judging from everyone else clamoring for the food, I don’t think you can make a wrong choice.”

“Alright. Fresh fraglock it is.” Igor grinned at him as he shouted out his order.

The chef grunted, went to a chest against the side of the stall, lifted the lid and extracted a small, wriggling quadruped. It wasn’t until the chef nailed the fraglock through the head before mounting it over the fire that Igor realized how fresh his meal would be.

Igor spun and gagged uncontrollably, but nothing came up. “I can’t eat that, Jax.” He kept dry heaving.

Jax swore silently. For someone who had completed advanced biomedical training and been promoted through the Progeny Institute, Igor had a very sensitive stomach. Then again, cloning wasn’t exactly a bloody endeavor. It probably hadn’t helped that he and his other littermates had teased Igor relentlessly growing up, trying to harden his resolve. The four of them had been asses really, and whenever their *sirdar* caught them—because Igor never told—they got swift correction. Jax had spent more time than any of them bent over in chastisement for taunting Igor. The pain never bothered him, but *Sirdar’s* evident disappointment made him regret his actions. He’d sneak out from his confinement to apologize to Igor—who’d always accepted it.

Tossing some money on the counter, Jax guided him away and down another aisle filled only with textiles. Once the smell dissipated, Igor's midsection stopped clenching and he stood up straight.

"Sorry about that."

"Don't worry. We'll find something more palatable later."

Wandering slowly through the market they made purchases here and there. Jax handed over credits for a couple of star fruits and a large, fluffy bun that was still warm. Igor gobbled down whatever was handed to him. Jax quickly purchased more.

He was just watching some juice drip down the side of Igor's mouth when he said, "Jax! Look there." He wagged his finger pointing to a small table in the back.

Jax wiped the droplet with his thumb and licked it clean. "I thought you didn't want to help?"

"I could hardly not mention a plate full of tokens."

Platiful. Odd indeed. Jax motioned the vendor over, "What are those coins for?"

The old man picked one up, "These here are Sirens. You throw one into the Well of Tells in the aquatic district, and a mer will retrieve your fortune."

The two Sirens jingled in his hand. Try as he might, the vendor refused to sell more than one to each of them. You'd think, at that price, he'd be happy to part with a few extras. Jax held them tighter as they approached the waterwall. There was no glass but the liquid kept its form, encompassing the entire distance from the transport hub to the pleasure district.

They stood there, side by side at the well, just watching. Long leaves undulated and small schools of fish flitted here and there. Circling slowly was a pinniped, doing acrobatic twirls and turns. It slowed as it neared them, observing them as much they did it. There was a knowing in that look and then—wink! It sped away, leaving nothing but a trail of bubbles, rising slowly.

Jax handed Igor one Siren and bade him to throw it. It slowly drifted down, and just before it reached the bottom, a hand snatched it. A figure rose from behind a fan, her hair colored similarly to the blue plants she had been resting

amongst. She approached the barrier and stared at Igor, her tail lazily sweeping the sand. There was something, not quite creepy, but intense in the eye contact between the two and then, with a smile, she darted away.

When she returned, a small golden circle lay in her palm. She raised it to the barrier and began to push it through. More than a little intrigued by how she manipulated the field barrier, Jax reflexively lunged before stopping, letting Igor put out his hand to catch it before it fell.

Interesting. That was no cheap bauble. In fact, the cost of the Siren did not cover the value of Igor's fortune. What would he get? Jax tossed his Siren further into the well, it hadn't fallen far when a small flurry of bubbles surrounded it, and then a pair of green eyes held his gaze. They were huge compared to the boy's face, a giant grin cut across it, and then he was gone.

Jax's fortune was not as easy to find apparently, for some time had passed and he had not returned. Igor was turning the circle over and over in his hand. "Let me see."

He dropped it into Jax's outstretched hand. It was heavier than it appeared and smooth, even with all the carvings scored into it. He twisted it and it came apart into two identical rings, the markings on one mirroring the ones on the other.

"Oh!" Igor plucked them from him and twirled them, putting one on each hand moving them synchronously.

Distracted, Jax didn't notice the mer's return until a shrill whistle called him. The boy smiled and held up a—yes, yes it was—a token. Once again, the barrier gave way and Jax held the token in his hand. The boy watched as Jax showed it to Igor and then when Jax turned back, his dimpled grin broadened as he waved and leisurely cut through the water disappearing back into the depths.

Up, up... and Away?

“How lucky was that?” Jax bounded up the ramp into the space runner. He inserted the token into the reader and waited. The computer ran, but then it was ejected. “What?” Oh no. This was a token; he knew it.

“Something wrong?” asked Igor.

He shoved it back into the box. Again, rejected. The token fell out onto the floor.

Igor picked it up. “Why won’t it register?”

Shrugging his shoulders Jax said, “It’s like all the others. This is not a fake.” He was sure. Had to be something else, but what? Jax plopped down and started querying the galaticaching board about registration fails. A couple threads had nothing and then, there—one discussing transmutation. “Apparently, ‘some tokens especially higher point Bling tokens require exposure to an element, catalyst or other force before activating’, and I’m guessing we’ve got one of those.”

“How will we know what to do?” Igor leaned over his shoulder scanning the thread.

Reading further, “It says that ‘activation keys are located in the general vicinity of the token’.” Jax dragged his hands through his hair tugging.

“Stop.” Igor rested his hands on Jax’s. “You’ll get patchy and start looking mangy.”

He immediately stopped, just holding Igor’s hands. He was going to miss this companionship when he took his new position—solitary. He barely went hours without seeing or talking to Igor at home, how was he ever going to survive years without him?

“Let’s check out the map and see what else there is in the port nearby,” said Igor.

They spent the next couple hours studying the sectors adjacent to the well. SPV7Z-218 looked like crap from the outside. Situated on the edge of the known galaxy with little assistance available it made sense, but there were high-grade amusements and technology everywhere. The range of activities available between the transport hub with the viewing platform of the aquatic

district and the pleasure district alone numbered into the double digits, making their search not as easy as it first seemed. They agreed that several of the clubs located in the Hedonist sector were where they wanted to go. They touted everything from mind-altering substances to an antigrav stage. Pleasure district it was. Maybe they'd just get lucky. Jax knew they both needed it, and he had no problem paying for Igor to fucking relax.

The Perks of Public Transport

Hopping on the slingshot just inside the security checkpoint, Jax and Igor stood leaning against the doors. It was empty except for one other couple. The larger male was whispering and gently rubbing the grotesquely swollen abdomen of his companion.

Now that looked uncomfortable. Jax diverted his attention to his favorite playtoy when there was nothing else around, Igor's hair. Igor rolled his eyes as he started braiding it.

"Why don't you grow your own hair so you can play with it instead of mine?"

"Where would be the fun in that?" Jax tugged harder to ensure it was straight. Igor might complain, but of all his littermates, it was Jax he came to for grooming. "Besides, until you decide to move in with me and I have someone to do it every morning before duty, I am not spending the time securing and pinning it."

He pulled a band from his pocket and was twirling it around the end when the other pair began a heated exchange.

"No—I can't... fucking slow... my fucking breathing." He growled. The smaller male was whacking the other's shoulder, his beautiful face distorted in pain or rage... or both.

Not exactly a threat to the big guy, but awkward.

"I hate you." The smaller male burst into tears as another groan wavered through gritted teeth. The hulk seemed unmoved by the physical abuse as he pulled his companion closer, massaging his stomach and obviously attempting to soothe him.

Jax had sidled as far away as he could from the pair when the slingshot abruptly stopped; sending them all onto the floor. A sharp cry of pain preceded a long, drawn-out whimper that had the hulk clutching the fragile figure in his arms.

"Hold on, Taro." He rocked back and forth cradling his pregnant mate. With each cry he was becoming increasingly more distressed. "Please. Calm down."

That comment was met with a weaker whack to the cheek. "I will not... calm down." Taro gasped and then an ear-piercing scream ripped through the

metal enclosure. "Something's wrong," he yelled clutching his stomach. A bloom of red stained his silver tunic.

Igor had been pounding on the doors to no avail and the intercom system was not responding. Jax kept calling over the speaker trying to get anyone. Igor stopped fighting the panel and hurried over to the pair after the last cry.

Crouching he said, "Help is delayed. We need to see what's going on with your mate." Igor waited for the hulk's response.

"The babies are too soon. We knew with the difference." He gestured between them. "The size... would mean an early delivery for Taro, but this is months before..." A tear ran down his cheek. "This was only supposed to be a wellness check for them."

"It's okay. Lift his tunic." Igor encouraged as he motioned Jax. "I need the medkit in the wall panel. Tell me what's in it."

Glad to be occupied with anything, ignoring the soft cries emitted with each pant, Jax ripped it open. "General first response items: gauze, suturing laser, disinfectants, unguents, and sheaths."

"Tige, don't leave. Please." Taro's begging was cut short by another cry.

"Never," he vowed.

Igor was focused on the bloody opening revealed by the rolled up fabric that seemed to be getting larger as they watched. "Sheaths," pulling them on as soon as Jax handed them over. "Thylacine, correct?"

Tige nodded. "He's only in his seventh season."

Igor raised a brow, but made no comment. Jax knew blood. He dealt with blood. He dealt out blood. But this, this was nothing like what he knew. He was a nervous wreck watching the three while he had no fucking clue what was going on. On the plus side, Igor seemed knowledgeable about the species.

Jax wasn't sure he understood what Igor intended to do. Heck, Jax wasn't sure he even understood how a male got pregnant. And he was definitely a male; the shriveled dick made that much obvious. All he had to do was help Igor and try not to look. Why was there blood? He hoped that help would arrive before—another scream. Uh oh. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Open the gauze." Igor barked. He grabbed the square and held it out, "Disinfectant."

Jax soaked the cloth. Igor gently swabbed the opening. They continued this until the entire area from opening to pouch was clean.

“How many?”

“Three. He’s too small for more and even then Taro’s been taxed for weeks.” Tige kissed his mate’s forehead murmuring sweet sounds.

“Taro, I’m going to reach in and help pullout your younglings and place them in your pouch.” Igor waited for him to open his eyes and acknowledge him. “Understand?”

Heavy lids rose and Taro gave the slightest nod and whimpered.

Igor looked to Tige. “I’m sorry for this trespass, but I am concerned about both Taro’s and the younglings’ distress.”

Tige’s expression was grim, but he nodded. “Do what you think is best. Help them.”

With a deep breath, Igor eased his hand into the birth canal. Taro gasped at the intrusion and Tige held him tighter. Turning his wrist, he slowly withdrew it holding a crimson-streaked, hairless form that wriggled. Igor gently laid it inside the pouch just above. Then, carefully slid his hand back in. A few moments later, another one was placed within. Igor moved quickly and adroitly, his hand seeking from left to right.

“I need to find the third youngling,” he said in warning and then pushed deeper.

Taro cried out; blood was now seeping onto the floor. The pair seemed to be hyperventilating. Igor’s curt nod towards the two spurred Jax to grab Tige’s shoulder; he guessed this was the time all that triage training was going to come into use. When Tige looked up Jax said, “Breathe with me.”

A slow inhalation and exhalation, Tige followed his lead. Repeat. Taro began to mimic Tige, and Jax just kept them focused as Igor searched the cavity. At last, his arm started withdrawing and the last one emerged.

It seemed too still.

Taro began weeping, burying his face in Tige’s chest. The hulk watched Igor rub it gently. Still. Igor kept rubbing, slowly massaging the form. Tige closed his eyes when nothing happened. The only sounds were Taro’s sobs and Tige’s hitched breathing.

Igor didn't look upset, merely determined.

And then, the slightest of movements and the last youngling joined his littermates. Igor made sure it attached to a teat and then removed his hand.

Both were staring, not breathing as Igor smiled at them. "It's alright. The last one is a bit smaller than his siblings, but it shouldn't be noticeable after a couple weeks of nursing."

Thankfully, that good news was punctuated by the sound of a laser searing through the slingshot's door.

"Of course I knew what I was doing." Igor was unwinding the braid Jax had woven for him. "I am a progeny and reproduction specialist. We study various species and scenarios for fertilization and birth, not just Felddoonae."

"Their method is so different." *And terrifying.* Actually, insane sounded more like it, but at the same time he couldn't help but feel a little jealous at the emotional result. "Tige and Taro seemed so close. I wonder if we're missing out on something without the incubation and birth," Jax postulated, remembering how entwined Taro and Tige were afterwards. They didn't seem to notice anything beyond themselves. Even while the crew was battering down the door, they just kept whispering and smiling at each other. "Amazing really."

He snorted at the incredulous look Igor leveled at him. "You're on your own with that one, Jax. I couldn't be happier returning to my lab and the bloodless calm of planned cloning."

"You wouldn't even do it for our kittens?" He teased Igor as they headed towards the pleasure district.

Igor cocked his head and stared at Jax. With an almost imperceptible shake he said, "Are you nuts? After seeing that, I'm not sure why other species aren't on board with cloning. Because, I'll tell you this, Jax—if I had to go through that, there's no fucking way our species would propagate." With his arm wrapped around Igor's shoulder, he felt a shudder run through him.

"Heck. If fucking wasn't purely recreational, there'd probably be less fucking."

Well, didn't that just sound shitty.

Blow me... away

Igor tried to hand over the card Tige had given him in thanks as they approached the entrance to *Stripes*, a members only club popular with the Thylacine crowd.

“No. He gave it to you,” Jax balked, not taking it.

Undaunted, Igor handed over the card to the brute guarding the ingress. If they thought Tige was big, then this guy dwarfed him. He examined the card and then them. With a slight dip of acknowledgment, he pushed open the panel.

By the stars. “How big do they get?” Jax asked.

“Not that big. He’s been genetically altered.” Igor slid between two slightly less intimidating figures. “Fully matured males are about Tige’s size.”

“Why is Taro so small?”

Igor frowned. “He is still young.” Pushing towards the bar he continued, “Thylacines don’t generally reproduce before their tenth to twelfth cycles, but Taro reached fertility early.”

“Aren’t there females?”

Igor gave him the stupid look. “Of course. Thylacines are one of several species where both males and females are equipped to reproduce. In the presence of the right hormones both sexes will go into heat.”

“Guess Tige made him hot.”

“You could say that,” Igor snorted.

Jax was thankful that at least one of his littermates understood his humor.

“Thylacines generally engage in repeated group matings when one becomes fertile.” They pushed through the crowd heading for the bar and Igor continued, “It is intense and often involves between four to eight participants. For Tige to have singlehandedly fertilized three pups, then Taro and he were quite busy for a couple days.”

“So...” He was going to ask how exactly that worked, but further discussion was halted as they gave their orders. When he turned back to Igor, he had that look he wore when he was going to explain to kittens why chasing firestorms was a bad idea, and Jax decided that maybe he really didn’t want to know.

The female formulating their drinks wandered back placing the fluorescent green-filled flasks down. "You're the ones who helped Taro and Tige?"

News traveled fast.

"Yeah," Igor said. Taking a deep sip and then shuddered. "Whoa... now, that's got a kick." He gave Jax a goofy grin.

Jax was suddenly aware how quiet the room had gotten and all the attention their conversation was drawing. A few males that rivaled the guard in size were huddled on both sides of them. Jax moved an unaware Igor in front of him.

"Thanks." She leaned onto the slick surface and asked more quietly, "Taro's my baby brother; how's he doing?"

Igor's relief was obvious. "Pretty good considering the shortened term. The younglings, too." He handed over a credit chip.

She refused it. "On the house, the whole evening for services rendered." Then wandered off to another customer.

The drinks kept coming and the company was surprisingly good. Thylacines were big, but a garrulous lot. Igor had been sent a couple more from the admirers surrounding him. Jax hung back watching him. Igor was rarely the center of attention, but boy did he have these dogs chasing their tails to catch his eye.

"Your companion's very attractive," a voice to his right spoke. Jax had noted the presence of the large Thylacine beside him, but since he'd kept quiet, Jax hadn't disturbed him.

"Yes." No doubt about it. Igor was beautiful. And now licking a brightly hued powder off one of their necks. Well this would be interesting, and here Jax worried he'd have a hard time getting Igor to relax. But Igor just jumped on a psychotropic ride without a care. Jax could only hope he knew what he was in for.

"I suggest you wade in to claim him before the pups get too rambunctious."

Jax took another look, the male didn't seem that much older, but there was a thickness to his muscles that belied his maturity. Only a couple handfuls of years, but he had no idea how long Thylacines lived.

"He's not mine." Certainly not the way the Thylacine intended. Possessive and exclusive were not paired emotions for the Feldoonae people, unlike several species he'd encountered.

“Really,” the male grunted. “Then perhaps you wouldn’t be disinclined to a little attention yourself.” As he pushed his body against Jax’s fully.

He was big and thick—all over. The rod presently probing his spine made Jax catch his breath. *God. That is big.* His focus was quickly reduced to the arm wrapped around him, the cock waiting, and Igor licking his way down a Thylacine.

Almost as if he could sense Jax’s thoughts, “Don’t worry, kitty. I know your kind. Feldoonae are very limber and supple.” He rubbed harder. “It’ll fit.”

Slowly, they migrated toward an alcove as the four bodies surrounding Igor pushed him back onto a table and Jax followed to watch. Clothes were being tossed to the floor and a meaty paw started jacking him.

Igor was groaning and arching into the hands grabbing him. He was out of control by the time a mouth engulfed his cock and a pair of hands held him down. It wasn’t long before Igor was shooting a load down the throat. The Thylacine yanked Igor’s ankles high, nearly to his shoulders while an enormous cock was being rubbed against his hole, a copious amount of precum bathing it. Igor was pushing his pucker against the thick cock grunting as he licked the one pushed against his lips.

Jax was turned around, his suit on the floor, his cock in a stranger’s hands. “Your friend will be busy for a while. Let me entertain you while my pack works the H3At out of his system.”

No wonder his littermate was sluttier than usual. Igor wasn’t a prude, but he also didn’t usually take a double team like a pro. He wondered how long the effects would last, and how sore he’d be after. Judging from his first reaming of the night, it would be significant. Any more thoughts on the matter Jax might have had were abandoned as he fell to his knees for a taste of his own cockpop.

Ground Control to...

Jax lay in a heap on the floor and watched the table spin as Igor took his fifth load up his ass and down his gullet. There seemed to be a break in the daisy chain as more drinks were passed around. One of them held a wobbling blue cube to Igor's mouth coaxing, "Have this. It will bring you energy so we can play some more."

Igor licked and put his hand up to hold it. Staring at the square and licking, he suddenly sat up on the table head-butting the Thylacine ministering to him.

"Frack!" Holding his head and the cube up he said, "Jax, I know what to do." He jumped off the table oblivious to disgruntled comments from his buddies.

Jax couldn't even pull his legs together. "Yeah?" *Fuck, that cock had been huge.*

Igor thrust the wobbly cube into his face. "We need the antigrav stage."

His blank look must have encouraged him to explain further. "Jellification." He shoved the cube against his lips. "You should have this—you look totally fucked." Igor helped pull his legs together and gave him a hand up as he continued with his hypothesis.

Whatever was in that cube was potent stuff; Jax felt ready to fly. They suited up, ignoring the howls and baying of disappointment behind them as they strode toward the exit. "You're sure?"

A giant grin split Igor's face. "Definitely."

"Hutchinson Effect!" They said simultaneously, staggering arm in arm out the door.

"You're a genius, Igor."

"Duh."

To the Races

Jax was checking his intelunit for the antigrav location when he noticed Igor had wandered off. Jax felt more comfortable keeping an eye on him in his present state. He hadn't gone far; Jax could make out the magenta head bobbing on the edge of a crowd. There was cheering and, if Jax wasn't mistaken, a bit of gambling going on. Igor had skirted the gathering until he'd found a spot where he could see over those in front.

"Place your bets," the loudspeaker crackled.

Participants were queued up in pairs to transverse a circuit on the floor. A mix of genders and species, all lithe and naked, were waiting on their marks. Jax was trying to figure out why the course was so short when Igor started whining.

"What?"

Deep, rapid breaths and Igor responded, "Nothing." Then whined again.

The race pairs lined up one behind the other, and it was then that Jax saw that all the males were highly aroused. As their partners bent over, they grabbed one then the other leg and pulled them flush until they were mounted on their cocks.

"How exactly does this race work?" Jax asked another viewer.

"First cart to cross the finish line without losing its cocking pin, wins."

"Any restrictions?"

"Doesn't matter which hole, as long as it stays in for the duration."

Odds were announced and promised credchips were being wagered on the outcome. One team was the clear crowd favorite, but the odds on another were tempting enough to ensure some action on the sidelines. Jax watched it all while Igor was mesmerized by the view as judges verified team positions and holstering compliance. His whining increased as the starting pistol sounded, intently rubbing against Jax's haunch.

Jax leaned over and nipped Igor's jaw. "Shhh..." He impeded his rubbing by holding Igor firmly against him. "You'll only make it worse. Stop."

Igor was inhaling deeply, his nose buried in Jax's chest, a low whine escaping with each exhale. Jax drew him further into his embrace, gently

petting Igor, massaging his scalp and holding him tight to still Igor's need for frenetic movement.

The race was over before they knew it. The winners, the odds' favorite, were strutting about acknowledging the crowd's cheering. All around them bets were being settled. Jax's informant laughed and collected credchips from two disappointed youths. "Never bet against ass, especially if the lube is light," he sagely advised.

Up in the Air

After stumbling into *The Root*, home to the only antigrav stage within 50 parsecs, Jax cornered the manager and held Igor back from licking him as he pled their request. Other than a few smirks for the wrangling Jax did holding Igor back, he elicited no response aside from the initial rejection.

“Wait! Is there any way we can pay to use the stage?”

“No. House policy won’t allow it.”

Jax felt a warm... very warm presence behind him. Turning, he noted the biggest humanoid he’d ever seen. *Where the heck did all of these behemoths come from?* He made the guard at *Stripes* look like a youngling. Tall and wide, the newcomer’s thigh was larger than his waist.

“Problem R’wan?” A deep voice reverberated through Jax.

“These two want to borrow the stage, and I was just explaining the rules, boss.”

“I’ll take it from here.” He turned to the pair. “Come. Sit with me.”

Igor stopped trying to climb on Jax and peered over his shoulder, his breath hot and heavy as he rubbed up against him. Who knew how long the H3At would affect him, but it didn’t seem to be diminishing. Jax watched the newcomer admire Igor. After brief introductions, Jax explained what they wanted and hoped Q’rcus would agree to some terms of use. They had to get that token exposed to the antigrav.

“We need to use your stage for a few minutes,” said Jax. No response. “We’d be happy to pay for the time.”

“The only way anyone gets on that stage is if they’re performing. There is a great cost to run it. Patrons expect something spectacular when it is on. *The Root* does not disappoint.”

Igor continued to command interest as he slithered up and down Jax’s back. Maybe... “We can perform.”

“I think that may be true.”

“You’re a Bauman,” Igor blurted out. He climbed over Jax, barely missing his head with his knee, sitting between them on the curved seat—his appraisal

just as blatant as his appraisee's. Igor reached out a hand toward Q'rcus's crotch and Jax pulled him back onto his lap, where he quickly became distracted by grinding his ass against Jax's cock.

Grabbing his hip and gently wrapping a hand around Igor's throat, Jax stilled him. "Sorry. My littermate is not quite himself."

Q'rcus took a sip from one of the drinks that had appeared. "From the looks of it, this is not the first club you have visited." He nonchalantly stroked himself, the massive bulge attesting that he was proportional all over.

Igor purred, loudly, pulling against Jax's restraint.

"The crowd likes to be entertained." Q'rcus left his hand on his shaft as he continued, "Can you... *please*?"

Igor's enthusiastic moans of assent sounded like he was coming, which he might have been.

"Yes. We can do a routine." They had done exercise performances while younglings. Of course, that was years ago when they did group physical activities as juniors before specialized, individual training. He and Igor had practiced one for a competition so many times that Jax still occasionally dreamed of it. And, the antigrav would substitute perfectly for the ropes they'd used to create their aerial display.

"Good. I would like to see it." Q'rcus reached down below the table and grabbed a tall box. "Here are your costumes. If you need assistance donning them, ask. I will send R'wan to set things up and help as necessary."

Taking the box, Jax herded his littermate backstage. He had just placed it on a table when Igor tackled him to the floor. Biting the back of his neck, grunting while humping his ass. He'd better help get him off if they had any hope of performing, unless Igor fucking him on the antigrav stage was entertainment. For this club, probably, but he had no intention of trying to work out the logistics while floating.

Jax lifted his ass. "Come on," he said while Igor was grinding. "You want to rub one off like this or should I just suck your cock, Igor?"

Igor growled. "Your mouth."

Jax had the closures open and Igor's cock down his throat when R'wan wandered backstage. Jax couldn't care less as Igor pumped hard and deep, groaning as he released. A gentle bathing with his tongue and Igor popped free.

Removing the arm from his eyes, "Thanks for that, Jax," he said. "I swear. I'll never do H3At again. Never."

Probably true, but Igor was still flushed and his pupils were huge diamonds—he wasn't close to being done. Jax should have left him in that Thylacine daisy chain for a couple more rounds.

"You should get ready, now." R'wan nodded towards the box. "Markgraf Q'rcus is most anxious for your performance."

Opening Q'rcus's box had revealed two bright, jeweled swaths of orange and green. But, their costumes were moving. Undulating as they inched along, crawling up the sides.

"How?" Jax touched one; it was smooth and silky. Reacting, it moved towards his finger. The frills wavering as it slowly progressed up the box.

"Jax why is it moving? By itself?" Igor remained a step back.

"They are nubri. Symbiotic organisms from the Piscean system." R'wan answered. "They are non-sentient and subsist off natural excretions from many humanoids." He picked one up, the long black tentacles dangling nearly to the floor. "They are also helpful with dermal infections, but that's not why we use them. Besides being beautiful, they are unaffected by the harmonics of the antigrav stage, unlike many inorganics which can jellify."

"Really?" Igor gently picked the remaining one out of the box. "Fascinating."

"You could perform nude, but many enjoy the benefits of using a nubris."

Jax snorted. R'wan clearly interpreted his disbelief.

"They keep things tucked and in place while rotating. Less pinching and twisting when one uses a nubris." R'wan gently stroked the creature and grinned. "Plus, the suckers are very pleasing. Many performers finish their set very happy."

"Wow. Help me get it on." Igor had barely finished his request before he offered his penis... errr... himself to R'wan.

The tentacles wrapped around their torsos, small barbs hooking into their skin as the body adhered to their crotches, the suckers gently massaging as they moved infinitesimally. Whoa... that did feel good, but not too good. Jax found it was enough stimulation to keep hard, but not to distract.

Having tucked the token behind his balls, Jax wiggled a little to check for shift—not happening with the nubris's suction hold. "You sure this is safe?" He asked Igor. It was his balls, and the last thing he wanted was to end up with a token-clad testicle.

"Stop worrying." Igor groped him. "All those incidents you're remembering are from early experiments, the nascent beginning of antigrav technology." He fondled Jax, the nubris, responding to Igor's touch, was undulating faster, rhythmically pulsating.

Growing hard and wanting more he pushed into Igor's hand. "Igor..."

Biting Jax's ear he whispered, "Not yet." And drew his hand away after one last caress. "Those beauties will not be gold encrusted when we depart the stage. I promise."

Dragging in several deep breaths, Jax wondered where this new, cruel Igor had come from. Teasing had never been his game before. Adjusting himself and finding no reprieve, he followed.

They stood back to back on the stage after quietly conferring in the dark. Igor quibbled a bit and then conceded that any change to their gymnastics routine was ill advised. But the quirk in Igor's lips alerted Jax that perhaps there would be a surprise or two. Little did he imagine how playful and aggressive his littermate could be.

They interlocked elbows as the music began. Bright lights shone down and the crowd disappeared as they rose from the floor. Igor thrust himself downwards as he pushed Jax up, his body rotating 360 degrees, drilling towards the ceiling. He slowed, maneuvering his body parallel to the floor and stretched his hands out. Dipping his head backwards he could see Igor propelling himself off the stage, spiraling in a tight somersault. Arching his back, Jax grabbed Igor's ankles and allowed momentum to pull him as Igor grasped him and they sailed into a circle, their bodies languidly twirling.

The lights felt warm on his skin and the nubris was more distracting with the added heat and movement. Their suckers were rapidly compressing and decompressing against him, wrapping around his genitals and squeezing. Jax was beginning to see the allure as he enjoyed a particularly strong undulation along his cock.

Having ceased spinning Igor lay inverted, flat against his back, head to tail. Jax spread his legs and reached for Igor's hands, pulling him through and down along his body, aligning them perfectly. Groins pressed together, they locked legs and arched away from each other bringing themselves to a standstill in midair.

The nubri in contact with each other began to attach and reattach, as they seemed to be wrestling. Indeed, Jax's nubris seemed quite keen on attaching itself to Igor's.

Jax brought this to his attention. "We've got a problem, Igor."

"No shit," he shouted over the music. "You stay there. I'll sort it out."

Igor straightened and then crawled down Jax.

"Apparently, I'm more desirable because I'm excreting more," said Igor as he jacked Jax's cock, luring the nubris back with the leaking precum. Jax was enthralled watching Igor catch the stray droplets floating with his mouth until the nubris glommed on with a ferocity that brought a bite of pain as it increased the pressure.

"Ouch!"

"Stop being a baby, Jax." And he floated through his legs.

"X formation," Igor prompted.

Jax refocused and bent over with his legs spread even wider and arms pushed upwards and back. He felt Igor move into position, his crotch firmly against Jax as his legs veed wide. Once again, the nubri became agitated. Igor grasped his hips, thrusting firmly into Jax.

Jax gasped, "Fuckstars, Igor."

Igor laughed, slapped Jax's ass, and pushed it forward, spinning him out while he spun backwards. Continuing through a series of twenty formations, Jax was tormented by Igor's manhandling and was relieved when they reached the final maneuver. Straightening, Jax raised his arms, bringing his feet down on the stage again. Igor came to rest nestled behind him. Jax and Igor drew in deep breaths, their sweaty bodies vibrating from the performance, the nubri, and the anticipation for having nailed this token. They weren't the only ones affected. The crowd's noise was barely discernible over the thumping base, but they clearly evoked a response.

Jax attempted to readjust the garment cupping him, pulsating with each breath and gently squeezing. He could feel Igor behind him; wished he was still pressed up hard against him. They sauntered over to Q'rcus's table.

"Exquisite, kittens." Q'rcus patted his enormous legs and opened his arms in welcome. Jax crawled up onto one while Igor took the other. "So athletic." His hand gently rubbed Jax's back and down his hips. "Most invigorating. I think the audience found you most inspirational."

Well, if the breathless attendants running back and forth with various toys and lubricants were anything to judge by, they had definitely caused a rush. The raised volume of the Hetairan chants did little to mask the neighboring moans and grunts.

He watched Igor fondle himself as he slid into the cradle between the arm and Q'rcus's leg. Groaning, he pulled at the jeweled nubris barely containing his cock as it pushed against it. Q'rcus gently plucked away the damp strands of hair stuck to his cheek, moving them back over the side even as his other hand caressed Jax's ribs up and down.

"So, little mates, you are not solely bound together?" Q'rcus's palm rested on Igor's chest awaiting an answer. Suddenly, his misunderstanding of littermates didn't seem very important.

"No." Igor tugged at the nubris again. "Help me, Jax."

A large hand tumbled him off his perch and he landed with his face in Igor's crotch. "Take it off him, kitten."

Well, gee. Since you asked so nice. Forget that. Jax just wanted Igor, naked and ready. He pulled the thin straps down; Igor moaned as the tentacles' barbs unhooked and then squirmed as Jax peeled back the body of it as Igor lifted his hips. The nubris slithered into a corner of the box where Jax dumped it. Q'rcus snapped his fingers and an attendant was pouring warm oil into his hand before he'd turned back. He looked and Jax nodded before that large palm encased Igor in a tight grip. His breathing rate increased with Igor's writhing.

"Take off yours."

Quickly, Jax plucked the strands loose ignoring the ripple of pain and pulled them free through his legs, dropping it, with little regard, to join the other nubris. Hopping back up, he rubbed against Q'rcus as he watched him jack Igor relentlessly.

Pinching a nipple Q'rcus asked, "Igor prepared you?"

Jax had no idea what he was asking, but at this point he was prepared for anything. "Yes... YES!" He agreed, wanting to push Q'rcus along. Igor's moans were almost enough to set him off.

"Good. I want to see the rest of what didn't happen on stage." Q'rcus pushed and flipped Jax over his thigh. Jax grabbed Q'rcus ankle to hold on as he heard another snap. A large thumb and forefinger spread his cheeks and a warm liquid drizzled down, tickling as it coated his pucker and balls.

"I would never fit without much training and stretching. It would probably take weeks."

Jax grunted as a thick finger, slick with oil, circled, teased, and then pushed in. The pressure so divine in this empty wanting. Easing in and out, then harder. Jax started begging, "Please... more." The finger continued its measured pace. Suddenly, it disappeared and a larger, thicker presence took its place. "Please... Yes! God, fuck me. Fuck me. Now." He tried to push back, but a pair of hands stayed his hips. "Please, Igor."

"Shush. Don't make this end too quick, kitten. Be patient and he'll give you what you need."

Maybe Igor had a point about being called baby because kitten was certainly starting to annoy him. Igor rubbed up and down, pushing ever so gently. He felt the initial press and burn, a warm body coming to cover him as he slid deep and delivered a kiss just below his shorn hair. The hands tightening, marking him, bruising as Igor finished seating himself in him. He felt so good.

"So pretty."

Igor slowly pulled back a little and then pushed in harder, tipping Jax even further over Q'rcus's leg. Then started a steady pace, pulling out, almost until he popped free and then sliding deep. It was impossible to distinguish whose grunts and moans were whose. Gripping the leather of the boot, rubbing his face against it, and licking it.

"Oh god." Jax desperately wished he had something in his mouth to distract him from the intense pleasure. He was never going to last long. Suddenly, a thick finger was pushed between his lips and firmly against his tongue. He sucked hard and squirmed.

A deep grunt reverberated through Jax as Igor pulled free. Crying out in protest as Jax was hauled up to straddle Q'rcus's thighs. His own legs spread wide, pushed flush against the broad chest and soon breathless, as Q'rcus overpowered him with a kiss. Jax felt a rough and demanding push as Igor recommenced fucking him—hard.

Freed, he gasped air into his lungs. Igor pulled him back to rest against his chest, his fingers playing with his abdomen, tickling up over his ribs and slowly teasing his nipples. Jax groaned as he tugged harder making them respond. So tight they hurt.

Q'rcus had opened the placket to his trousers and pulled out his enormous cock. No way they could possibly envelope it. Jax felt Igor grab his cock, rubbing it up and down Q'rcus's prick; he groaned.

"After I'm done fucking you, we're going to lick that." A sharp thrust of his hips punctuated Igor's statement, grinding Jax into Q'rcus, whose substantial precum lubricated the way for Jax to slide and grunt between the two.

Igor was saturated in cum and busying licking more off when Jax heard the chirring and noticed their company. "*Sirdar!*"

Eyes wide, Igor mewled.

"Ajax." Turning, "Igor." Those gold eyes pinned them down.

Jax could hear the soft pants of Igor's increased breathing.

Sirdar focused on Igor. "You missed the Genetics Summit." His eyes wandered back and forth between Igor and Jax and then Q'rcus and the club. "I was concerned when Leo presented your findings."

Igor stuttered, "Unimportant conclusions... the allele splicing failed initial testing... I was with Ajax..." He tried to stand up as *Sirdar* stepped closer, stumbled and grabbed Jax's shoulder for balance.

"So I was informed."

Noting the pause in the exchange, Jax jumped in. "We were just finishing, *Sirdar*." He picked the token up off of the floor between Q'rcus's legs where it had fallen at some point during the post-stage frivolity.

The golden gaze swung down, relentless in its observance. "Good. You have a new position waiting, Ajax. It is time to go."

Sirdar didn't ask for an introduction and Q'rcus didn't seem interested either, so Jax didn't bother. "We should... get dressed."

"Excellent. I'll meet you at the bar." No adieus, just his back.

Jax smiled at Q'rcus. "Sorry about that. He can be a bit single-minded at times. Thanks for the use of the antigrav."

"No worries, little mates." He grinned and looked to both him and Igor. "That was very entertaining and the pleasing... was more mine than the audience's. But, there are perks to being the boss."

Igor stepped near, pulling Jax closer. "We should go." And then turned to Q'rcus. "Thank you."

If I Knew Then...

Getting all that spunk off took a bit of scrubbing, but the aquajets felt fantastic. Jax almost wanted to go get dirty just to wash up again. He let the warm liquid rinse away the last of the cleanser, lingering just a bit. Months of sonic showers couldn't compare to the decadence of *The Root's* bathing chambers. Remembering *Sirdar* was waiting, he shut it off, dried, and dressed quickly. Igor was still valiantly grooming his hair, which appeared to have been the primary depository for Q'rcus's impressive load.

Jax scrambled out and spied their *sirdar* near the cages. He was watching the performers gyrate with a smile. It was odd to think of their elder pursuing his own conquests. Then again, it was good. After all, it meant he could expect the same. The conversation stopped as Jax approached, and *Sirdar* excused himself and settled on a seat a few feet from the delicate, furred dancer then pushed a drink over to him.

"Have you made a decision, Ajax?"

"Regarding what?" Jax didn't like vague leading questions. He'd been tricked into things one too many times to jump on it.

"Solitary assignment."

"Didn't think I had much of a choice." Jax grunted taking another swig of his drink and enjoying the burn. Nice distraction from the corresponding one in another orifice. *By the stars, no more Thylacines or Baumans for him.*

"Don't play ignorant." The impatience in *Sirdar's* voice was perplexing.

"Wha...?"

The glass slammed down and *Sirdar* searched his face. "You still haven't figured it out? How long will it take?" The growl that followed surprised Jax. Not once in years had he heard *Sirdar* growl, and never at him.

Feeling inadequate he stammered, "I... yeah, no... I really have no idea what you're talking about."

A loud grunt and *Sirdar* glared at him. "You don't. Do you?" It was followed by a deep sigh and then silence.

Jax waited, trailing his finger through the condensation, making patterns with the moisture. He hoped if he was quiet and patient his *sirdar* would tell

him. It was clearly important and the fact that *Sirdar* was angry with Jax for not knowing was distressing. He didn't like this feeling.

Finally. "Ajax, you've had ambrosia. What does it taste like?"

Alright. Not the expected conversation trajectory. "It has no flavor," he answered. "No. That's not right. It has no description... for each the taste is perfect."

"Perfect."

"Yes, perfect."

"How many perfect things have you known in your life?"

Igor's fucking hair, he loved it. No, pay attention before *Sirdar* gets cranky again. "Besides ambrosia?" He thought about it. Searched his memory and just got frustrated. What could he be referring to? "I don't know."

One black brow rose. Silence.

"I mean... there's lots of things I like—a lot." Jax was gesticulating. "I love when the pack goes up into the mountains and we all hunt and rumble around together."

"Hmmm..." That sounded promising so Jax continued.

"My blade collection. Love them. Especially that tsin dagger Igor gave me during my presentation ceremony." He had been so proud of finishing his examinations and being inducted into the Stealth Division when so many of his peers were assigned to Sentry. And then Igor's gift and the partying after the recognition dinner; it was perfect.

Sirdar snorted. "Alright. As a military attaché, your love of weaponry makes sense. I think I got a little too enthusiastic when selecting those allele profiles. Just... Please tell me you've stopped sleeping with them."

"Only one," Jax promised with a sly smile and then shrugged. "Habit."

He could feel *Sirdar* waiting for him to continue. Obviously, whatever the goal for this line of questioning was he hadn't reached it. Damn. What could he be referring to and how would this affect his new position? Solitary was a test, several years of intense internal focus with little outside interference or interaction. There was only one consideration taken when solitary was assigned and that was coordination with mates, but since Jax didn't have one... He nearly dropped the slippery glass.

“Why are you asking about solitary when the only factor in the decision is accommodating a mate?” He couldn’t look away from *Sirdar*. The silence was palpable.

“I created this pack. You and your siblings are my design.” He paused. “But, nature has ways of twisting things and creating surprise in even the most perfectly planned endeavors.” There was something like pain... No, Jax couldn’t figure it out, but he saw it in *Sirdar’s* expression.

“I have a mate.” *What the fuck?!* He gulped down the remainder of his drink.

“You don’t have to choose your mate. Life with others can be perfectly satisfying. It’s like cake. Still delicious, but not ambrosia.”

Oh hell, no. “I have a **mate**,” he said a bit more forcefully. Who? When? The room wasn’t spinning, but he felt dizzy. “I **have** a mate.” He slammed down the glass. *Fuck this.*

Igor.

His heart felt like it just went supernova, racing... expanding, consuming his chest and leaving no room for his lungs. Jax struggled to breathe. *Sirdar* just watched and waited. “You’ve known.” A nod. “Has everyone known?”

“A few,” his *sirdar* conceded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” *Fuckstars!* Did Igor know?

“It can’t be given; it must be acknowledged.”

“It might not be given, but it sure could be hinted at,” growled Jax. *Sirdar* seemed unperturbed by his show of aggression and, for some reason, that just aggravated Jax more. “All that wasted time.”

Sirdar smiled at his outburst. “Never.” He pulled Jax into a hug. “Blessed from the beginning.”

It had been so long since he felt the solace and absolute security of his *sirdar’s* arms around him. Everything felt not so bad when he was there. “That’s why you kept reassigning Igor and me.”

The hum of accordance reverberated through him like a short purr. “Focus is always better when in near proximity to one’s mate. Clarity and intent is strengthened.” Jax melted into the comfort of the petting. “Not to mention,

anxiety diminished. You may not have realized it since you are rarely divided, but when separated for extended periods discomfort increases.”

Jax relaxed into the haven of this embrace. “The Tamar fever. It wasn’t, was it?” He had been so excited to attend his first galactic-wide training seminar in the Cygnus quadrant, but he fell ill about sixty-five percent of the way through the exercises and had to be transferred for treatment, bypassing the facilities there.

“No. That’s why you were treated at the Endox facility, where Igor was studying.”

Jax whined and the arms held him tighter. He imagined that keeping unacknowledged mates close, yet unaware of their condition, had entailed quite the maneuverings on *Sirdar*’s part. His whole life. How could he not know? He knew he was closer to Igor than his other littermates, but he assumed it meant they’d be coalition partners.

“There was no wondering with you two. The birthing celebration was summarily interrupted as soon as Igor was plonked down and you dragged him into a corner by the scruff, hissing and swiping at anyone who approached.”

Why wasn’t this in the records and vidclips? “Really?” He grinned against *Sirdar*’s shoulder.

Sirdar laughed, reminiscing. “You know the scar on Ocet’s cheek?”

“The one from the ‘Mating Incident’?”

It was pack lore and always told in hushed voices during gatherings, especially after the drinks had been flowing. Never completely detailed, but Ocet usually blushed, and every one of the elders would laugh while Jax and his littermates just wondered. All they got out of it was that mating was not something you wanted to interrupt, and any questions they asked were immediately dismissed.

“Yes.”

Okay, *Sirdar* really could lose the smirk.

“Be prepared during the next feast. I think Ocet has been waiting to respond to a certain kitten’s challenge.”

Oh shit. “I did that?”

Sirdar nodded. “He was the first to notice your display and tried to separate you before... Well, not really sure how he thought the bond wouldn’t set, since

you are littermates, but he tried to spare you both. And you took exception to his misguided consideration.”

Jax groaned. This was not going to be good. Blood would be inevitable, but with any luck, Ocet's anger had dissipated with the years, not magnified. Regardless, the challenge couldn't be ignored and truth be told, Jax was more than ready to fight for Igor, even if it meant an honor match against his superior.

Sirdar kissed his forehead. “Ocet always was a superstitious one.” Another kiss on his cheek. “The fear of the Prophecy of the Felddoonae Younglings being reenacted by you and Igor scared him. How he believed that you would be just like the apocryphal mates who found each other and never broke embrace becoming fossilized into the statue in Capitol Park—no clue. Fear does strange things.” He kissed the other cheek. “He freaked out, started babbling about the warning on imprinting too early and earned himself a stripe, thanks to you.”

“Well, that will liven up our next gathering.”

“As if news of your mating isn't enough. But, a little blood match should be entertaining.” *Sirdar* pulled back to smile at him.

“Does he know?” asked Jax.

Sirdar didn't pretend he didn't understand. “Igor imprinted at birth, that's why he always followed you.” He paused for a second then carefully continued, “When you were first separated for studies, he approached me in tears and asked why.”

Just hearing it evoked a sharp pain, bright and quick.

“He was convinced that he'd done something wrong, that we were punishing him.”

Jax shook his head. “Never. He was always the good one.” He leaned into the hand cupping his cheek. It was as if *Sirdar* knew how much the retelling of something so old could bring such fresh hurt.

“After a couple weeks of emotional distress, I explained to him about mates. And he made the connection directly.”

“Always the smart one, even at the very beginning.”

A flutter of magenta in the corner of his eye was all he saw before Igor said, "Is Jax alright, *Sirdar*?"

Jax pulled out of *Sirdar*'s embrace, stepping backwards.

"Yes. You have duties Igor. I expect you at the institute next solarii. Do you wish to return with me?"

Igor looked to Jax. There was a slight furrow in his brow, but then he smiled. How could he have ever been so blind? Not even once thinking about the luxurious accommodations available on the private cruiser should he accept *Sirdar*'s offer. It was so obvious and Jax could see it now.

He saw the question in Igor's eyes, but the choice belonged to his mate. The one he had denied for years. "What do you want, Igor?" asked Jax.

"I want to register that token."

Jax pulled it from his pocket and tossed it over; Igor snatched it mid-arc and smiled. Igor turned it over and over, running it back and forth across his knuckles. He seemed to be pondering something.

"After hosting parasites from Carnarvon, being expelled from a Flatula, wrestling eels on Amphitrite, not to mention our ill-fated run through the Sanguine Fen—even after all those incredibly stupid and foolish adventures," Igor shook his head and smiled, "I wouldn't give up a moment of this adventure."

Jax caught the token as he tossed it back.

"I would travel with you until the very end."

The End

Author Bio

APS is a Jack-of-all-trades and master of none. Self-defined as terminally curious and prone to self-indulgence, APS excels at frittering. Diagnosed as having issues with authority from a young age, APS frolics in being a perpetrator of general ridiculousness and a defender of the irreverent.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SUGAR AND SAWDUST

By Debbie McGowan

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: Guy in his mid-thirties, short blonde hair, displaying defined muscly torso, his thumbs hooked inside his skimpy black briefs. His eyes are hooded, his expression tough and dangerous.

Photo 2: Guy in early twenties, dark complexion, open jacket, slim and well-toned, attractive, pouty, with dark, unkempt hair swept over his smouldering features.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I adore my baby brother and I try not to meddle in his life but since our parents are halfway 'round the world', looking out for him is up to me and he is so unlucky in love, I can't help it. Guys are always taking advantage of his kindness and generosity (okay, gullibility). Yesterday, I saw him in a restaurant with this man, and I'm beside myself. Shall I send champagne or a walker? What's a big sis to do? Yeah, this guy doesn't look like he'll take his money but what about his heart?

Note: brother is twenty-something, just very youthful-looking.

Fingers crossed,

Sincerely,

Kym

P.S. I'd like a sexy, more light-hearted than angsty story.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: humorous, age gap, pornography, models, gifted

Content Warnings: sexual language

Word Count: 12,541

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Shayla Mist, for a very thorough beta-read, edit and reread, and to Kym for a great prompt and photo choice—it was fun! Thanks also to the LL team (mods, fellow authors and prompters) for the encouragement and camaraderie. Finally, huge thanks to the real Jorje, for sharing his fashion expertise (I guess I owe you after ribbing you mercilessly for the last eight months), and also to Matt, whose similarity to Photo #2 guy unknowingly made him muse for the weekend.

SUGAR AND SAWDUST

By Debbie McGowan

Chapter One

Jorje stirred from somewhere under the muddled, muffled mass of duvet, trying to fight his way to the top of the bed before his phone stopped ringing. He made it. It stopped.

“Crap.”

As he lay there, puffing his bottom lip out to try and clear the sweaty strands of hair from his face, he realised three things. Number one: he had a massive hangover, which meant he'd also been massively drunk the night before. Number two: this wasn't his bed. It wasn't even his bedroom, or his apartment. Number three...

The blonde head approximately six inches to his right emitted a low grumble, something between a snore and a groan. In the distance, Jorje's phone started up again. Slowly, carefully, he turned on his side and sat on the edge of the bed, squinting and locating the painfully bright glow of the phone screen across the room. The ringing stopped. The screen dimmed once more. Hesitantly, he pulled the duvet away, amazed and relieved to find that he was still wearing his Cavalli briefs. He rose to his feet and peered under the duvet—blonde dude was still in his underwear too. Well, that was both good and bad. Good, because he had yet to remember anything about the night before. Bad, because it didn't look like it was worth remembering, and that, at least, would have compensated for feeling like death warmed up.

So. No idea where he was. Not a clue how he got there. Absolutely no memory of the dude in the bed. In fact, the last thing he could remember was being at Bella's night club with Ben and the gang, dropping shots like they were going out of fashion. And now he was here, and it was daylight, and his phone was ringing again. He made it across the room.

“Tay,” he mouthed soundlessly at the sight of his sister's profile pic on-screen. He absolutely did not want to talk to her right now. He dismissed the call, gingerly pirouetting to take in the sight of the room—the curtain-muted daylight, the rough woven rugs, like stepping stones, between the door just to his left and the king-sized bed with its king-sized occupant, back turned, still fast asleep. Jorje picked up his clothes, cracked the door open a few inches, and crept through the gap.

The light in the hallway was blinding, and he automatically screwed up his eyes, wincing in pain. At one end was a vast arched window, the sun streaming

through and replicating the arch in shadow form on the floor, fading where it collided with the white heat beaming from the skylight above. Light bounced off the plain white walls, starkly contrasting with the black wrought iron banisters that ran the length of the hall and swirled down around a spiral staircase. Jorje used the rail to steady himself, tugging on his Balmain biker jeans. The slim fit was a pain in the ass when sober, near impossible when hung-over (possibly still smashed), staggering with one leg in and one leg out. He almost toppled, but not quite, the slap of his bare feet against the wooden floors echoing loudly up into the rafters. He finally got the jeans on, zipped them, glancing along past the doorway from which he had just emerged, hoping to locate a bathroom. There were two other doors, both identical. Tentatively he opened the first, got lucky, dived in and unzipped his jeans again, the pleasure of that gush of piss utter bliss and loud enough to drown out the sound of someone else entering the room behind him.

“Good morning.”

Jorje jumped and stopped peeing. A deep, gentle laugh like distant rolling thunder rumbled behind him.

“Err... all right?” he greeted, quickly poking himself back into his jeans and tugging the clips closed. His hands were sweating, not so much with nerves—being a model he was used to people watching him dress, although generally not whilst in a stranger’s bathroom, and not whilst taking a piss. He turned around to find the guy standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the jamb, boxer shorts visible above the waistband of low-slung charcoal cargo pants. Jorje’s gaze travelled upwards to the guy’s navel, through the centre of a major six pack and broad pecs. He was older—much older, mid-thirties, maybe—and fit as fuck, Jorje decided, which was, he guessed, how he’d ended up here the previous night, apparently too drunk to do anything about it. Shame.

“How are you feeling?” the stranger asked.

“Err, fine?” Jorje replied, trying not to notice the immense bulge in those loose-fitting pants.

“Not hung-over?”

“Well, a little.”

The guy smiled. “You were out cold,” he said. “I had to carry you up the stairs.”

“Did I...?” Jorje swept his hair back from his face and held onto it—clung onto it, in fact, like his life depended on it. “Did we, err...?”

The stranger shook his head, seemingly intrigued by the insinuation. "I don't screw comatose guys. I don't screw guys."

Jorje nodded, felt a flush rise up his bare chest and neck, grateful that his dark complexion would mostly conceal the fact.

"Can I make you some breakfast?"

Now Jorje came to think about it, he was starving. "Yeah, that'd be good."

The guy nodded. "I just need to use the..." He nodded again in the direction of the toilet.

"Oh. Right. Sorry." Jorje stepped aside and around, attempting to avoid body contact. His still-unknown bathroom companion seemed to get the message. Jorje waited at the door, watching him unbutton and free himself, like unwinding a garden hose, evidently aware and uncaring of the fact he was being observed. He pissed long and steady, shook, fed his dick back into his pants, buttoned up, flushed and washed his hands. Turning to face Jorje again, he was smiling, amused by his audience. Jorje cleared his throat.

"Don't suppose you've got a spare toothbrush?" he asked.

"Sure." The guy opened the mirrored cabinet and handed over an unopened packet. He took a second toothbrush, squirted a length of toothpaste onto the bristles and tossed the tube in Jorje's direction. Jorje fumbled it, watching helplessly as it bounced across the tiled floor. He stooped to retrieve it, taking a moment to study the guy from the feet up—well pedicured, lightly tanned skin, smooth and taut over tendons, disappearing under the grey canvas pants, loose but for a little tightness around the upper thighs and that tremendous package. The sound of running water snapped him out of it, followed by a spurt of foamy spit hitting the back plate of the sink. Jorje swallowed hard.

"All yours, Sweetness," the guy said, passing Jorje in the doorway, close enough for his scent to register—a mix of mint, morning sweat and last night's cologne—but not so close as to be in each other's space. Jorje watched him casually swagger his way to the top of the stairs, where he paused, smiled briefly and slowly descended out of sight.

Chapter Two

By the time Jorje was done in the bathroom, there were four more missed calls on his phone: one from Matt at the agency, and three from his sister. He hit “return call”. It didn’t even ring once before Taylor answered.

“Where the hell are you? I’ve been calling you for almost an hour!”

“I was, err, busy.”

“Yes, well, I don’t really think I want to know about that. So whose place did you end up at this time? How old is he? Do you even know his name? Please tell me you haven’t...”

Jorje held his phone away from his ear, listening to the continuing barrage of questions. He totally got that Tay worried about him, but he was twenty-two and could look after himself. OK, maybe that was overstating things slightly, given that his lack of answer was down to not having one. He didn’t even know *where* he was, let alone the guy’s name. However, the aroma of bacon drifting up the stairs was alluring enough to warrant trying to find out.

“Look, Tay. I’ll call you later, OK?” He quickly pressed “end call”, tugged on his T-shirt and followed the smell to its source. Pausing on the stairs, he took in the view of the open-plan lounge and kitchen. And there was mystery guy, just finishing up loading bacon onto thick wholemeal toast—one-handed, because the other hand was occupied. Jorje watched in a daze, wondering if the dude was aware he was there on the stairs, or if he even cared. The guy put down the tongs, wandering back across the room, still jerking off, slow as anything, his fist sliding the full length of his erection. He was huge. Enormous. He stopped by the fridge, eyes trained on his hand for a moment, glanced up, saw Jorje and turned away to put his dick back in his pants. He turned back and smiled.

“Juice?” he asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” Jorje accepted, trying to act as if everything was completely normal, whilst also freaking out ever so slightly. He descended the rest of the way and took a seat on one of the high stools set along the counter joining the kitchen and lounge.

“There you go.” A glass was set down next to the plate. Jorje took a large gulp of the deliciously cold apple juice, followed up with a hungry bite of bacon and toast. He sat back, chewing self-consciously.

“Thanks,” he acknowledged. He swallowed, still watching the guy carefully for any sign of embarrassment about getting caught jacking off. He didn’t seem in the slightest bit perturbed, but was still watching Jorje, so he had to say something.

“I know this is gonna sound really rude, but, err... Well... see, the thing is I can’t actually...”

The guy held out his hand. “Alec,” he introduced. “Alec Evans.”

Jorje shook the offered hand—the one that less than a minute ago had been wrapped around that massive dick—noting the calluses on the wide palm. Too much rough self-pleasuring?

“And you’re Jorje,” Alec said.

“Yeah,” he confirmed, so preoccupied with running his fingers over the hardened bumps of skin he didn’t realise he was still holding on. He let go. Alec continued to study him, no trace of the earlier smiles, which made him seem altogether more sinister. Scary, even.

“How much of last night do you recall?” he asked, aggressively tearing at the toast with his teeth and chomping, open-mouthed, eyeing Jorje with a hunger that made him feel even more uneasy—if that were remotely possible.

“Nothing,” Jorje admitted.

Alec nodded slowly, ripped off another hunk. “You were spiked.”

“What?”

“Well,” Alec shrugged, “that’s my guess. One minute you were chatting away, coming on to me, the next...” He slammed his palm hard against the counter, making Jorje jump and, once again, setting off the hangover bang in his head. Even so, he managed a laugh of disbelief.

“*I was coming on to you?*”

Alec sneered. Jorje back-pedalled.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

His brain was fuzzed, making it hard to say what he actually did mean, but the truth was, as much as he could be a bit of a flirt, he never made the first move, certainly not with guys like Alec—rough, tough and more than likely straight. Having said that, they always took a shine to him, which was why Tay had been nagging him on the phone. A string of older men, each and every one after a bit of pretty young ass, no commitment—use, abuse, dispose.

Not that he'd always dated older guys, but the younger ones were worse—gold diggers attracted to his job, thinking he must be minted. He worked as a model for one of the top international agencies, and he was doing OK. Better than OK, in fact, for a twenty-two year old. But it was a career with a very short shelf life, and, after the first couple of times he got ripped off by user boyfriends, his parents insisted he put away all except basic living expenses in an account he couldn't touch without his sister's counter-signature. For both his own sake and that of peace and quiet, he'd agreed to it, which meant Taylor had far more control over him than he'd have preferred. However, she also stepped in to rescue him often enough that he was more grateful, than begrudging, of her interference.

He knew, or hoped at any rate, that not all men were like that. He just kept choosing the wrong ones, or they kept choosing him. Whichever, it made him instantly suspicious of Alec, who really didn't look the safe, nurturing sort. And yet the first thing he'd done was reassure Jorje they hadn't fucked. A quick squeeze of his rectal muscles seemed to confirm this was so. He glugged at the apple juice and ate some more of the toast. His phone started ringing again. Matt from the agency—it dawned on him why.

"Shit!" Jorje dismissed the call and slid off the stool. "I need to go. I'm supposed to be working." He ran upstairs, grabbed his shoes, and came back down again, pausing to put them on.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?" Alec offered.

Given that he was already more than half an hour late for the shoot, Jorje couldn't really refuse.

"That'd be great, thanks."

"No problem. Let me go grab a T-shirt."

Alec left, returning a few seconds later in a white, tight muscle top. Jorje eyed him over, appreciating the tautness of the fabric across defined chest and abs, whilst also thinking how amazing he'd look in a black Armani.

Chapter Three

“Ready?” Alec prompted. Jorje nodded. Before he got any further, his phone started up again. He answered it.

“Hey, Matt. Sorry. I overslept... Oh. Yeah, that’s... Cool. Sure... Yeah, later. Bye.” He hung up and shrugged. “They cancelled the job.”

Alec nodded in partial understanding and set his keys down on the counter. “I’m going for a shower,” he said.

Jorje watched him all the way up the stairs, wondering if he was expected to follow. The movement in his Cavallis told him he wanted to, but he was kind of afraid—of not knowing where he was, of Alec, and incredibly, that massive dick. But Alec had said he didn’t screw guys. So maybe the lack of self-consciousness over the hand job was a jock thing, although sharing a bed with another guy was way off base if he was straight, and Jorje’s gaydar sucked when he was pissed. It sucked when he was sober, too, not that it ever mattered. Guys came on to him, straight or gay. He was pretty enough for the “straight” ones to treat him as a sandbox. Maybe that’s all Alec had intended, and realised he couldn’t get it up after all? Whatever, the sound of running water told him that if he didn’t act now he’d miss his chance. He decided to let it go, instead taking the opportunity to try and figure out where he was.

Like the hallway upstairs, the downstairs walls were entirely white, other than two vast abstract prints, both around six feet by four and mostly blood-red, hanging at opposite ends of the room. The floor was dark, solid wood, the reclaimed stuff with holes and knots, yet smooth underfoot. A bay window extended to the ceiling on his right, a red-cushioned seat inlaid into it. Jorje wandered over and peered outside, discovering that he was below ground level, which made the upstairs storey ground and this the basement. More iron steps ascended diagonally across a knobbly external wall, above which he could just make out a white pickup truck, the cab door bearing black lettering: “AE Joinery and Carpentry,” along with a mobile number and a landline with a local code. That was something, he supposed. At least he hadn’t become the victim of a prankster and been carted halfway across the country while unconscious. He wandered back to the counter, finishing his apple juice in one go. Still thirsty, he went to the fridge for a refill, hoping Alec wouldn’t mind.

The fridge contained very little—a half litre of milk, around a dozen cartons of orange and apple juice, an eggbox, a pack of bacon. On second glance, there

was next to nothing in the kitchen, either. Jorje opened a couple of cabinets, discovering crockery, pans, a blender—all the usual kitchen stuff, all hidden away. The guy was a neat freak. He was also back from his shower.

“So you’re a carpenter?” Jorje asked without looking his way. It was a question with an obvious answer, which was why he opted for it.

“Yep.”

Alec sauntered past, topless again and still in low-riding cargos, but blue ones now. He grabbed a carton of juice from the fridge, offering it up to Jorje. He was seriously dehydrated, so accepted.

“How about you?”

“I, err...” Jorje paused, wondering which lie he should use this time. He’d been a student, a trainee nurse, worked in a fast food joint—anything these days to avoid telling guys what he really did. “I’m a fashion model,” he said, surprised by his accidental honesty.

“Right.” Alec’s eyes wandered from Jorje’s face, taking in the DSquared T-shirt and Balmain biker jeans. “I wondered about the designer gear.”

Jorje laughed. “Yeah, I was always into it anyway, and a mate suggested it would be a good career for me.”

It had been excellent advice, too. At school they had pushed him towards doing something physical, because he wasn’t mega-clever, although he wasn’t stupid. His parents were set on him going to university, like Taylor, but there was nothing he was that interested in. However, everyone told him he was pretty in a kind of pouty, boyish way, six-one and like a “streak of piss”, his dad always said, so he got a portfolio together and was picked up by the first agency to which he applied.

“So, are you in any rush to go anywhere today?” Alec asked.

“Not now, no. I should’ve had a photo shoot this morning, but they cancelled. I’m gonna be in the shit. It’s the second one I’ve missed.”

“Get spiked a lot?”

Jorje glanced up and made brief eye contact, unable to decide if Alec was kidding. The smirk suggested so. He found himself smiling in response. Alec tipped the carton of juice to his mouth, glugging thirstily and making his Adam’s apple bob up and down. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand

and belched, which Jorje took as conclusive evidence that he was indeed straight.

"Be right back," Alec said. "Just need to sort out the van for a job." He slid his feet into black Crocs and disappeared from view, leaving Jorje wondering how someone so damned sexy could have so little dress sense, and also who he should call to find out about the night before.

He'd started the evening with his mates in a club they always went to, and it wasn't the kind of place he'd expect to meet people like Alec—precisely why they'd gone there and not somewhere else. None of this explained how he'd ended up back at the guy's house, with no recollection of anything but his first couple of drinks.

Jorje sat in the bay window, peering up at the pickup truck, listening to the noise of metal clanging against metal—tools of the trade, he guessed—unable to see Alec for the time being. He heard one side of a conversation: Alec's voice, a pause, that deep rolling laugh, another pause, the flip flop of feet, click of alarm, visual contact, legs, naked torso, muscles straining under the weight of a large metal toolbox. Jorje's dick instantly stood to attention. Dolefully, he shook his head at his crotch.

"Down, boy. The dude's straight."

His dick ignored him and twitched optimistically. The door opened and Alec stepped through, frowning, neck muscles bulging. He dumped the toolbox and stretched his shoulders, the resultant lift of his pecs enough for Jorje to have to look away. Straight, yes, and appalling taste in clothes, but still fit as fuck.

"I'll head home soon," Jorje talked into his T-shirt to avoid eye contact.

"No rush," Alec assured him. "I'm working today, but not till later this afternoon."

"Yeah, but you need your place to yourself."

Alec shrugged. "Not really." He mooched over to the far side of the room, where there was a three-seater white leather sofa positioned in front of a picture window. Beyond that was a walled-off patio with a couple of terracotta pots and not much else. Alec flopped onto the sofa with a leg underneath him, arms extended across the back cushions, eyes on Jorje. That sneer again. *Come-to-bed eyes.*

It was an expression Jorje had heard older people say. His mum used it once to describe one of the other guys in his agency who always looked stoned. Eyes half-closed, hooded by dark lids—Jorje thought it was a ridiculous description, until now, looking at Alec—the heavy brow shadowing deep-set eye sockets, lids drooping almost shut, yet open enough for his piercing blue glare to burn into Jorje's. They were definitely come-to-bed eyes, and Jorje was confused. He let his gaze drop to Alec's crotch, observing that the monster was awake, the strong, thick elastic waistband the only thing keeping it from poking out the top of Alec's boxers. Jorje finally tore his eyes away, discovering that Alec had his closed and seemed to be... what? Fighting something. Maybe it was just best to go.

"I, err..." Jorje began. Alec opened his eyes again, his mouth also slightly open, lips full and red. He let out a low growl of frustration and shook his head.

"I really want to fuck you," he said.

Chapter Four

“So you do screw guys, then?”

Without answering, Alec got up and strode across the room, stopping right in front of Jorje and cupping his cheek with his palm. He sighed heavily and released him. Running his hands over his short blonde hair, he took a step back.

“Why did you say you didn’t?” Jorje asked.

Alec hooked his thumbs through the belt loops of his pants, pushing them down further still, revealing curly blonde pubic hair. Jorje didn’t hide that he was looking. Alec laughed dryly.

“OK,” he said. “Promise not to judge me?”

Jorje shrugged his consent, even though he had no idea where this was going. Was the guy straight and just after a try-out? Did he have some kind of disease that meant he couldn’t have sex? What the hell was the jerking off about earlier?

“Thing is,” Alec began, “my job?”

“Carpentry?”

He laughed again, this time more amused than sarcastic.

“My other job.” He put his head down and peered at Jorje through his eyelashes. “I’m a model too,” he admitted.

“You’re a...” Jorje didn’t know what else to say. He’d worked with a few older models, but they were the same kind of build as him. Alec was pure muscle—more body builder than body beautiful. Actually, Alec was hot, and fashion models were not that beautiful—stick-thin, kind of sickly looking—which was why Jorje was struggling to believe him. Although there were other kinds of models—the calendar guys, for instance, or male fitness models...

“What they call a glamour model?” Alec explained.

Jorje nodded, frowning, still not sure what that meant.

“I’m a porn actor,” Alec confessed finally.

“Oh!” Jorje said. He felt himself blushing. “Because you’ve—”

“Got a massive knob? Yeah.”

Jorje started to laugh and Alec joined in for a while, but then became serious, and very intense.

“Thing is, Sweetness, I’ve not had sex—real sex—in two years. I shoot my load even once off set and I can’t get the job done.”

“Which is what the slow hand job was about before,” Jorje thought aloud. “Can’t you take Viagra, or something?”

Alec shook his head. “I get high blood pressure, and anyway it doesn’t hold this fella up for long.” He pointed at his closed, though heavily strained pants. Jorje chewed his lip thoughtfully.

“Can I... err... Can I see it?” he asked. His skin was burning hot, but he was completely into Alec. Still terrified of the conger he kept in his pants, but into him nonetheless. Alec dutifully obliged, carefully unzipping and wriggling his boxers down over his hips, then lifting the front to set it free.

“Fuck, that’s huge!” Jorje said, which, of course, he already knew, as he’d seen it on display in the kitchen, but up close it was even bigger than he’d realised—around a foot in length and about two inches in diameter. He bent down to take a closer look, frowning in concentration, as if inspecting some kind of mystery object. Alec backed off.

“I’m so tempted to just shove it in your mouth,” he said. Jorje moved away, completely understanding. Well, not completely, but he figured it was like an extreme version of how he felt when he wanted to go on a chocolate binge, but couldn’t because there was a show coming up. Two years, though. That was insane!

“This job you’ve got this afternoon?” Jorje asked.

“Yeah. We’re filming a couple of scenes. A three-way, followed by a blow job and cum shot.”

“OK. So, technically you do get to have sex.”

Alec nodded. “With female porn stars. Every man’s dream, huh?” he said sardonically.

“That really sucks,” Jorje said, blushing some more when he registered what he’d said.

“Yeah,” Alec agreed. “So a fuck’s out of the question. Sorry.”

Jorje smiled. “It’s OK.”

“But, I’d...” Alec moved closer, his actions finishing the rest of the sentence, as his lips closed in on Jorje’s, planting a tentative first peck, followed by another, and another. Their mouths opened, tongues coming into play, darting in and out, making up for the loss of action elsewhere. They kissed for many minutes, Alec returning his star attraction to his pants just in case they got carried away. He desperately wanted to get carried away. How cruel it was, to be here with this gorgeous young guy and know this was all they could ever have. One kiss. And then he would leave, and Alec wouldn’t blame him for that. He had nothing to offer someone like Jorje.

Slowly, reluctantly, Alec moved away. Jorje opened his eyes and took sharp little breaths in and out, his arousal making him shudder. Alec looked so dejected. It hurt to see him like that, big muscly guy that he was. He was just like a little boy lost at the mall.

“Would you like a lift home?” Alec asked.

“Do you want me to go?”

“Hell, not at all!”

“Then no. Thanks. I’ll stick around a while longer.”

Alec leaned back against the counter, legs apart, dick still hard and throbbing like a bitch. He studied Jorje’s face.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I like you?”

“If you’re thinking I’m some kind of valiant knight who saved your ass and didn’t take advantage of you...”

Jorje shrugged. “You are.”

“I just told you. However much I want to fuck you, I can’t.”

“Yeah, but what did you say first? ‘I don’t screw comatose guys.’ If you weren’t a porn star, would you have screwed me last night?”

“Of course not. It’d be like date rape, not that I was the one who spiked your drink. That’s fucking low.”

Jorje spread his hands in an expression of presenting the obvious. “There you go. You’re a good guy, Alec. And for the record? I’d totally love you to fuck me.”

“You would?”

“Well, kind of,” Jorje said. By “fuck” what he meant was he’d like to get into some serious playing around, but thought he’d probably die of internal bleeding if Alec tried to fuck him. Alec knew exactly what he was thinking and laughed.

“OK. We’ve got a few hours to kill before I need to be at the studio. You want to play a video game or something?”

“Sure.”

“And then...” Alec watched Jorje intently as he spoke. “I’d like to take you to dinner this evening.”

Jorje nodded. “I’d like that too.”

Chapter Five

They met outside an Italian restaurant in the city centre, where Alec had booked a table in advance—a secluded booth right at the back. Granted, it wasn't his face that most of his “fans” recognised, and his other features were all well concealed under a pair of loose-fitting jeans, and a long shirt over a T-shirt. Jorje looked him up and down.

“You'd look even fitter in Armani,” he remarked.

“Even fitter?” Alec asked.

“Yeah.”

“So you think I'm fit?”

“As fuck,” Jorje said.

Alec nodded very seriously. He wasn't dismissing the compliment, just that it complicated things, got in the way of his “professionalism”, if that was the word for it. And he knew he was in good shape. He worked out a lot to keep his physique. In his job, he couldn't afford to carry any weight or lose definition, and figured it was the same for Jorje. Maybe pasta wasn't the best idea after all, but Jorje didn't seem to mind.

The waiter seated them and brought the wine list. Jorje left the decision with Alec, and he ordered a bottle of Chardonnay, going through the motions of tasting it, even though he visited the restaurant often enough to know exactly what the wine was like. He was still thinking how good it was to have someone to share it with when their starters arrived.

“How did this afternoon go?” Jorje asked.

“OK, other than nearly fucking up the, err, final shot.”

“Is that possible? I mean, she does you-know-what, and you just...”

“Yeah,” Alec laughed. “Easy as pie!” He leaned close and spoke quietly. “I was thinking about your sweet little ass.”

Jorje smiled coyly. Alec sat back again, thighs spread wide, one arm slung over the back of his chair.

“That did it for me,” he said earnestly. He was doing that come-to-bed eyes thing again, chewing on a crust of focaccia, his tongue rolling seductively

across his lips. Jorje's cock sprang to life and his mind wandered. How much would it hurt, really? It wasn't a lot more to accommodate. Who was he trying to kid? He could see the beast rising from here—could probably lift the table off the floor with that thing.

Alec picked up his wine and sluiced his mouth clean, one elbow now on the table. He ran his thumb over the corner of his mouth, staring deep into Jorje's eyes the whole while. "You're thinking about it," he stated. Jorje swallowed hard. Alec sucked his teeth regretfully. "Not gonna happen, Sweetness."

"What about this place?"

Taylor and her boyfriend, Dan, stopped in front of the menu board outside the restaurant, both taking a moment to ponder. Dan glanced inside. It was mid-evening and quiet, with a few tables free.

"What do you think?" he prompted.

"Fine by me," Taylor agreed. They stepped inside, immediately being greeted by a smart Italian waiter in blacks and whites.

"Table for two?" he asked.

"Please," Dan confirmed.

Main course arrived; Jorje's appetite was voracious, which he put down to not eating since breakfast, and the after-effects of whatever his drink had been spiked with the night before. After Alec had dropped him home earlier, he'd called Ben in an attempt to fill in the massive gap between the vodka shots and waking up in Alec's place. Unfortunately, all Ben could tell him was that they went looking for him around one a.m. to tell him they were moving on, and assumed he'd had a better offer.

Alec, on the other hand, was struggling to eat at all. Out on his first date in years, he wasn't sure how to behave. He'd never been much of a charmer, mostly shacking up for one nighters with guys who thought they wanted to run the gauntlet with his obvious gift, but soon realised that it really wasn't all it was cracked up to be. For Alec, the porn industry had been his saviour—the only good thing to come out of having an abnormally large "manhood", as they liked to call it. Otherwise it was a nuisance, requiring the wearing of tight briefs under boxers for his day job and trips to the gym, waking him up in the night

because he'd roll over and pinch it under his leg. Going for a "number two" required clever balancing tricks, or risk dangling it in the water. As for gratifying relationships? None, but at least he got regular orgasms and he got paid for the privilege. Sometimes, though very, very rarely, he got sucked off by a guy and even got to fuck one once, on-camera. But most of the films were straight, or threesomes with girl-on-girl action, none of which turned him on in the slightest, and meant he was hard for hours—perfect for his line of work—shit for having a sex life, or any kind of life at all, really

"Would you like to see the dessert menu?" the waiter interjected into Alec's miserable reverie. He looked to his date to see what he thought. Jorje nodded enthusiastically—and not just for the dessert. He really didn't want the evening to end. Weird, but Alec was the first guy he'd felt any real connection with, and whilst they'd been eating in silence, he'd been thinking—not deliberately—about how they'd work around the whole big dick thing. He really wanted to give it a try, not because he was turned on by it, or not just because he was turned on by it. So he ordered tiramisu, and Alec had a coffee, watching Jorje's face contort with delight at his dessert, without him being aware of it for quite some time. When he realised, he blushed and smiled.

"I have a major sweet tooth," he explained. Alec nodded.

"I noticed." He reached across and lifted a dribble of the alcohol-laced mascarpone off Jorje's chin. Jorje grabbed Alec's hand and sucked his finger clean. "Really, don't do that," Alec warned.

"Why not?"

"Because it can't happen."

Jorje put his spoon down. "When are you next filming?"

"Wednesday."

"Right. So, let's say we go back to your place tonight. You've already done the deed this afternoon. It'll still be Saturday—"

"You don't get it, do you?"

"What is there to get?"

Alec sighed in exasperation. "I'm dysfunctional."

"No you're not. It works perfectly well."

"And what the fuck do you think we're gonna do with it?"

Jorje shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm seriously up for working it out."

"You could be out with guys your own age—"

"Who leave my drink unattended when I go to... ah!" A flash of memory. "I went to the toilet," Jorje said, the pieces starting to fall into place. "I remember there was this guy. Oh, what was his name? Sam, or Simon, or... whatever. He came and sat with me. Said he'd seen me in a magazine spread."

"You're saying that's who spiked your drink?"

"I can't be sure, but who else could it be? He was the only one I didn't know."

"Where was that?"

"Bella's."

"You want to do anything about it?"

"No."

Alec was still watching him.

"I've never seen him before. He's not a regular."

Still watching.

"And what can I do anyway? I'm just a skinny pretty boy."

"You're not 'just' anything. You're fucking beautiful."

Jorje busied himself with scraping the rest of the tiramisu onto his spoon. He was used to being told he looked good, but it was all fake, parading in fake clothes, striking stupid poses while cameras click-clicked away. One of the photographers even sounded like Austin Powers—"Yeah, that's it, baby. Oh yeah." All the models thought he was bloody hilarious, but what did those compliments mean? A couple of years down the line he'd still be skinny, because that's the way he was, and he'd be too old to carry it off. And no one ever had told him he was beautiful. Fucking beautiful.

"Hey," Alec said, "just say if you change your mind about finding this guy Sam, Simon—I'll gladly have a word with him."

"Thanks."

Jorje meant it too. He was overwhelmed by how protective Alec was being, and a bit pissed off by it, if he was honest. Threatening to do over the guy who

spiked him was one thing. Trying to protect him from the trouser conger was just downright unnecessary. He was an adult and sick of people trying to protect him. By people, of course, he meant Taylor, *and* his parents, *and* his agent, all of whom would take one look at Alec and decide he was bad news, because he looked like bad news. God, he even sounded like bad news—porn star with a twelve-inch dick, self-employed, spoiling for a fight. A bad boy. And still goddamn fit as fuck.

With the tiramisu finished, there were no further ways to delay the end of their date. Alec led the way, weaving between the tables towards the door. Jorje followed, so fixated on Alec's swaggering hips that he didn't see Taylor and Dan, but Taylor saw him. Her brother and a man—a much older man, rough looking, with short blonde hair, muscly, kind of familiar.

Chapter Six

On the walk back to his apartment, Jorje tried to convince Alec to give things a go, so sure that he wanted it too, and was just being defeatist. Every attempt he made at bringing it up, Alec changed the subject, or stopped talking completely. Now they were outside the building. The end was here. Jorje really didn't want this to be the end.

"Coffee?" he offered.

"You don't mean that."

"No. I mean, I'll make you coffee, but..." He sighed heavily. "Please. Just give it a try?"

"Look—"

"We could just be friends?"

"But we wouldn't be just friends, would we? I'm thirteen years older than you. In five years, I turn forty. I've got high blood pressure, and... *him*." He nodded meaningfully at his lower body.

"And I don't care. Please?"

"Why are you so damned stubborn?"

"Determined," Jorje corrected. "Not stubborn."

"That what they tell you at the agency?"

Jorje grinned and didn't answer. The agency, and his sister, and his parents, all said the same thing: he was stubborn as a mule, to which he always argued back that it was determination, not stubbornness. Once Jorje set his sights on something...

Alec closed his eyes and nodded, against his better judgment. "OK. Coffee."

Jorje kissed him. "You won't regret it. I make amazing coffee."

"Don't you dare try getting me drunk."

"Spike your coffee?" Jorje said lightly. Alec looked deeply offended. "Hey, you said it!"

Alec let it go and followed Jorje up the steps to his second floor apartment—small and cosy, with one bedroom, compact lounge and

kitchenette. It was all he needed, and was part of the financial management his parents had enforced. Taylor paid all the bills on Jorje's behalf, ordered his weekly shopping, and deposited spending money in his bank account. Alec looked around the place, nodding approvingly.

"Great little place."

"Nothing like yours," Jorje said.

"Would you want somewhere like that?"

"Yeah. It's fabulous. I especially love the spiral staircase, and those pictures."

"They're awesome, huh? My brother painted them. He's a bit crazy, but a brilliant artist. They're called 'She Calls' and 'He Falls'—no idea which is which, but I just love the colours."

"They kind of look like someone bled to death on a canvas," Jorje remarked. Alec laughed.

"I think that's the idea, to be honest. You'll really like Gareth. He's not much older than..." He realised the implication of what he'd just said—you *will*—and quickly changed the subject. "You could afford a place like that though, surely?"

"Yeah, but I don't have access to my money."

Alec frowned, awaiting an explanation. Jorje filled the kettle and talked as he prepared two mugs.

"Basically, I've been ripped off by so many guys that my sister ratted me out to my parents, and between them they came up with a scheme. I get an allowance, and Tay—my sister—takes care of everything else for me."

"A wise move," Alec agreed.

"Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, believe it or not."

"Uh, OK. I'm not that gullible."

"Uh, well, Mister 'I got my drink spiked and went home with a porn star', that's not how it looks to me."

"She wouldn't approve."

"Of?"

“You.”

“Understandable. I’m not good boyfriend material.”

Jorje ignored that and finished making the coffee, gesturing to Alec to follow him through to the lounge. They had no choice but to sit next to each other, as there was only a sofa. Jorje turned on his music system—a Bang and Olufsen BeoLab set-up. Alec sat back and closed his eyes, head bobbing gently in time to the rhythm.

“Sounds phenomenal,” he said. “I was going to get a Bang and Olufsen, but I don’t listen to music much. It’s too... emotional.”

“I know what you mean. Some songs bring back memories, don’t they?”

“Yeah, that. And just the whole way music taps into your brain, makes you feel things.”

Jorje turned and sat cross-legged, facing Alec.

“Are you frightened of feeling things?” he asked.

“Not frightened. It’s just easier not to. I can’t have a relationship with anyone, so I work and go home, chill out with a video game, kill a few baddies. I’m doing OK.”

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“Sometimes, but...” Alec glanced sideways. “Yes.” He nodded. “Today I realised how lonely I am.”

Jorje shuffled closer. Alec’s heart rate doubled. Jorje took his coffee from him, set it on the floor and straddled him, wrapping his arms around his neck. Slowly feeling himself rise up, riding the trouser conger, he smiled. Alec put his arms around Jorje’s back.

“You really are determined to do this, aren’t you?”

In response, Jorje leaned forward, their lips almost touching. His phone buzzed against his thigh. “Shit. One second.” He leaned back, pulled his phone from his pocket and answered it. At the same time, he used his other hand to massage Alec’s very hard cock through his pants, maintaining eye contact as he spoke into the phone. “Hi, Tay.”

“Jorje. Where are you?”

“At home. Why?”

"I just saw you in Bernetti's with—"

"A guy?"

"Who is he, Jorje? Another loser who's going to screw you and break your heart?"

"Tay—"

"Why can't you just find someone nice who'll look after you? I know you think I'm a boring nag, but I worry about you, honey."

"Tay—"

"You can do better. You know that, don't you?"

"Tay! Shut up a minute!"

She took a loud breath in, but didn't say anything else.

"F-Y-I, his name is Alec, and he's right here with me now. We're having a coffee. He bought me dinner. And last night, my drink got spiked—"

"He spiked your drink?"

"No! He took care of me."

"How d'you know it wasn't—"

"It wasn't him. Anyway, enough spying on me! Seriously, what were you doing watching me?"

"I wasn't. We just happened to end up in Bernetti's too, and you were so besotted, as usual, you walked right past and didn't even see us."

"Oh. Well, I'm fine. I'm safe. OK?"

"You'd best not be lying, Jorje."

"Would I lie to you, Sis?"

She sighed. "Fine. I'll call by in the morning."

"Why?"

"You're my baby brother, and I love you. Is that a crime?"

"I guess not. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Be safe."

"I will. Love you." Jorje hung up and put his phone down next to the coffees. "Now, where were we?"

Chapter Seven

Jorje's arms snaked around Alec's neck, pulling him close, their mouths coming together, tongues twirling, jousting. Jorje moved closer still, pressing his chest against Alec, trying not to gyrate or thrust, sensing how uneasy he was. Alec's erection was painful, crushed under Jorje's leg, because it was trapped inside tight briefs. Jorje pulled Alec's jeans open, easing some of the pressure. He reached inside, tugging at the top of the briefs. Alec's dick sprang free, and Jorje let it be for now, focusing on giving the best kiss he could. It went on and on, gently mashing their lips together, occasional clashes of teeth that made them smile, tasting each other, appreciating the intimacy with no requirement to do more than this. When their jaws started to ache, Jorje eased away, his own erection jammed against the inside of his too-tight jeans. Alec glanced down.

"May I?" he asked. Jorje nodded eagerly. Alec unfastened the Hermès buckle, his hands shaking as he tugged at the waistband of Jorje's jeans, struggling to open the zip. Jorje lifted so that his thighs were vertical, which made it a little easier. Alec eased his jeans down, along with his underpants. Jorje's perfectly proportioned dick was now just a couple of inches from Alec's mouth, a bead of precum glistening on the tip. Alec dipped his head and collected it with his tongue, taking his time, rolling it against his soft palate, savouring the taste, the wonder of being with someone. He slid down a little between Jorje's legs and tentatively kissed his cockhead. Jorje's hips started to move back and forth, driven by that primal instinct for release. With each forward thrust, Alec opened his lips a little wider, letting Jorje control things, so that at first only the head entered Alec's mouth. He circled it with his tongue, remaining completely still and waiting for it to be withdrawn, then returned once more. Over the course of a minute or so, Jorje pushed no more than half his length into Alec's mouth, but at the next thrust forward, Alec grabbed Jorje's buttocks and pulled him right in, sucking hard.

"Uh," Jorje sounded, his hips now moving at speed. Alec's mouth felt so good around him. Warm and soft, yet the pressure of the sucking was overwhelming. He moved away, feeling the skin tingle as the blood drew to the surface, and rammed back in. A couple more of those and he'd be coming, which he didn't want yet. He ran his fingers through Alec's hair, twisting the short curls to try and get something to hold on to. Instead he grabbed Alec's

head and held it steady as he made short, sharp movements, sliding in and out, in and out. Alec's teeth dragged along Jorje's length, the lubricating effect of the spit leaving him hypersensitive and teetering on the edge. He withdrew.

They returned to kissing, pausing to remove their shirts and T-shirts, naked skin making contact, both hot and sticky. Jorje reluctantly moved away so he could get out of his jeans, nodding at Alec to prompt him to do likewise. He shook his head.

"Fine," Jorje said, grabbing Alec's waistband and dragging it underneath him until he had no choice but to lift up and let Jorje remove his jeans. Jorje stepped back to admire the man before him. He loved those rippling muscles, so well defined—the calves, thighs, abs—and in between that huge dick, standing tall and proud, yet so desperately neglected, just begging to be loved. He knelt on the floor in front of Alec and bowed his head, taking the first couple of inches in his mouth, one hand wrapped around the base, the other lifting Alec's balls and fondling them. A bit more length into his mouth, and a little more, his gagging reflex already fighting against what he was asking of it, but he would do this. After all, sword swallows did it, didn't they? Jorje took a big, deep breath and held it, descending until his throat refused to go any further—on this occasion. Practice. That's all he needed. He eased back, pushed down again until he heard Alec groan and felt him lift his hips. Jorje glanced up into those come-to-bed eyes. He stopped sucking, kept his hand in place and rose to his feet.

"Come to bed," he said, tugging on Alec's dick to lead him. Alec followed, not entirely willing, yet unable to resist.

Jorje flicked on the light and pulled Alec into the room, crushing their lips together in a bruisingly hard kiss that took Alec's breath away. Jorje's hand clenched tight around his dick, tugging firmly, and for all of the self-control Alec exhibited in front of the camera, a few short seconds in Jorje's capable clutches was going to send him over the edge. He grasped the fingers to stop them and withdrew from the kiss.

"I'm going to shoot if you keep doing that."

Jorje smiled. "Isn't that the idea?"

"For someone so young, you sure as hell know what you're doing."

"Well yeah. Like I said, I've been with a few guys. Most are happy to let me do this for them. Aren't you?"

“No.”

Dejected, Jorje pulled away. Alec pulled him close again, kissing him on the forehead and lifting his face.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m enjoying what you’re doing, but those other guys were using you. I might be lots of things, but I’m not a user. This is supposed to work for both of us.”

Jorje studied Alec’s face. No doubt about it, he was being honest in saying he wanted to make this good for Jorje too. But something didn’t fit. Specifically, that massive cock didn’t fit—not just physically—into any part of a relationship.

“Have you ever had a boyfriend?” Jorje asked.

Alec shook his head.

“You’re a virgin?”

Alec blinked slowly and smirked. “What do you think, Sweetness?”

“I dunno. You’re acting like one.” He nipped Alec’s chin and heard the sigh escape. “Don’t you want this?” he asked, flicking his tongue against Alec’s lips. Jorje trailed down and across his chest, repeating the tongue-flicking against a nipple. Alec moaned in pleasure.

“Yeah, I want it.” He closed his eyes, revelling in the contact, the sensation of someone caressing, teasing, attending to his needs.

“Then let me do this for you,” Jorje beseeched.

Alec surrendered, allowing himself to be steered to the bed—not by his dick this time. Jorje pushed him back against the pillows and continued the trail of kisses and bites, restraining himself so that he didn’t leave any marks. Each hip received the delicate attention of his tongue. He painted Alec’s abdomen with saliva—invisible, glistening bikini briefs in the tungsten light, framing that magnificent yet much commodified cock that lay flat against taut abs. Alec remained completely still, eyes closed, little shivers of pleasure rippling from each spot Jorje touched. Jorje slid further down the bed, taking Alec’s balls in his mouth, one at a time, sucking them gently, massaging them with his tongue. His palms skimmed over bulky thighs, up over hips, following the concave dip and up the ramp of ribs. He paused a moment, waiting for Alec to open his eyes.

“Why aren’t you watching?”

“I don’t want to. I just want to feel it.”

Jorje shrugged in acceptance, and lowered his face, aligning his lips to the base of Alec’s dick, alternating kissing and licking, moving from side to side so that he covered every square millimetre. Alec’s entire length throbbed gently to his rapid pulse. Jorje wrapped his fingers around the top and squeezed, tugging back the foreskin and licking around the exposed glans, at the same time bringing his fist upwards and delivering that precious pearl of precum. Now on his knees, he crawled up the bed and turned around so that he could take as much of Alec as possible, giving his throat time to adjust and accommodate. He managed an extra couple of inches on his previous attempt, but there was still so much more to go. He had excellent control over his gagging reflex—he’d had to deal with a good many cocks being shoved down his throat, and roughly. Despite that, he could no longer breathe, not even through his nose. Slowly he eased back, successfully fought the urge to cough, and settled into a rhythmic sucking. Alec started to writhe beneath him.

“Move over a little,” he muttered, pushing against Jorje’s hip to indicate where he wanted him. Jorje obliged, lifting his leg so that he was now straddling Alec’s shoulders, the air cool against the moistness of his crack, the heat of that tongue immediately recognisable as the tip probed his hole. He resumed sucking, his rhythm matching that of the tongue fuck, rocking down onto Alec’s dick, aware that both of them were grunting. He felt fingers wrap around his own dick, knew they were building and felt his stomach clench in anticipation. Alec’s tongue probed deeper, opening him wider, his grip tightening, the speed increasing. Jorje too, sucked faster, harder, squeezing his lips as tight as was possible, revelling in the pulsing against his tongue, the sudden shift of Alec’s hips as his cockhead rammed hard against the back of Jorje’s throat. And then the most immense stream of cum, filling his throat and mouth, too much to swallow. Still it kept coming. How much he wanted Alec to fuck him right now! He no longer gave a shit if it hurt. He wanted him inside, filling him until he could take no more. Frantically, he ground back on Alec’s tongue, felt fingers dig hard into his buttocks and then he was coming too, and shouting out.

“Oh, fuck, yes! Yes. Fuck!”

His own cum hit him in the face, merging with what was already there. Still in the high of the orgasm, he rooted helplessly on Alec’s deflating erection, riding out the final waves and then collapsing, utterly spent.

He remained there for several minutes, struggling to swallow, his throat raw, lips bruised and swollen. Alec's soft dick lay beneath him, like one of those travel pillows, almost comfortable enough for him to sleep right where he was.

"You OK down there?" Alec murmured. Jorje groaned. "I didn't drown you?"

"Not quite," Jorje said, smiling and slowly dragging himself to one side. He got to his knees, his jism beard dripping down his neck and chest. "Going to shower," he explained, scooping his sticky hair out of the mess.

Alec watched Jorje stagger from the room and settled back, hands behind his head, eyes closed, content for the first time in years, possibly ever.

Chapter Eight

Alec returned from his turn in the shower and slid into bed. Jorje shuffled across sleepily and put his head on Alec's chest.

"Tired?" Alec asked, planting a kiss in Jorje's still damp hair.

"Mmm," Jorje murmured, snuggling into the crook of Alec's neck. Strong arms wrapped around him, and he drifted off to sleep.

Three times during the night they awoke together. On the first of these, Jorje realised that if he intended to get any more of Alec, it would need to happen before daybreak officially delivered the end of Saturday, because Alec needed to save himself for Wednesday's filming. So, in spite of his sore lips, Jorje dived under the duvet and sucked Alec's soft dick. It quickly responded and Alec once again surrendered. This time, at the first sign that Alec was heading for climax, Jorje moved away, the resultant spurts landing on Alec's chest. Jorje cleaned up with a towel. Alec attempted to grab Jorje's dick.

"It's fine," Jorje said. They were still kissing as they fell asleep.

The next time they awoke, Alec immediately took the initiative and went down on Jorje, gently caressing his cock with lips and tongue, taking his time to bring Jorje to orgasm. It felt amazing, and different, and Jorje didn't want it to end. Wordlessly, they once again fell asleep.

The final time was cheating, as the room was already starting to fill with the warm orange of sunrise. However, it was now or Wednesday, and neither could wait that long. They slid together, gently thrusting, cocks brushing against each other as they kissed deeply.

"Got any condoms?" Alec asked.

"None that'll fit you," Jorje replied lightly. Alec smiled.

"I meant for you."

Jorje moved his face away and looked into those deep eyes, too dark to see the blueness of them, but he could imagine well enough.

"Make love to me," Alec whispered, clutching at Jorje's hand.

"I..."

"Or fuck me, whichever. I want you."

Jorje rolled away. "I've never done that before."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to put you under pressure."

"No. It's OK."

"If you don't want to, I'm good with that."

Jorje lay on his back, thinking. *Make love to me*. Alec's words. No one had ever said that to him before, not even the other way around—*I want to make love to you*. He'd heard, "I want to fuck you," often enough. Sometimes not even, "I want to," but, "I'm going to." Making love. It wasn't about the act itself, but the sharing of intimacy, closeness, trust. They didn't need penetration for that. They'd never need it.

"Why?" Jorje asked.

"Because I can't make love to you," Alec stated.

"But isn't that what we've been doing all night?"

Alec carefully rolled onto his side to face Jorje, repositioning his semi-erect dick so that he didn't trap it. He traced Jorje's lips with a fingertip.

"Is it too soon?"

"No." Jorje turned over to face Alec too. "No," he repeated. "Not too soon, just maybe not right for us?"

"Us?"

"Yeah. Us." Jorje moved closer, rubbing himself gently against Alec, bringing him back to life. "This is good for me. Isn't it good for you?"

"It is," Alec agreed. He put his arms around Jorje and pulled him on top, partly so he could control the speed and intensity of the motion, but also because gravity was less of an issue that way. They continued to move together, dicks side by side, sandwiched between them, size no longer a factor in this equation. One plus one. Jorje lifted onto his knees so he could run his hands over Alec's firm chest, waxed bare, because that was what porn fans demanded. It made him no less or no more than beautiful; a tough, sculptured shell around the gentlest, most vulnerable man Jorje had ever known. Yes, this was making love. He could feel it growing within him. His throat constricted with the realisation and he gasped.

"Already, Sweetness?" Alec asked teasingly. He pulled Jorje down again and increased his speed.

"No. Or it wasn't. Oh God..." The build-up started and he couldn't help but go with it, faster, thrusting harder, aware of that pole of steel against his belly, digging under his ribs. And then he was soaring, his mouth somehow finding Alec's in time to mute the cry of pleasure and relief. Alec grunted and pushed up against him, the hot jets shooting between them, and then it was done. Again.

"Wow!" Jorje said. He slid sideways. Alec kept hold of him. "I've never come three times in one night."

"I have," Alec grinned. Jorje laughed and kissed him again.

They lay there a while longer, breathing in each other's scent, ignoring the sticky coolness drying on their bodies for as long as they could.

"OK," Jorje said with a reluctant sigh. "I'm heading for the bathroom, and afterwards, I'll make us breakfast while you shower."

Alec kissed him on the nose and released him, snoozing until Jorje returned for his clothes. More designer gear, Alec observed, but casual, good for a lazy Sunday. Jorje became aware he was under scrutiny.

"I'm taking you shopping," he said.

"What for?"

"Everything?"

"I don't need—"

"No way is a boyfriend of mine wearing Crocs."

"Boyfriend?"

Jorje pouted, waited for Alec's expression to change from shock to acceptance, gave him the sweetest of smiles and left the room. Ten minutes later, freshly showered, Alec arrived in the kitchen, just as Jorje was trickling maple syrup over pancakes covered in sliced bananas and pecan nuts. Alec came up behind him and wrapped him in his arms, nuzzling into his neck.

"You really do have a sweet tooth, huh?"

Jorje wriggled against the tickle of stubble on his skin.

"Is this all right?" he asked.

"It's perfect," Alec assured him. He reached over and picked up a slice of banana, feeding it to Jorje, syrup running down his fingers. Jorje took the

banana and sucked Alec's fingers clean. Before they got any further, there was the sound of a key turning in the lock.

"Hi." The voice called a split second's notice on Taylor's arrival. She stopped dead. Alec released Jorje.

"Hi, Tay," Jorje greeted his sister, but she wasn't listening. She was staring at Alec, an expression of horror on her now colourless face. Jorje ignored her reaction and pressed on with his intended introduction. "This is Alec," he said.

Taylor rallied slightly, her cheeks starting to pink up. She smiled artificially and extended a hand.

"Nice to meet you, Alec," she said.

"Err, likewise," Alec replied.

Jorje looked from one to the other and shrugged.

"You know each other," he stated, because it was obvious that they did. Alec coughed nervously and looked away. It wasn't his place to say. Jorje glared at his sister, awaiting an explanation. She smiled brightly and made a big deal of noticing the plate of pancakes.

"Enough for me?" she asked over-chirpily.

"Maybe," Jorje said. "If you tell me what's going on."

"What do you mean?" She was blushing crimson and still tried to cover it. "Have they got maple syrup on them?" She opened the cupboard to get a plate. Jorje kicked it shut and folded his arms.

"Taylor!" he hissed.

She glanced nervously at Alec.

"Have you told him?" she asked.

"Yeah," Alec confirmed.

Taylor took a deep breath and turned back to her younger brother. She'd always feared this moment would come. She was the eldest, the more sensible, responsible one. Or so thought their parents, who were halfway around the world and distantly benevolent. Jorje was scowling, waiting.

"The thing is, Jorje, I've..." She bit her lip nervously. "I've worked with Alec," she said quickly.

“You’ve worked with...” Jorje began to say, the rest falling in place. “Oh my God. You do porn?”

Chapter Nine

"Glamour modelling," Taylor corrected.

"Oh shut up! Glamour modelling. What a ridiculous thing to call it!" Jorje was angry. "So what's your hidden talent? A clitoris that looks like the face of Jesus? A third tittie?" He was being a bitch and he knew it, and in being a bitch, he'd accidentally suggested he thought Alec was a freak, which wasn't true.

"Nothing like that," Taylor said quietly.

"What then?" Jorje pressed.

"I can take him." She nodded at Alec's crotch.

"Him? You mean Alec's cock?"

"Yeah."

"Take *him* where? In your slutty mouth, or up your—"

"For God's sake, Jorje!" Taylor yelled.

"Why didn't you recognise him last night?"

"I only saw his face," she said. She glanced at Alec and shrugged. "Sorry."

Jorje raised his hands. "You know what? I think I'm gonna just leave the two of you to get re-fucking-acquainted." He stormed out of the kitchen, calling back over his shoulder, "Lock up when you're done." The front door slammed shut. Taylor flinched. Alec sighed heavily and screwed up his eyes.

"I'm so sorry," Taylor repeated.

"It's fine." Alec didn't know what else to say. Last night he'd dared to hope, because this time was different. To Jorje, he was more than just a freakishly big dick on legs. Just his damned bad luck that he'd been paid to ram that freakishly big dick down Jorje's sister's throat. He felt utterly wretched, unsure what to do for the best. Should he leave? Wait and see if they could fix this? He absently poked at a pancake overhanging the plate. The pancake flipped, splattering maple syrup across the counter.

"I need to go after him," he said.

"And say what?"

"I don't know. Get him to understand that it doesn't mean anything."

“He’s not stupid, Alec. He knows porn’s not like real life.”

“He feels betrayed.”

“By me, not by you. He’s just hot-headed. Give it another five minutes—”

Alec shook his head. “No. I’m going after him.”

Jorje flopped onto the bench at the bus stop opposite his apartment building. In his fury, he’d completed a full circuit of the block. It hadn’t helped much. He was still angry, although he wasn’t sure who with. Himself? After all, he’d gone along with the whole scheme that put Taylor in charge of his life. He’d accepted without argument (well, *almost* without argument) that she was the more responsible one and had his best interests at heart.

So maybe that was part of it. People bossed him around, told him where he needed to be, how to spend his money, who he could and couldn’t date. He just did as he was told, assuming they all knew what was best for him, because they were better than him. Now he wasn’t so sure. However, even if Taylor’s secret career meant she couldn’t criticise him on this occasion, his parents were going to hit the roof when they found out about Alec.

If Alec still wanted anything to do with him.

Jorje quickly pushed the thought away, glad, at least, that it wasn’t Alec who was making him angry. And yes, he was going to tell his parents about Alec—the being older part, not the porn part. It was about time he stood up for himself. He was going to take control of his life and stop being such an idiot with money. And men. *At least I don’t get paid to suck them off.*

And that, really, was the thing that was pissing him off the most. It didn’t matter that it was for the camera, or, more to the point, that Alec was gay. Childish and irrational as it was, Jorje was jealous of Taylor, because she’d had Alec first.

An older woman sat down on the bench, startling Jorje back to his senses.

“Morning,” she said, with a grin.

“All right?” Jorje muttered in response.

“Lovely day,” she remarked, peering meaningfully at the bright blue sky.

“Yeah,” he agreed vaguely. He hadn’t noticed. He caught movement in his peripheral vision. The door of his building opened, and Alec emerged, glancing

up and down the street. He spotted Jorje and started to jog over. Jorje quickly got up.

"Nice talking to you," the woman said.

"Err, yeah. You too."

Jorje intercepted Alec at the kerb. For a moment, they stared wordlessly into each other's eyes.

"I was just coming back," Jorje explained. Alec frowned. Jorje tilted his head slightly, in the direction of the woman at the bus stop. "I didn't want to take the chance that she'd recognise you too." He smiled innocently and fluttered his eyelashes, to make it clear he was teasing.

Alec laughed lightly. "I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, well. It's not your fault. Come on. Let's go and eat breakfast. I'm starving."

Jorje took Alec's hand and they crossed the road, heading back to the apartment, where Taylor had made fresh pancakes. She drizzled maple syrup over them and passed the plate to Jorje. He nodded in thanks and shoved an entire pancake in his mouth.

"Thank fuck I'm not straight," he mumbled around the mouthful of sticky-sweet food. "Imagine if I'd rented a porno and found you in it. I'd have been scarred for life!"

Taylor laughed, sensing he was over the initial shock and starting to calm down. "I wouldn't have risked it if you were straight, I promise you."

Jorje raised an eyebrow. "What if Dan—"

"He knows," Taylor interrupted.

"Or Dad?"

"OK. Don't go there." The thought had crossed her mind, but these were things best not dwelled upon. It was easier to assume that their dad was not the sort of man to watch porn films.

"Just in case," Jorje said, "are there any titles I should avoid? I mean, what witty thing did the pair of you 'star' in together?"

"Sawdust and Cream Cakes," they said in unison.

"Sounds... messy," Jorje remarked dryly. He glanced at Alec, who had his head down. He looked so ashamed. That made Jorje feel sad. He reached out and squeezed his hand. Alec attempted a smile.

"I'm going to quit," he said quietly.

Jorje didn't comment.

"I'll tell them tomorrow. No more Jonny Sawdust."

"Who?"

"The series is called *Jumbo Jonny Sawdust*. I'm a carpenter, just like in real life, except they don't have me doing woodwork for real. Or not that sort of woodwork, anyway."

Jorje giggled. "And you are?" he asked Taylor.

"Oh, I was only in the one episode. I was a prim little spinster running a bakery, and Jonny came..." She paused to rephrase. "I called on Jonny to fix my kitchen door. He offered to help me fill the cream horns."

"Oh, Jesus. That is appalling!" Jorje said. "There'd best not be any added ingredients in these pancakes." He grimaced and dropped the pancake in mock disgust. "Do people actually get off on that?"

Taylor shrugged. "I don't hear you complaining this morning."

"That's because Alec is more than a twelve-inch dong to me, babe." He made eye contact with Alec. "You know that, don't you?"

Alec nodded.

"And you don't have to quit, unless you want to."

"I think I do."

The look in Alec's eyes told Jorje everything he needed to know. He wanted to make a go of things. Jorje put his arms around him and kissed him lightly.

Taylor watched them smooch for a moment, and finished washing up. "Look, I'm gonna go. We'll catch up later, OK?"

"OK, Sis." Jorje released Alec so he could hug his sister.

"Promise you won't say anything," she implored.

"To who? Mum and Dad?" Jorje asked, somewhat disbelievingly. Taylor nodded. "Are you kidding me? Hey, Mum, Dad, this is Alec, my porn star boyfriend. He already knows Tay, of course..."

Taylor blushed.

“Not a word,” Jorje assured her, then leaned closer and whispered, “but only if you teach me your sword swallowing trick.” He moved away again and grinned. She slapped him playfully.

“Consider it done,” she said.

“Good. Now get outta here!”

“See you, Alec,” she called.

“Yeah. Take care,” he replied, and he and Jorje watched as she left with a parting little wave of fingertips.

“I’m sorry,” Jorje said, once the door had closed.

“Why are you sorry?”

“What I said earlier? I didn’t mean to imply you were a freak.”

Alec shrugged. “I am a freak.”

“No. You’re not.” Jorje was completely sincere.

“You’re the first guy who’s seen me as more than just a twelve-inch dong.”

“Yeah? Well you are so much more. You’re handsome, and kind, and loving, and patient, and have dreadful fashion sense, but we can fix that.”

Alec drew Jorje in and kissed him, softly and deeply. He tasted of maple syrup.

“Whatever makes you happy, Sweetness.”

“Jonny Sawdust?”

“It’s terrible, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I can see a whole new line—checked shirts over cupcake prints, carpenter jeans with pink polka dot patches... Oh my word! That’s perfect!”

Jorje freed an arm so he could reach the pancakes and alternated feeding them to Alec and himself as he continued.

“We could open a boutique, with a design floor upstairs. And you could do all the fitting, make it hot and sexy, like your place. Can you imagine? My designs inside your designs. We’re totally made for each other.”

He paused to see what Alec thought, noting the smirk of amusement.

“You’re not taking this seriously, are you?”

Alec suppressed a laugh. “No, no. It’s an interesting idea,” he said. “And what’re we going to call this boutique of ours? Sugar and—”

“Sawdust,” Jorje finished. “Sweet and tough, just like us. Sugar and Sawdust.”

The End

Author Bio

Debbie McGowan is an author and publisher based in a semi-rural corner of Lancashire, England. She writes character-driven fiction, covering life, love, relationships—the whole shazam. A working class girl, she ‘ran away’ to London at 17, was homeless, unemployed and then homeless again, interspersed with animal rights activism (all legal, honest ;)) and volunteer work as a mental health advocate. At 25, she went back to college to study social science—tough with two toddlers, but they had a ‘stay at home’ dad, so it worked itself out. These days, the toddlers are young women (much to their chagrin), and Debbie teaches undergraduate students, writes novels and runs an independent publishing company, occasionally grabbing an hour of sleep where she can!

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Google+](#) | [Goodreads](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TAKEN FROM HIM

By Jackie Nacht

Photo Description

An extremely handsome, lean, muscular man with black hair stands with his hands overlapping and his eyes downcast. Around his neck is a stunning necklace of silver and rubies that trail down to the top of his abdomen.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am the ever obedient pet of the Vampire King. I live only for him and though he is harsh to me in the presence of others, he never fails to let me know how much I really mean to him in private. I know his cruelty is only to stave off his enemies. Something I am more than happy to play along with because I would never want to be the thing that is used against him.

You see, I am a bastard mutt, born from a human woman and passing vampire father, the lowest, seen as dirty by the 'true' vampire community. Neither accepted by humans nor vampires. I was left to die as a child, unwanted by my mother but somehow I survived on the streets and through a miracle, was found by his highness as I finally lay dying on the side of the street over two years ago.

I'm soon to be 28, an age in which he feels will be the time to make me a full vampire. I ache for that day to come, for though I age slower than a mortal I will still grow old and die, while he will continue to live on. I am glad, after many fights, he has agreed to make me his and turn me so we can be together in immortality. I do not need to be accepted by his coven, though they'd probably treat me better once I am fully vampire, I just want to be with him forever. I am his whole world and he his mine.

One day I am taken from him, someone close to him has betrayed him and knows his only weakness is me, and though I am hurt and they continue to hurt me for information that will never be theirs, I do not fear death. For I know he will come, because there is something they seem to have forgotten... The way he was before he found me. Ruthless and unforgiving. The epitome of Evil. Their world will crumble before his wrath. For ever daring to betray him, I, for one, can hardly wait to see their fear when he comes to annihilate them all.

Snuffing them out like death itself. He may have a weakness in me, but he is still the millennium-old Blood Lord.

Death is coming...

Please, tell my story of love, survival and eternity.

Sincerely,

Neko

PS. Please be a HEA! The only must! lol...

Hoping for modern time... though if it doesn't fit with how you see the story, I am more than Ok with any changes! <3

Thank you so much! Other than HEA, pretty much anything goes! I'm not really picky! <3 heh...

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: vampires, immortal, abduction, captivity, revenge, HEA, coven/secret societies, dark and gritty, hurt/comfort, soulmates

Content Warnings: graphic violence, torture

Word Count: 10,191

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TAKEN FROM HIM

By Jackie Nacht

Chapter 1

Liam stumbled along the dark, filthy alley. A bastard halfling getting what he finally deserved, death. He knew it was coming. The world wasn't blind. Humans knew that vampires existed, and along with that, there were halflings like Liam.

Oh, how he wished he had never been born. Holding the wound at his side, he could feel the hot blood spill between his fingers. At twenty-six, someone had finally done what so many others had wanted to do upon seeing him: kill him.

Humans couldn't help him, and vampires—well, he was considered viler than the garbage that littered this alley to them. They wished him dead; he was considered a shameful mistake to both humans and vampires.

A wave of dizziness hit him hard, and suddenly the ground came up and hit him in the face, or at least that's what it felt like. His cheek exploded in white hot pain as his face hit the pavement. Moaning, he rolled onto his back.

This was a fucking horrible way to go. He was going to die right there in this filthy alley, and no one gave a fuck. Liam had survived this long for no other reason than to give the world the big *fuck you*. However, even he could be taken unawares. The man who stabbed him had come from the shadows and struck the blade deep before Liam had ever seen him.

A numbness spread over Liam, along with acceptance. He had wanted so much more, knew he could have done many more things if he would have had time and a chance.

The sound of footsteps clapped along the pavement. Liam watched as a pair of highly polished black men's shoes came into view next to his head. Of all the things he could have thought at that moment, the first thing that came to mind was it was a pity the man had ruined his shoes by stepping in a pile of vomit. Here he was dying, and all he could worry about was a stranger's shoes. How absurd.

The man knelt down, black wool coat billowing around him, and that's when he saw the razor sharp fangs. The man hissed, staring down at him. A full blooded vampire. The length of the fangs were a huge tell. Liam's fangs looked pathetic in comparison, but they were far from human. The one physical feature

that kept him banned all his life. That and his cerulean eyes, which were lined in amethyst. All pure blood had amethyst eyes. This guy's were breathtakingly beautiful with black lashes surrounding them. They were also utterly cold.

Liam hoped the vampire would end him quickly, that his suffering wouldn't last.

"Please," Liam rasped. *Just finish me.*

The vampire tucked his arms under Liam's body and lifted him up.

"What—" Liam began but was cut off.

"Hush," the vampire said harshly as he carried Liam swiftly down the alley.

Liam rested his head on the vampire's chest, smelling a clean fresh scent that seemed to calm him even though he was sure he was going to his death. Liam was so busy burrowing into the vampire that before he knew it, he was being tucked into a large backseat.

The vampire held him as he shouted to the driver, "Home!"

Closing his eyes, Liam began to fade. The feeling of the warm body against him, even if it hated him, was a more comforting way to go than he thought possible. His heart rate began to slow, and he could feel himself fading.

Overhead, he heard the vampire murmur, "Christ, you're skin and bones. We need to get there faster. White, he doesn't have that much time."

Liam closed his eyes only to jerk them back open when he felt himself being tied to a bed. He fought weakly as he was bound. The vampire stared down at him with those cold eyes as he struggled.

"We already cleaned and sutured the wound, but you need to be given synthetic blood. With you being a halfling, your body will react poorly. By the looks of you, you've never had this done. Be prepared, it's painful."

Synthetic blood was the horrible stuff vampires gave to halflings. One couldn't be changed with it and the side effects were horrible. It was always better to have human blood, but injured, synthetic was the only way to go.

"Dragos, give him something to bite down on." Three other men surrounded him. Two of the men looked exactly alike and a lot like Liam's savior, while the other was prepping the procedure, his back to Liam.

Dragos!

Dragos was the Vampire King who was leader of the coven in the United States. Dragos ruled ruthlessly and had twin brothers. It was told he was utterly cold, known to be heartless, and had been for millennia. He was above helping a bastard halfling. Liam was going to die.

Panic bubbled inside him and Liam struggled to get free of the bindings. His eyes widened as the Vampire King leaned down and stroked his damp hair back. "You will be okay. I give you my word."

Liam shifted his eyes over to the twin brothers to see them staring at their brother in shock. A hiss filled the air as Dragos turned on the two. "Leave!" he roared at them.

There wasn't much time to catch up with what was going on since Liam's body suddenly arched off the bed in agony. Dragos shoved a leather-wrapped stick in his mouth as Liam cried out. His body was on fire.

"My physician is here to help you. He'll get you back to normal in no time." Dragos leaned down next to him.

Normal? He had never been normal.

Body trembling, Liam endured what felt like lava filling him. He wasn't sure how long it lasted or if he was even going to live through it. After what seemed like hours, the pain began to lessen. His muscles ached from the strain, and he was soaked in sweat. Liam spat out the stick when he knew he was no longer going to chip his teeth from the agony.

Tired, Liam stared up at the Vampire King and murmured past a bone-dry throat, "I'm going to make it?"

"You are, my pet." Dragos stroked his hair back.

"Pet?" Liam murmured.

Dragos lifted him and gave him a cool drink. His throat was parched. "Yes, my pet. You'll no longer be alone."

"Yours." Liam almost wept in relief. For the first time, someone had helped him. Hell, Dragos wanted to claim him as his pet. Liam couldn't imagine why the Vampire King would want a halfling bastard like him. However, after the aid he had received, Liam would trust the Vampire King with his life completely.

Dragos stared down at Liam for a minute before he leaned and kissed him softly on the lips. "Mine."

Dragos walked out of Liam's room two days later. He needed a shower badly, and if he behaved like this any longer, others in the coven would become suspicious.

When he'd gone out two nights before to check on a coven member, Dragos never expected to find the one meant for him. After millennia of being such a coldhearted bastard, Dragos had assumed he was always meant to be alone. Hell, until he'd found Liam, he'd preferred it.

Thinking of his beloved mate still healing from the injuries inflicted on his human body brought vengeance to the forefront of his mind. When Liam was well enough to be on his own, Dragos would hunt the fucker down and end him.

Dragos walked down the hall to his own room. Once entering, he went straight to the en suite, turning on the shower and then stripping. Dragos stepped into the cold shower, lost in his thoughts. Over the last two days, he'd talked a lot to his little halfling. Liam was a light in his darkened world. He was kind and genuine, something Dragos hadn't seen in a very long time.

There was no way to hide what Liam was, and honestly, Dragos was already in love with him without the slightest change. Unlike most male vampires, Liam was smaller in height, probably no more than five foot ten. His skin was pale and soft with black hair. Liam was stunningly beautiful, but Dragos wasn't foolish enough to think kindness and beauty would have the halfling accepted into the coven.

The only two things his vampires cared for were blood and power. Liam wasn't a full-blooded vampire and would never be accepted into the coven. If others knew what Liam was already coming to mean to Dragos...

Fuck!

Dragos began washing his hair vigorously as he thought of what the coven would do if they knew Liam was his one. The harm and torture Liam would suffer just because of how much he meant to Dragos was unthinkable. Dragos was powerful and their king, but even a king could be brought to his knees if others knew the one weakness that could destroy him. Even such a powerful

vampire could fall at the hands of hundreds of lessers. His coldness and power was what kept the coven in order. He'd never had a weakness that could be used against him until now.

After rinsing, he turned off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel. He stared at himself in the steamy mirror, knowing what he was going to have to do to protect Liam. He would have to act as if the halfling meant nothing to him. No one, not even his two younger twin brothers, could ever know what Liam was to him. He knew his brothers would help him, but Liam was his alone to protect.

Dragos' brothers, Stasio and Andrei, had always protected his back in the past. They'd grown up tight. But they'd been raised in a rigid household, and as children, they only had each other.

Their father had been a coven leader who'd paid them little attention until it came time to prepare them to rule their own covens. Their mother had been killed shortly after the twins were born by another coven.

Even as a young boy, he'd known he would need to protect Stasio and Andrei. The twins were so young when they would come back from their lessons, chubby cheeks bruised from another child in the class. His vampire blood seethed at seeing harm done to them. He didn't know how to show affection but if anyone fucked with his brothers, they paid dearly. They were his, dammit. His coldhearted reputation was birthed during those encounters. From there, the three of them had grown into a powerful threesome. With him at the head, the three were feared above all. Their protection for each other made them close to this day. No one dared mess with them, especially Dragos. He had ended more than one coven member for crossing the three.

Dragos loved his brothers; he really did. Could he trust them with Liam's life? Probably, but how much danger would it put Stasio and Andrei in? No, he needed to handle this situation on his own. Liam's life depended on him treating his mate as if he were nothing more than a pet.

Dragos grabbed the sink, knowing there was no way he could do this full-time. He would have to explain his actions to Liam. He needed to protect his mate even from those he called family. Dragos had to give his mate a choice in the matter. If Liam wanted to leave, Dragos would let him. It would rip his soul apart, but he wouldn't take Liam's freedom.

However, just because he couldn't show his affections in front of others for fear of Liam's life didn't mean he would continue the pretense behind closed

doors. Dragos would do everything in his power to let his mate know how important he was and how much Dragos cared. There would be nothing Liam would ever want for, including Dragos' love and respect.

He walked out of the bathroom and then got dressed. He left his room once again to return to Liam. He needed to talk to his mate and explain the danger Liam was in simply because the Vampire King was in love with him.

Chapter 2

Two Years Later

Liam took a deep breath as he stared in the mirror. Behind him, the coven physician, Stefan, prepared the room for after the coven meeting. It wasn't flowers he placed on the bed but stuff that would be needed to help Liam recover.

For the last two years, he had put on a show. For the doctor, for the coven, and even he believed it at times. The ever obedient pet to the Vampire King. After putting on the stunningly made silver necklace adorned with rubies that stated his status as such, Liam stared at his image in the mirror.

Liam had chosen this path. Two years before, when Dragos had sat him down after his wounds healed and explained the situation, Liam had stayed. He'd known even after two days that Dragos was going to be his future. He had always heard that vampires would be drawn to their mate; he just hadn't been sure it was possible for him since he was a halfling. But Dragos knew, and he knew. They were mates and had to protect each other.

He wouldn't walk out on his beloved because the path before them would be difficult. They would work together and find a solution. Liam even thought he might have one until Dragos shut him down on it numerous times.

Days away from his twenty-eighth birthday and he still looked much younger than his years. He looked like he was in college as opposed to his late twenties. However, he couldn't take the credit for that. It was the halfling blood that made him age slower. Oh, how he wished he could live forever with Dragos, immortal like a full vampire. They had fought endlessly about changing him. Dragos feared changing Liam. There was a small chance Liam wouldn't survive the change. Liam argued back that it was better to try than to slowly die of old age. Still, the Vampire King wouldn't budge on the matter. Doubt had crept into Liam over the last couple of months. *Does he not want me? Love me? He says he does.*

Stefan's image appeared behind him in the mirror. "It's time. The coven is arriving."

Liam stood, schooling his features, preparing for the role he would have to maintain in front of the others. The coven was ruthless, seeking weakness even

in their own Vampire King. They all had an unquenchable thirst for power. Liam would not be the weak link that brought his beloved Vampire King down.

With a grace he had picked up over the two years, Liam walked to the doors, looking beautiful and serene while dread filled him inside. It was going to be a long night.

Just think about how it will be later when they are all gone.

With that last thought, Liam bowed his head and crossed his wrists in front of his body; the obedient pose of a pet. The doors opened and Liam walked out to the vampires before him.

Liam sat on the floor by Dragos' legs with his wrists crossed in front of him as the coven ate around him. Dragos was front and center along with his twin brothers, Andrei and Stasio. They were an imposing trio, but none as ruthless as Dragos. No one approached the trio of men, even though the congregation seemed to be enjoying themselves. The coven simply knew that Dragos would not welcome any of their company at his table.

That was the way of their world. Liam was the only halfling that had ever seen the inside of these private meetings. Only pure bloods were initiated into the coven. The world knew of vampires, but several covens held secret societies that even top notch governments didn't know about. Here, the laws were different. Here, human laws were not welcome. The laws of blood were all that mattered.

A tug to his hair had Liam exposing his neck, and Dragos lifted him into his lap. He ripped off the decorated necklace, which let everyone in the room know who Liam belonged to, before he ruthlessly bit down on Liam's shoulder. Liam could hear Dragos' cousins laugh from within the audience as Liam gasped in pain.

He doesn't want to do this to you. Dragos is trying to keep you safe. Someday, things will be different.

Liam repeated the mantra over and over as Dragos took heavy pulls on his vein. Spots began to sprout in his vision before Dragos leaned away with a roar.

Liam was put back on the floor, and he tipped over, laying his cheek on the cold stone. He blew out a breath, reminding himself this was to protect him. As a halfling, he was lucky to still be alive. The only reason he hadn't been killed

by the full vampires was that they thought he was a plaything for their Vampire King. If any of them ever knew the truth...

Observing from under the table, he could see Stefan watching him closely as he stood next to Dragos' cousins, Lew and Niklos. Stefan had a worried expression on his face while the other two laughed. Miko, another cousin, neared the pair and wrapped his arms around Stefan as if to comfort the physician's worry. The physician pasted a fake smile on his face before turning to kiss Miko tenderly on the lips.

Liam blew out a breath. The doctor was the soul of discretion.

Liam listened as the meeting started, his mind drifting as vampire after vampire discussed matters with the Vampire King. Dragos had been their leader for more than a century, and the only reason that Dragos had never been usurped was because he was ruthless. The vampire had never shown a weakness that could take him down. If he did... well... full blooded vampires could only be trusted so far. Family ties and coven loyalty didn't compare to their thirst for power. Over the last couple of years, Liam had seen brothers behead brothers over betrayal in the struggle to climb within the hierarchy. Just the thought sickened Liam. If he didn't love Dragos so much, he would wish to walk away from this world and never look back.

The meeting ended and the room cleared out, even Dragos, but Liam still lay on the floor. He didn't have the strength to get up after all the blood Dragos had taken. He knew Dragos' lack of concern was an act, just like he knew the footsteps coming back into the hall an hour later belonged to Dragos himself.

Kneeling before Liam, Dragos scooped him up, brushing his lips over Liam's forehead. "Liam," Dragos murmured before he turned and took the back stairs to his quarters.

Liam sighed, knowing that the nightmare of the night was over and that the better part was coming.

Chapter 3

Dragos carried Liam into the Vampire King's room, blood supplies set up already to make Liam whole again. He laid Liam gently on the bed, and Dragos stared down at him in concern.

"Did I take too much?"

"You timed it perfectly. I took a nice nap while you all talked politics." Liam tried to give Dragos an encouraging smile.

Dragos frowned. "On the stone floor. Next time, I'll have pillows down there."

"You can't change anything with regard to me." Liam frowned. "They'll see it."

"I can change one thing," Dragos growled as he began intravenously giving synthetic blood to Liam.

Like the first time, the pain was excruciating, but gritting his teeth, Liam never uttered a word. Dragos was already vexed by the position the two of them were in; Liam would not add to it.

As the pain lessened and Liam felt more like himself, Dragos sat next to him, staring down with those beautiful amethyst eyes. "I'm going to give you what you want. I'm going to change you on your birthday. I don't want to lose you to age. The coven cannot touch me."

Liam sat up, joy filling him. "You mean it? We're going to be together?"

Dragos cupped his face. "Yes, Liam. I want you by my side."

A sense of fear came over Liam. "The coven will not accept this. They'll turn on you."

"I am the Vampire King. I have to stop being handcuffed by the discriminating rules of my own people." Dragos began taking out the IV. Liam watched those large powerful hands work tenderly against his flesh.

"Make love to me." Liam stared up at Dragos, trying to convey all the love he had for his vampire. What once started as gratitude and a glimmer of acceptance in a world he had long since been denied, had grown to love in the last two years. To have to hide those feelings amongst other vampires had been necessary, but to know they wouldn't have to soon...

Dragos leaned down and kissed him deeply. There was nothing tender about this kiss. The kiss was meant to claim and consume, and Liam was all for that. Liam thrust his tongue into Dragos' mouth, making sure to scrape it along a sharp fang. There was a slight burn at the cut and a coppery taste as blood pooled. Dragos growled and, without breaking the kiss, maneuvered to lie atop of him.

Liam's body reacted instantly to the heat of Dragos as he covered him. His cock hardened and ached behind the soft pants. Dragos was already grinding his hard cloth-covered cock against him as the kiss turned feral. Dragos pulled back with a hiss, a spot of Liam's blood on the corner of his mouth.

"Get these pants off." Dragos stood next to the bed and began removing his clothes.

Liam lifted his hips and slid the soft fabric down. Dragos hated these types of clothes on him. His Vampire King always preferred him in modern clothes. Little did the coven know what Liam wore behind closed doors. The dark jeans and buttery soft shirts they lounged in as he and Dragos ate in private.

Dragos crawled to him from the end of the bed, a bottle of lube in his hand. The vampire was not small. The man had large muscles, and there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. He was the exact opposite to Liam's thin frame.

"Do you still have it in?" Dragos spread Liam's thighs.

"Yes," Liam whispered.

He felt Dragos' fingers working the ruby butt plug at his entrance, pulling it free. Liam wore it as much for himself as for Dragos. The nights of coven meetings were a series of ups and downs. The quicker he could get to Dragos and make love without any pain, the better.

Dragos sat up and uncapped the lube, pouring a generous amount on his thick cock. Liam watched, fascinated, as Dragos stroked himself a couple of times. Liam groaned and reached down to grab his own, trying to alleviate some of the ache. Precum leaked onto his stomach as he watched the handsome vampire above him lean his head back and hiss.

"I..." Liam began.

Dragos stared down at him, those beautiful amethyst eyes full of desire as he lined up his cock to Liam's entrance. Liam didn't even have to voice his request; the Vampire King just knew what he needed. *Dragos.*

Liam felt Dragos push inside of him slowly. With the lube and the plug he had used, there was little to no pain even though Dragos was large. Liam continued to stare at his lover as the vampire bottomed out inside him. The deeper Dragos was inside him, the more the Vampire King pushed Liam's legs until finally hooking them over his arms.

Liam closed his eyes, overwhelmed. It was always like this when the two of them were together.

"Open your eyes." Dragos groaned above him.

Liam slowly did as requested.

"Keep looking at me. Don't close them," Dragos whispered before he began pumping his cock in and out of Liam.

Slow and tender, Dragos was completely unlike the persona he presented to the rest of the world.

I love you, Dragos mouthed before he picked up the pace. Liam groaned as Dragos continually hit that spot inside him that brought him closer and closer to the edge.

Reaching down, Liam gripped his cock as Dragos' thrusts became erratic. He knew the Vampire King was close.

Dragos reached between them and replaced Liam's hand, stroking him with his already oiled hand. *Ooh!*

Dragos leaned down and kissed Liam, nipping at his lips, and that's all it took. With a hitch of his breath, Liam felt himself climax, cum splashing onto his stomach.

Dragos pulled back and, with a few more thrusts, sank deep and came. Liam felt the warmth of cum fill him as he watched the pleasure cross over Dragos' face.

After a few moments, Dragos pulled free and rolled to the side, going into the connecting bathroom. A moment later, he came back with a warm cloth and wiped Liam down. If the others ever knew this...

No, Liam wasn't going to think of all those assholes right then. He wasn't. Here, he could be himself. He didn't have to talk like them, think like them, or behave under their laws. Dragos loved Liam the way he was.

Dragos dropped the cloth on the floor and crawled back into bed with him. “I’ll inform my brothers tomorrow, and then we’ll let the coven know the morning of your birthday. I don’t want any of them to ruin this day for us.”

Liam rolled over and rested his head on Dragos’ muscular chest. The night had taken its toll on him, and even completely content with the future, he was still exhausted.

Closing his eyes, Liam whispered, “I love you.”

Dragos pressed a kiss to his head. “I love you, my pet. My Liam.”

Liam drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face.

Chapter 4

A couple of days later, Liam was hard at work. Well, hard at work killing the boss in his computer game anyway. Rapidly tapping the keys, he was trying his best to help out his raid group, only to take one more hit and get killed.

“Fuck!” Liam yelled at the screen. Nothing like having to start all fucking over again.

If he'd owned any of the hardware he used, he might have thrown the headphones, breaking them. As it was, all the stuff was gifted to him by Dragos. Even as he ripped off his headphones and death-gripped them, he maintained enough control to keep from breaking the precious gift. Barely.

Where is Dragos anyway? Liam thought as he glanced at the time. The vampire had gone off earlier with his brother, Andrei, to talk to a coven family while the other twin, Stasio, stayed behind to keep an eye on their home and the *pet*. They had been gone for more than three hours. It wasn't like Dragos, but there had been a few times when he'd gone out with his brothers and had some fun well into the night.

After walking over to the closet, Liam pulled out a pair of pants and hiked them over his boxer briefs. With the house left just to him and Stasio, he could go down and get a bite to eat in the kitchen. Even pets had a right to eat in the king's home. There were just rules that Liam would have to follow. One was making sure he didn't talk to Stasio. Outside Dragos' room, Liam must always maintain the look of a pet.

Upon opening up the door, Liam immediately felt prickles on the back of his neck, letting him know that something was off. Running back into the room, he then grabbed the blade Dragos had given him and crept down the hallway. He wanted to yell out for Stasio but knew that would be foolish.

He silently made his way into the main living area, and that's when he knew he was in trouble. The entire room was upset. Tables were tipped, lamps broken, and even the couch was shredded. How did he not hear that? Then he thought of what he had been doing, blasting the game in his headphones, and he closed his eyes in dread.

“There he is. The precious pet of the Vampire King,” Stefan venomously said from behind him.

Turning slowly, he took in the scene in the dining room. Stefan and Miko stood in the doorway, staring at him with such utter hate Liam wondered how he was still standing. Behind them, Niklos and Lew were dragging a bloody Stasio out of sight.

Liam whipped his gaze back over as Miko and Stefan approached him. Knowing that he couldn't take all four, especially without the help of Stasio, Liam turned and took off for the back door.

Liam wished he was faster, that he could be full blooded already. He was just a day away from the speed and strength that the other four possessed. Weak, he ran as fast as he could, whipping open the door and flying down the stairs.

The sounds of pounding footsteps behind him hiked up his fear. Stark terror made him push his legs harder than he ever had before. He was so close to the main gates and a busy street when he felt the impact from behind.

Liam let out a shout as he hit the ground hard, tangling limbs with a massive Miko. He didn't get oriented with his bearings before he felt the impact of a fist in his face once, twice, and three times. The last time, his nose made a sickening crunch, and warm blood covered his mouth and chin.

Moaning, Liam could barely see Miko sitting above him through his watering eyes. Miko grabbed his arms and pulled him up toward the vampire, "Fucking weak. I don't know what he saw in you, but I can't wait to end him. He'll suffer at every piece of you we send back to him, and the coven will turn on him like rabid dogs. Half the coven already can't stand that Dragos brought a bastard in and can't wait to destroy him."

They dragged Liam through the grass into the back of an SUV. The doors slammed, and he let out a whimper, knowing that his future was only going to be filled with pain.

Dragos pulled up to the gate, putting in the key code to allow him entrance up the drive. Andrei sat next to him, cleaning Dragos' weapon. A few choice words to the head of one of the families about how he treated his bride had Dragos ending the vampire's life for abusing his family.

Dragos would not have abuse in his coven. Getting out of his luxury car, he could immediately smell it. The smell of Liam's blood, spilled within steps of him. Andrei stiffened on the other side of the car.

“Be ready.” Dragos pulled a dagger and a gun from the holster he wore under his coat.

Scanning the area, he slowly followed the scent of Liam’s blood, coming all the way back to the gate. Bending down, he brushed his fingers across the grass that showed a visible struggle. Pulling back, he turned his hand over to see the tips covered with Liam’s blood.

Rage coursed through his veins, something that only the love of Liam had ever held at bay. Now it was like a beast was being unleashed from inside as he approached his large home. Going up the steps with murder on his mind, he entered to complete silence.

Andrei whispered next to him, “Stasio,” and took off in search of his twin.

Taking a deep breath, Dragos made his way to his room where he had left Liam playing his game. In the last couple of years, Liam hardly asked for anything, and it broke Dragos’ heart every time, knowing that his love still feared desiring something in this world. It was the longing look that Dragos observed one night when Liam had watched him on the computer. He immediately went out and got Liam everything that a young man could want. It was a place the man could go where he wasn’t judged and found lacking in the world. The only other place was in Dragos’ arms.

The door was already open, and he walked in to see it empty. He knew it would be. Dragos knew his love had been taken from him. The all-consuming rage broke free inside of him, and a roar filled the air.

Andrei came up behind him, and he took his own brother by the throat and held him against the wall. “Was it you? Stasio?” Dragos hissed.

Andrei grabbed his hands, gasping out, “Stasio is bad. I just fed him. He knows who betrayed you.”

Dragos stepped back, dropping his brother. Andrei grabbed at his own throat as he took in great gulps of air. “Dragos, we’ve known since the beginning that you loved Liam. We have always been prepared to stand by you and him. You’re our brother. We love you deeply. Have we not all proven throughout the years we can trust each other? Did we not all work together to move up the ranks of the covenant? Did we not have each others’ backs when a covenant member turned against us when we were younger? Dragos, although this is the first time you have someone to protect, your brothers will sacrifice their lives to protect your Liam.”

Dragos scrubbed his hands over his face. The three of them had always stuck tightly together. Dragos thought they might even be closer than most vampire brothers, and Dragos had just fucked up by not trusting them.

“Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. If someone I loved was taken from me, hell would be unleashed.” Andrei stood and put his hand to the wall to support himself for a moment. “Stasio is in the living room.”

Andrei led the way to the living room, and Dragos saw the damage that had been done to his younger brother. Bruises marred his flesh, and his face was covered in blood and wounds. Looking closer, he could see a hole in the shirt near his brother's chest.

“You were shot?”

Stasio staggered to his feet. “Yes, but I'm coming with you to get Liam back.”

“We need to call Stefan and have him check you out.” Dragos pushed his brother back down on the couch.

Stasio was shaking his head. “You can't. It was him and our cousins. Miko, Lew, and Niklos all took Liam. I think they are going to try and overthrow the coven.”

Of course they are.

The only other person in the coven that knew Dragos treated Liam different was the physician. All the supplies needed for post care had all gone through Stefan. The asshole wasn't the leader in this, but he gave his lover, Miko, the tool that could bring Dragos down. He had given them Liam.

Calm washed over Dragos, as cruel and ruthless as he had been before Liam. Now that his lover had been taken, that description seemed too minor for the hell that he was about to unleash upon his coven.

Holding out his arm, he commanded, “Stasio, feed and heal from me. I need your help, brother.”

Stasio grabbed his arm and bowed his head. “Brother, you have it.”

Andrei stepped closer. “I'll go to the armory and get everything we need.”

As Dragos stood there feeding his brother, madness began to take over. Nothing would be left of those that took Liam, and those that survived would know to never fuck with what was his again.

Chapter 5

Pain flared in Liam's subconscious. Moaning pitifully, he was determined to wake up, get his bearings, face what was to come.

The hiss was all he heard before he felt someone snap a whip against his back. Liam screamed as he woke. The searing pain came over and over; he struggled only to find his arms were tied between two poles. There was so much pain, even the feel of his blood running down his back was too much to bear.

Niklos stopped and laughed. "Look how well it tears his flesh. Such a weak half-breed."

Miko stepped closer and faced him, squatting into his line of vision. Behind him stood a nervous looking Stefan. "I never knew what he saw in you. All those times he brought you to the coven meetings, I expected... more. Nothing. You are nothing. Yet we can take over everything just by destroying a piece of shit like you."

Liam let out a hoarse laugh. "You think you have brought down the Vampire King by taking me from him. You have unleashed the harbinger of death. You will die, and I will relish every moment of it for your betrayal."

"If you live that long. Tell me, how are you with sun, halfling?" Miko laughed as he stood and turned, drawing a blade and stabbing Stefan in the heart. "Another weakness eliminated. Useful for information, but that was all he was good for."

Stefan eyed Miko with such shock at his betrayal as he grasped at the blade sticking out of his chest. He tried to say something before he fell face first in the dirt. The doctor bled out before Liam.

"Do you fear death, halfling?" Lew said as he circled him with the barbed whip, flipping the handle in his hand.

"No," Liam whispered. Dragos would come for him, and he would smile upon their deaths even if he was to go to the hereafter shortly. Even now, his Vampire King was on the hunt. He didn't only wish it; he knew.

Lew laughed as he swung the whip, lashing his stomach. Flesh tore under the barbs, and he could not contain his scream. Two more times, Lew whipped

his stomach before he circled to his back to ravage it until Liam had to wonder if there was any flesh left.

Liam slumped in the bindings as rain began to fall. Unable to hold his head up any longer, he let his head drop forward, chin touching his chest. He hissed as even the droplets of water were too much for his tortured body.

Miko laughed, "Sun is up in half an hour. Let's see if a halfling can survive throughout the entire day. But before I go..." Miko lifted his hand, which held a pair of pliers. Liam tried to shake his head, but someone from behind held him tightly. His tiny fangs were pulled from him as if they had not been truly attached, but the pain, God, the pain was excruciating. There was only so much more he could take. Thankfully, his mind was in accord because he finally succumbed into blessed darkness.

The next time Liam woke, he could barely open his eyes. Blinding light bore down on him. Tugging at his hands, Liam realized he was still tied out in the yard. He was in so much agony that he couldn't even cry out in pain anymore.

The sun couldn't kill him like a full-blooded vampire, but it could do one hell of a lot of damage to him. Add in the hours of torture he'd gone through before daybreak, and Liam would be lucky to live out the day.

The sun's passage dragged on as his back painfully blistered.

"He'll come for me. He will." Liam whispered over and over through dry, cracked lips.

Finally, a small reprieve hit him during the day as dark clouds blew in, announcing more rain to come. The storm that hit would send others to hideaway in their basements. But Liam had to endure the painful hail and storm while still tied outside.

At last, the sun began to sink in the sky. He only wanted to see Dragos one last time. He knew his lover would come for him tonight. "I can make it. I just want to say goodbye," Liam whispered as he hung in his bindings, awaiting the night's torture.

All too soon, the sound of footsteps came from the direction of the house, and the three cousins approached along with several other coven members. Liam couldn't believe there were a dozen or so waiting to betray the Vampire

King. Were they mad? Did they really think these assholes could overtake Dragos?

Miko approached with a whip in hand. Liam knew he could not survive another night. He was simply waiting to see the vengeance that would be meted out once Dragos arrived.

Miko began his punishment on sunburned, torn flesh, and Liam didn't even have the strength to do any more than hang there and take it.

Four, five, six... the whip hit his flesh. The crowd gathered around began to cheer at his pain. To laugh as each drop of blood spilled on the ground.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen... The smell of sex and blood filled the air as vampires became aroused and began feeding and copulating at the sight of his life being extinguished. They were more repulsive than the lowest creatures.

Too many strikes to count... The world blessedly went deathly quiet around him. Had he lost his senses, then? With the last of his strength, Liam lifted his head and locked gazes with Dragos. The Vampire King stood before him, flanked by his brothers in the center of the crowd. He was armed to the teeth with weapons Liam could not even recognize. The air around the Vampire King had stilled, as if it was even afraid to provoke the wrath of the vampire.

Liam mouthed, *I love you.*

His Dragos had come for him. It was okay to surrender to the darkness. Closing his eyes, Liam accepted death.

Chapter 6

Dragos stared as the only man he had ever loved closed his eyes. Even from his vantage point, Dragos could see that Liam was at death's door and about to journey through.

Coven members surrounded him and his brothers, and he pulled out his samurai sword, waiting for whatever stupid fuck was willing to try to take a piece of him first.

His own cousin stood across from him, smirking as he held the whip in his hand, a whip covered in Liam's blood.

Miko sauntered around Liam, cocky and sure of himself. How quickly his coven had forgotten the extent of his ruthlessness. He would not make that mistake again.

Miko stood next to Liam and patted his lover's dirty hair. "Unbelievable that you could love such a piece of scum. Have you no pride in your blood? This coven is sick of looking at this pet every fucking gathering. I'm sick of seeing our coven go into the gutter being led by something that could care for such trash."

A few of the coven members fidgeted in their spot at the words. Their discomfort would not save them. Those that chose to come and side with his cousins, to witness Liam's torture, would soon know the consequences.

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?" Miko spat at him. "It's time for a change. Lew, Niklos, and I are taking over."

"Who decided?" Dragos asked softly.

Miko raised a brow. "I did."

Before anyone could utter another word, Dragos moved with a speed none of his kind possessed, his sword sweeping with the same speed and precision. When Dragos stopped, he had returned to the same spot where he had stood, his expression grim as Lew's head dropped from his neck to the muddy earth. With a louder thump, Lew's body followed a moment later.

Miko whipped his gaze to his brother as he fell, then released a scream and charged Dragos. Dragos unleashed all his righteous anger upon the coven members. With a swing of his sword, he gutted one before turning his attention

to beheading another. As blood poured, Dragos' mind craved vengeance even more.

Miko met him head-on, and Dragos took his time killing the foolish vampire. Limb by limb, he cut the vampire down. Stabbing and cutting until no one could recognize the vampire. He lay on the ground, looking as horrid in death as he had in his vampiric life.

Dragos turned to watch as Andrei and Stasio ran after a retreating Niklos, hacking at their last dearest cousin.

Then Dragos turned on the rest of the coven members who were present as screams filled the air. He had no mercy for any of them. They were no longer to be trusted. He would not let anyone live that could turn on him, his family, or those who chose loyalty to his leadership.

Madness crept in, and as each vampire fell before him, the more savage he became. This was who he was before Liam had tamed him, made him see the light in life. Without his Liam, the world was dark, and he would make sure anyone who betrayed him would never know light again.

The world around him grew quiet as his roar filled the night sky. Pain and anguish for the man he loved filled the sound. Crazy with grief, he yelled to Andrei. "Bring the fallen over here."

Dragos used his sword to untie Liam, who fell into his arms. Dragos felt for a pulse and shook with physical pain when he found none.

Stasio approached with two headless vampires. "What do you need?"

"I need their blood. All of them. Those who wronged Liam will bring him back." Dragos gently laid Liam on the grass, trembling as he realized that Liam's flesh was shredded. Making a decision, Dragos drew his dagger, and on Liam's neck, shoulder and arm, Dragos began carving the beautiful symbols with swift, efficient cuts. He would not have Liam remember his torture by having the marks of a whipping be permanent. His symbols with the combined blood would heal into a beautiful scarification where the others of Liam's torture would disappear.

"Dragos, all of their blood? Do you know how powerful..." Stasio trailed off.

Dragos turned to stare up at his brother. "That is why you need to prepare yourself as well. We will all do this, and no one will fuck with us ever again. Do you understand?"

Stasio nodded before he turned and rushed away to do his bidding. "Andrei, hurry up!"

As soon as the last carving was done on Liam, Dragos turned the blade on himself, cutting his wrist deeply. Taking the wrist, he dripped it over a carving on Liam's neckline, smearing the drops so that the cut turned dark crimson immediately.

Dragos was so intent on his task that he didn't notice as his brothers knelt beside him with their own wrists cut to aid in healing the markings, dripping their blood into the carvings on Liam's flesh. The wounds darkened and Liam soon began to moan.

Dragos pushed back Liam's hair, kissing pale lips. "I'm here, Liam."

Dragos, Stasio, and Andrei then got to work taking each coven member's blood and dripping it into one of Liam's carvings. The last one to be used was Miko. Dragos concentrated on a small carving on the back of the shoulder, dripping Miko's blood inside the cut.

Behind him, Dragos could feel his brothers begin carving new markings and covering his back with the betrayer's blood. Strength, the likes of which he had never felt, began to creep into each cell of his body.

No one knew why, but the blood of a deceased vampire was far more powerful than feeding off a live one. In fact, to keep from destroying their own kind, it had been law that you could never take the death blood of a vampire except under one circumstance, justice. These vampires had all done Dragos and his family wrong, and now their blood would be his payment. Other vampires would see it too, because death blood unnaturally marked flesh wounds to heal as a dark crimson scarification.

The amount of death blood they were all taking in would make them powerful enough to keep others fearfully at bay. Their bodies covered in scarifications would be the only warning others would have that they were greatly outmatched.

Liam's neck, shoulder, and arms carving darkened as the halfling began to turn from the blood scarifications. The other wounds to his body showed small signs of healing.

Dragos picked up his lover. "We need to get him back to the house. It'll take a couple of weeks for him to completely turn and heal, and I want to get him as comfortable as possible immediately."

Andrei nodded and ran to retrieve a vehicle.

Dragos leaned down and kissed Liam on the lips. It had taken two days to find him. Never again would they be apart.

Chapter 7

Liam stirred in his sleep. Upon opening his eyes, he realized his feverish nightmares had him soaked through to the sheets again. For the last two weeks, all he'd done was sleep, change clothes, talk to Dragos, and have the worst fucking nightmares.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Liam sat up, recalling what he had seen in the dream. In it, Dragos had been the one to be whipped and tortured. To him, there was nothing worse he could possibly imagine. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm himself. He knew it had been a silly dream. No way could Dragos ever be put in that position. He was too powerful... especially now.

The door opened, and Dragos walked in with a tray in hand. Thoughts of the nightmare vanished as Dragos approached the bed and sat on it. "I brought you your favorite."

Liam stared down at the stack of fluffy blueberry pancakes. His stomach rumbled, and Liam chuckled. "Thank you. I guess I'm a little hungry."

Dragos situated the tray in front of Liam and maneuvered to straddle him from behind. Those powerful hands worked at the muscles on Liam's shoulder as he cut into his pancakes.

He ate heartily of the food, enjoying the massage to his aching muscles. Finally, when he couldn't take another bite, Liam pushed the tray away.

Dragos murmured from behind him, "Let's get you in the shower."

Liam turned and kissed Dragos softly. "Will you join me?"

Dragos nodded as he got up and grabbed Liam's hand. He led him to the luxurious bathroom. Liam stood by as Dragos started the shower, getting the water warm. Liam stripped off the pajama pants. He needed to wash off the effects of last night's nightmare.

Dragos stepped in, and Liam followed, feeling the warm water wash away the last traces of the night before. Moaning, Liam tilted his head up toward the double-headed shower. The body spray that lined the wall soothed the leftover tension.

Dragos swept his hands down Liam's arms from shoulder to wrist, along the lines of his new crimson scarifications.

"You haven't talked about these," Dragos murmured. "I wanted it to be more private when I changed you."

"I know why you had to do it, Dragos. I think they're beautiful." Liam saw Dragos didn't believe him. He knew what Dragos was thinking; they were a reminder of his capture. "These are to keep me safe, Dragos, and to keep you safe as well."

Dragos leaned down and kissed him. "I wish we had more time, but the coven will be here soon."

Liam reached up and pulled Dragos down in a deep kiss. His new fangs nicked Dragos' lips and Liam sucked the crimson into his mouth. Tongues dueled as Liam reached down and grabbed Dragos' cock, pressing it to his. Using two hands, he stroked both of them together.

Dragos pulled back from the kiss and hissed at the ceiling. "Feels good."

"Do we have time for this?" Liam nipped at Dragos' neck. The delicious slide of their cocks rubbing together caused Liam to moan. *Feels so fucking good!*

"We'll fucking make the time. I'm not going anywhere but..." Liam felt Dragos' hand move one of his to the side so they were both working their cocks together.

Liam moaned, already on the edge. Having their cocks rub against one another in Dragos' grip was more than he could take. With a huff, Liam came, splashing cum all over their hands and stomach. A few strokes later and Dragos joined him, shouting out his climax.

They held each other as they tried to get their breathing under control.

Dragos kissed the nape of his neck. "I love you. Forevermore."

Liam stared up at Dragos. God, how he loved this vampire, and he was lucky enough he would get to share their lives together forever. "I love you," Liam murmured before he brought Dragos down for a kiss. The coven could wait.

An hour later, Liam stood with calm dignity at the front of the closed double doors. He had a new persona on this time. No more was he the obedient pet of

the Vampire King. His throat bore no jewelry. His chest was bare for all to see as he stood adorned in black silk pants.

The double doors opened, and Liam held his head high as he kept his gaze directed to the end of the hall. Dragos stood in front of the coven with his two brothers. All three of them were wearing the same black silk pants that Liam wore, showing off each and every one of the crimson scarifications. They were a powerful sight to behold, and everyone in the coven knew it. Liam stepped forward and began walking, not turning as the murmurs and the shocked gasps began.

Each and every mark on his upper arms, neck, and shoulders was a testament to his strength. He might be a turned vampire, but he had enough crimson to never be thought of as a weakness to the Vampire King ever again. No one would fuck with him, or Liam would end them himself.

Strength coursed through his veins as he continued to gaze at his lover, his partner, his groom. Dragos didn't smile, but his eyes finally held what Liam always hoped would one day be possible. They showed his love for Liam.

Liam stepped up to where Dragos stood, flanked by his brother.

Dragos reached out and, without pausing, took Liam in a deep kiss in front of the coven. The coven remained quiet as Dragos claimed him for all to see. The kiss went on far longer than was necessary, but Liam couldn't care what the others thought. No one could hurt the four of them again.

Dragos pulled back and reached out his hand to his brother, Andrei. Into Dragos' grasp, his brother placed a beautiful yellow-gold necklace with dark rubies throughout. It wasn't as long as the other or even as big. It was more of a thin collar than anything else.

Dragos turned to stare at him. "I love you. I want to show everyone who is here now that we are united as one, that you are my equal. Will you wear this symbol that you are mine forevermore?"

Too overcome with emotion, Liam could only nod. Dragos wrapped the necklace around Liam's neck and leaned over his shoulder to clasp the collar.

Liam stared up at Dragos. "I wish I had something to give you."

"You have. You gave me love but..." Dragos trailed off as Stasio came forward and handed Liam an identical necklace.

Liam stared up at Dragos, and his lover whispered to him, “However, I want everyone to know you have just as much a claim on me.”

Liam’s hand shook as he clasped the necklace around Dragos’ thick neck. Pulling back, Liam adjusted the necklace so it sat centered at Dragos’ sternum. Dragos wrapped his arms around Liam and kissed him. This kiss was for all to see, to claim and display that the two were equals, united, and that love was their most deadly weapon against those that threatened them.

Liam poured his love into the kiss, remembering how Dragos had taken him in and looked at him in a light that no one ever had. How Dragos had saved him from his enemies and changed him so they could be together eternally.

Pulling back, Liam whispered, “I love you.”

Dragos held him and murmured into his shoulder, “I love you, my Liam.”

The End

Author Bio

Short, sexy and sweet—where a little love goes a long way.

That's the best way to describe Jackie Nacht's stories. She was introduced to M/M Romance through her sister, Stephani, and read it for years. Then, she thought it was time to put her own stories on paper. Jackie began writing short and sweet stories that ended with a happily ever after.

Thinking back to her own book addiction, where there were many nights Jackie stayed up way too late so she could read just one more chapter—yeah, right—Jackie decided to write short romances for young adults as well as adults. Hopefully, they will give high school and college students, or working men and women something they can read during their lunch hour, in between classes or just when they want to briefly get away from the daily stresses of everyday life.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [MLR Press](#) | [eXtasy](#) | [Amazon](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TAKING A RISK ON LOVE

By K. Mason

Photo Description

Two men, dressed in frock coats, with waistcoats underneath and lace cravats around their necks, stand facing each other. Both men have long dark hair, tied at the nape of the neck. The man on the right, whose face is clearly shown and who looks slightly younger than the other man, appears unhappy, as though he's explaining something to the man on the right. Behind them on the wall is a large, ornate, gilt edged painting, under which is a candlestick with three lit candles.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love to read a story set in a historical, or at least close to historical, setting in 18th century France, full of court intrigue, backstabbing and duels. I'd like them to be fashion-conscious for the times, but not too effeminate in personality.

Enemies to lovers?

Maybe one of them is an artisan baker, or party planner for the court?

Or an assassin sent to the court from another country?

Please no:

Military/Navy/Soldiers

No BDSM

Crossdressing as part of sex

Over the top angst

Please include:

HEA or HFN

explicit sexual content

Historically appropriate attitudes to sex

Thanks, <3

Sincerely,

Kat Merikan

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: student/tutor, France, duel, masquerade, inappropriate use of a chaise longue, outdoor groping, completely improper behaviour, wig abandonment

Word Count: 15,996

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thank you to K.A. for creating the prompt and giving me something new to think about and research.

A huge thank you to all of the organisers and volunteers of the Love's Landscapes Event for all the hard work you do.

As ever, thank you to my very wonderful beta readers and cheerleaders for their support when I was writing, particularly to Kaje, Kat and Elci for keeping me off the ledge when I started to believe I'd bitten off more than I could chew with this one.

And finally, to my research assistants, Master Alex and his subs, Lucas and Kat, for bravely acting out the smutty bits and taking notes, so that I was sure that they did actually work.

Author's Note

This is a new historical period for me to write about, and I have to admit the research was a bit of a crash course. The story was written in six weeks and as such there are going to be mistakes; these are mine alone and I hope that they don't detract the reader from the story.

TAKING A RISK ON LOVE

By K. Mason

Yves found his eyes straying regularly towards the ornate, and in his opinion extremely ugly, turquoise and gold clock on the mantelpiece. Watching as the hands moved ever closer to the hour mark. This week's edition of *La Gazette* lay open on the desk in front of him. Not that Yves had any interest in the propaganda from the court at Versailles, which it usually carried. But it was the only paper carrying articles about the recently rediscovered Roman city of Pompeii. At two minutes to the hour he gave up all pretence at reading. Staring fixedly at the clock, he silently urged the second hand to move faster. If the clock struck the hour before Christophe arrived for his morning lesson, then he had won their ridiculous wager. More importantly he wouldn't have to attend the masquerade being hosted by the Marquis de Guise at his residence, l'hôtel de Rohan, the following evening.

As the clock face counted down the seconds, Yves found himself holding his breath. Less than a minute to go and the bells of the Couvent Ste Croix de la Bretonnerie on the opposite side of the road would begin to peal. Forty-five seconds. Thirty seconds. From outside the room, Yves heard the sound of someone approaching down the corridor, at speed. Twenty seconds. The footsteps were falling faster and getting louder. Fifteen seconds. Yves looked from the clock to the closed door and back. Ten seconds. The footsteps stopped suddenly outside the door and the decoratively carved brass doorknob began to turn. Five seconds. Yves slumped back into his seat with a sigh as the door was pushed open and Christophe, more or less, fell into the room.

"*Merde!*" Yves swore under his breath, as Christophe shut the door behind him. The bells of the convent's chapel calling the sisters to prayer drowned out the chimes of the clock on the mantelpiece.

"*Bonjour, Yves,*" Christophe greeted him with a smile as he pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the desk. Adjusting the lace cuffs of his shirt, which extended below the sleeves of his moss green silk overcoat, he lowered himself onto the cushioned seat. Wisps of long brown hair had escaped from the clasp at the base of his neck and were framing his slightly rounded cheeks.

“Good morning, Christophe,” Yves muttered with ill grace as he folded up the newspaper.

“Are we to continue with our translation of the *Aeneid*? I believe we were discussing the murder of Priam and the escape from Troy,” Christophe asked with feigned enthusiasm. Leaning forward he rested his forearms against the edge of the desk. His smile widened and his eyes sparkled as he sensed Yves’ annoyance.

“Of course.” Yves reached back to the shelves behind him for the large, leather bound volume of Virgil’s poem. He slid the book across the desk top towards Christophe. “We have two hours for study this morning. Then you have a fencing lesson with *Monsieur* Olivier before *le déjeuner*, which I understand from Henri will be taken with your father and *Madame* Violette in the informal dining room.”

Christophe’s groaned dramatically, letting his head thump down on the desk. “I don’t suppose there is any chance of me persuading you to join us for dinner?”

“None at all,” Yves replied with a smile. Whilst dinner with the Baron de Tulle was no hardship, his mistress was a vapid socialite whose interest extended only as far as the latest fashions, amusements, and gossip. What’s more, she did not approve of Yves. In her view, as the son of a vintner, he was of the trading classes and certainly not good enough to act as tutor and companion to her lover’s son.

“Please.” Christophe raised his head and stared at Yves with a pleading expression. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ll do anything; just don’t make me suffer through another dinner of having the virtues of ‘suitable young women’ whose acquaintance I should make pointed out to me.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything, name your price.”

“You’ll let me off this ridiculous wager? You won’t make me go to the masquerade tomorrow?” Yves countered immediately.

“No,” Christophe replied quickly, shaking his head. “That was part of a wager, it wouldn’t be right to renege on the outcome.”

“In which case, I’m afraid you are on your own for dinner. Now, shall we start with the translation?”

Yves sat back in his chair and watched as Christophe traced the long slender fingers of his left hand gently across the text, whilst with the right he dipped his fountain pen into the inkwell and slowly wrote out the translation.

It had been six months since Yves had taken up his position as both tutor and companion to Christophe. At nineteen, Christophe did not really need a tutor, but a bad attack of smallpox when he was twelve had left him very weak and with some damage to the sight in his left eye. As a result, his education had been put on hold for nearly two years while he recovered. His father had brought him to the Paris townhouse when he turned eighteen, leaving his mother and three younger siblings at the family home in Tulle. Though Christophe had made some friends amongst the sons of the noble families in the fourth *Arrondissement* where they lived, the Baron had become concerned at their somewhat wild ways and that they might be leading Christophe astray.

Yves had come to Paris from the family home in Bordeaux when he was just sixteen. Initially to complete his studies at *l'Académie française*, and afterwards employed by the *Bibliothèque du Roi*, as an archivist and assistant in the compilation of the great Encyclopaedia. During the ten years he had been in Paris, Yves had led a solitary life. He had rented a studio apartment on the second floor of a modest townhouse, in the not so glamorous area of the city, and outside of his work kept himself very much to himself. Whilst he had many acquaintances, he had very few friends. After six years though, the work he'd been doing was beginning to bore him, so it was something of a relief when his new patron, Charles de Breton, had suggested him as a tutor and companion for his friend Philippe de Valliot, Baron of Tulle's son.

Yves picked up the newspaper and turned his attention back to the article on Pompeii, but his mind kept wandering. Even the scratching of the metal pen nib across the paper distracted him. More than once he caught himself studying Christophe instead, noting how his head tilted to one side as he worked, his plump lower lip caught between his teeth as he concentrated on the translation. When Christophe suddenly glanced up at him, Yves flushed, heat rushing to his cheeks at having been caught staring. Quickly he looked away, but not before catching sight of the crooked grin that suddenly lit Christophe's face.

As the clock on the mantelpiece marked the passing of the first hour, Christophe laid his pen down with a sigh.

"Where are you up to?" Yves asked, folding away the newspaper he still hadn't managed to read more than a paragraph of.

"Aeneas has just returned to Troy for his wife, but she's been killed. Then there was something about her ghost telling him his destiny was to travel to the west and found a new city."

"Very good, and what do you think this represents?"

"That they'd all had a little too much wine. There are no such things as ghosts."

Yves raised an eyebrow at this outburst, trying hard not to laugh. "It's all symbolic, Christophe, much of the poem is to do with duty, piety and respect. It also deals with fate, and the predestination of man. What Creusa's ghost is telling him is that he is destined to found a new city, that he has a duty to his family, his people, to do so. What do you think the omens that preceded..." Yves' speech trailed off abruptly. "Christophe, are you listening to me? Christophe?"

"What? Oh—sorry—Yves." Christophe blinked suddenly as he stammered out the words.

"Am I boring you?"

"Of course not," Christophe lied cheerfully. "I was just wondering if you were this serious about everything. Or whether it was just the things you were passionate about." There was a sparkle of mischief in Christophe's eye as he said this. "What else are you passionate about Yves?" Christophe leant forward over the table towards him as he asked, his voice seeming unusually low.

"I don't think that is really an appropriate question, Christophe. Do you?"

"No, it probably isn't." Christophe sat back up as he spoke, not looking at all abashed by the rebuke in Yves' voice. "I'd still like to know though." Christophe gave him a wicked grin as he finished.

"Back to the text, please." Yves tried to sound stern, but choked slightly on the words; the look on Christophe's face suddenly made him feel like a rabbit caught by a poacher's lantern.

The lesson continued, but neither man's heart was in it, and occasionally Yves caught Christophe staring at him, a speculative expression on his face. When caught, Christophe would smirk before looking back down at his translation. It was something of a relief when they were interrupted by a quiet knock on the door, which opened without waiting for either man to respond.

"Henri," Christophe greeted the butler with slight inclination of the head.

"Pardon me for the interruption, but *Monsieur* Olivier has asked me to advise you that your fencing lesson will take place in the courtyard. He wishes your presence at eleven sharp."

"Thank you, Henri," Yves replied and the butler backed out the room again. With a glance at the hideous timepiece, he continued, "It's ten to the hour now, we'd best call it a day on your lessons."

Christophe wasted no time in placing his translation sheet into the book to mark its place and close the volume. Sliding it back across the desk he rose to his feet.

"I will see you after dinner then, Yves?"

"I hadn't planned anything."

"No. But we have a masquerade to attend tomorrow, and you need to be properly attired. We've an appointment with my tailor this afternoon and then I thought we could take coffee at Le brasserie Procope afterwards."

"I have evening clothes, I don't need..."

"No, Yves. I insist," Christophe said with determination. "So, if I can't persuade you to join us for *le déjeuner*?" Christophe paused looking at Yves hopefully, but he only received a shaken head in response. "Very well. A carriage has been arranged, I will meet you in the entrance hall at two."

Christophe didn't wait for a response, exiting the room and leaving Yves to slump ungracefully back into his seat with a sigh.

The heels of Yves' boots echoed as he paced the marble floor of the grand entranceway to the de Valliot's townhouse. A liveried footman, in station beside the carved wooden front door, watched him with a bored expression. Christophe was late. Again.

"Sorry!" The breathless exclamation from above preceded the sound of footsteps rushing down the sweeping staircase that led from the upper floor apartments. Christophe stepped off the bottom step and almost collided with Yves as he completed his fifth circuit of the hall.

"Sorry," Christophe repeated, holding onto Yves' forearms to steady himself. Yves couldn't resist the opportunity of looking him up and down. He'd

changed out of his morning attire and was now wearing a light blue woollen suit with a black embroidered edging on not only the jacket, but also the waistcoat and breeches, which also sported four elaborate silver buttons rising from the knee. As Christophe stepped away, Yves noticed a flash of deep red silk that lined the jacket. He looked every inch the young, privileged aristocrat he was. Yves couldn't help compare Christophe's elegant clothing with the unadorned, light grey linen suit that he wore. It left him feeling dowdy and uncomfortably underdressed.

"Ready to go?" Christophe asked with an excited smile. Yves nodded and followed after him as he headed towards the door, which was opened for them as they approached.

They descended the steps and crossed the small formal courtyard that fronted the townhouse. At the gates, a carriage decorated in the Baron's colours and pulled by two dark bay horses waited for them. The driver was already seated on the perch; reins in one hand and whip in the other. Another liveried footman waited by the body of the carriage, opening the door as they approached.

"*Monsieur Aubercy's, Rue du Jardinnet, please,*" Christophe instructed the driver before stepping up onto the footplate. As he did the tails of his overcoat fell forwards over his hips, leaving Yves with a view of his breeches, pulled tightly over his arse and thighs. For a second Yves had to fight the totally inappropriate urge to step up quickly behind him and put his hands where they most definitely shouldn't be; to test the firmness of the muscle under the woollen covering. But being in sight of the driver and footman held him in check.

Mercifully, the journey wasn't a long one. Christophe had insisted that they sit side by side on the leather covered bench seat. Every bounce of the carriage as it travelled over the cobbled streets made some part of their bodies brush against each other. These persistent, barely there touches—be it of leg, shoulder, or hand—seemed to send a jolt of wanting through Yves. He mentally cursed himself for his weakness, regretting that rather than continuing with his own studies, he'd taken his coffee out on the terrace where at a discreet distance he could watch Christophe at fencing practice in the courtyard below.

Stripped of his outer garments, his fine white linen shirt had clung to his body like a second skin after the third bout. Whether on the attack or parrying the thrusts of *Monsieur Olivier's* sabre, Christophe was graceful in his

movements. It looked almost like a dance rather than a lesson in swordsmanship and self defence. By the end of the hour Christophe was breathing hard. His hair had completely escaped from its binding and hung limply round his flushed face. As he shook *Monsieur* Olivier's hand, he looked up to the terrace. Catching sight of Yves, Christophe had smiled widely, his eyes seeming to sparkle in the sunlight. Yves suddenly found himself wondering whether Christophe would have the same look of flushed exhaustion after he'd given himself up to pleasure in bed. Realising where his thoughts had taken him, Yves felt uncomfortable. He was Christophe's tutor and paid companion, he had no right to even think such a thing about him.

Monsieur Aubercy's establishment was part of a row of high-class, discreet shops, which looked more like private homes. Yves followed Christophe through the front door and into what appeared to be a gentleman's parlour. In the centre of the room was a suite of elaborately carved dark wood furniture with rich burgundy upholstery. Against the wall a matching ornate sideboard, and between the chairs and chaise longue a nest of small tables. Spread out over these were swatches of fabric, the only clue as to the trade carried out.

"*Un moment*," a man's voice called through the open doorway at the far side of the room. Christophe settled himself into one of the armchairs, looking completely at home, while Yves moved quietly round the room looking at the artwork, which decorated the walls. It wasn't long before a short elderly man came through the doorway. He was dressed very simply in an unembellished cream suit, a pair of small gold rimmed spectacles balanced on the bridge of his nose.

"*Monsieur* Aubercy." Christophe rose to his feet to greet the tailor with a formal bow of his head.

"How many times must I tell you, Jacques is fine, *Monsieur* de Valliot," the tailor chided.

"Jacques, then. But only if you return the favour and call me Christophe." Christophe spoke warmly. "This is my friend, Yves Lagarde."

"*Monsieur* Lagarde," the tailor said with a slight bow to Yves, who acknowledged him with his own nod.

"You got my message?" Christophe asked.

"Of course, I started work on your request straight away." He looked Yves up and down slowly as he spoke. "I think you will be pleased. Come this way

please.” Without waiting to see if they followed, Jacques turned and started towards the back room.

“Request?” Yves asked as they followed, Christophe just shrugged, a slight smirk turning up the corner of his mouth.

The backroom of the shop was obviously the room where the work was done. Bolts of cloth of all colours lined the shelves, which ran along one wall from floor to ceiling. Two full sized wickerwork mannequins stood in the centre of the room. One was bare, but the other was dressed in an elegant black velvet court suit with a white waistcoat underneath. The clothing was highly decorated with embroidered feathers and beading from hem to neckline, silver with turquoise on the suit itself and black on the waistcoat. A pair of plain black breeches and white embellished stockings finished the ensemble.

“Is this it?” Christophe asked, pointing to the dressed mannequin.

“*Mais oui*,” Jacques replied with a nod. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful, just what I wanted.” Christophe walked around the garment where it hung. “Thank you.”

“Now we just have to check the fit and finish it. You said it was needed for tomorrow night?”

“Yes, for the Marquis de Guise’s masquerade. It’s going to be the social event of the season.”

“Very good, now, Christophe, if you would like to go take a seat in the waiting room, there should be some wine in the decanter on the sideboard should you wish refreshment. Then *Monsieur* Lagarde, if you could just strip down to your undergarments you can try it on and I can adjust it as needed.”

Jacques turned from Christophe to Yves and gave an encouraging nod as he spoke.

“What?” Yves demanded.

“I need to check the measurements Christophe gave me were correct, and that the suit is a proper fit, *Monsieur*.”

“Measurements? What measurements? Christophe?” Yves turned to his pupil who was moving quietly to the exit.

“Hmmm?” Christophe said vaguely.

"Measurements, Christophe. How did you get my measurements?" Yves demanded.

"Oh, well, I didn't have the exact measurements. I got my valet to borrow one of your suits from the laundresses and we measured that."

"You stole my laundry?"

"I didn't steal it, I borrowed it. I never intended to keep it," Christophe explained. "After all, you're wearing it today."

"I put this suit in for laundering last Friday, when exactly did you do this?"

"Monday."

"Monday? We only made the wager on Sunday. There was no guarantee that I would be going to the masquerade with you, yet you went to great lengths to obtain this, this..." Yves stopped speaking and waved his arm at the suit, seemingly lost for words. "Costume," he continued eventually.

"Oh, there was no doubt that you'd be going with me to the masquerade," Christophe said definitely.

"There wasn't?"

"No, never. It was something my mother taught me well. Never, ever bet more than you can afford to lose and never take a risk when a certainty is available."

"And I was a certainty?"

"Yes, you were," Christophe said with a smile then turned to leave the room.

"*Monsieur Lagarde?*" Staring after Christophe, he hadn't heard Jacques approach, and jumped at the gentle hand laid on his arm.

"Yves, please call me Yves," he said as he let Jacques lead him back towards the mannequin.

Stripped of his outer garments, and standing only in his stocking feet and small clothes, Yves felt distinctly uncomfortable. He stood in the centre of the room whilst Jacques moved about him, taking various measurements and jotting them down in a small leather bound notebook.

"He did very well with his estimate; there shouldn't be many alterations to make," Jacques said with a smile. "Now, we shall try the suit on, if you could put your undershirt back on."

As Yves went to collect his shirt from where he had placed it, he noticed that Christophe was seated in the chair closest to the back room. He held a small glass of dark red wine in one hand but his gaze was fixed on the doorway. Yves caught his eye before Christophe could look away and wasn't sure which of them blushed harder.

The breeches, like the waistcoat, were made of satin and slid gently up over Yves' thighs, fastening at the centre with buttons concealed by a front fall panel. The waistcoat itself was a snug fit over the coarse linen shirt that he was wearing.

"You have a finer shirt than this?" Jacques asked as he deftly pulled the folds of the garment so that it fell properly.

"If he hasn't, then I've a silk undershirt he can borrow." Yves looked up to find Christophe leaning against the wooden doorframe.

"I can't..."

Yves began at the same time as Jacques said over him, "*Bon*, that will work very well, you are around the same size at the shoulder and neck, it is the seat and leg that you differ." As he finished speaking, he held out the frock coat behind Yves. "Arms, *s'il vous plait*."

Yves obediently fed first his right arm and then his left into the armholes, and Jacques settled the back onto his shoulders.

"*Bien*." Jacques stood back to look critically at his work. "Just a couple of adjustments to the waistcoat and to take up the cuffs and let down the hem of the coat are needed. Turn slowly, Yves, so we can see the whole picture."

Feeling slightly stunned, Yves revolved slowly on the spot, his arms still held out to the side.

"Jacques, thank you. It's exactly how I described," Christophe praised the tailor who gave a polite nod of acknowledgement. "You'll put the bill on my account?"

"Of course," Jacques replied.

"How much is this costing?" Yves asked, letting his arms drop to his side. "I cannot let you..."

"No," Christophe said firmly before Jacques could speak. "This is a gift."

"It's too much," Yves said weakly, knowing that he was making only a token protest. In the privacy of the townhouse he'd argue against accepting such a generous present, but in front of the tailor he would not embarrass Christophe.

Between them Yves and Jacques removed the new court suit and Yves redressed in his own clothes. Christophe, Yves noted, had not returned to the outer room, but remained in the doorway watching. Yves knew he shouldn't sanction this impropriety and send him from the room, but part of him was enjoying having an appreciative audience as he changed. Jacques, who had obviously long since mastered the art of not seeing things that he shouldn't, simply ignored both of them as he continued with his work.

They left the shop, having agreed that Jacques' manservant would deliver the finished garment to the townhouse tomorrow afternoon, and walked the short distance through the quiet streets to Le brasserie Procope. A sign over the door proudly proclaimed that it was Paris' oldest coffee house.

The ground floor of the coffee house was open plan and given over to irregularly set hand carved wooden tables, each surrounded by several overstuffed, brightly coloured, armchairs. At one end of the room a large stone staircase led to the upper floor, where smaller rooms were available for more intimate discussions between customers. At the back of the room was a long bar, where the coffee was made, and doorway to the kitchen area at the back. Even at shortly after five in the afternoon the ground floor was crowded. As Yves and Christophe stood by the entrance, scanning the room for either a vacant table or friends they could join, the *Maitre d'hôtel* bustled over to them.

"*Bonsoir monsieurs*, are you meeting someone, or do you wish a table for yourselves?"

Before either man could reply a woman spoke from behind them. "They'll be joining my party."

Yves and Christophe turned. The speaker was a tall, middle aged, woman who wore a fashionable pale blue day dress and a darker blue fitted riding jacket. Her hair was covered by a powdered wig, carefully styled with ringlets cascading down past her shoulders.

"*Madame Le Breton*," Yves greeted her with a formal bow. "Christophe, may I introduce *Madame Le Breton*, the wife of my patron. Alexandrine, this is *Monsieur de Valliot*, son of the Baron de Tulle, my companion and pupil.

“*Madame*,” Christophe greeted her with a polite bow. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well, *Monsieur de Valliot*, I have heard much about you from Yves.” She laid her hand fondly on Yves arm as she spoke. Christophe turned towards him and raised an eyebrow. “Oh, all of it good, I assure you,” she said with laugh. “Now, you will join me won’t you? I am hosting a small party in one of the upstairs rooms; I am expecting my husband and several of our friends to join us for dinner and discussion.”

“Christophe? Would that be acceptable?” Yves hoped that Christophe would agree. Yves had long wanted to introduce him to his patron and friends.

“Of course, we’d be delighted to join you,” Christophe responded for them both.

“You are in the blue salon, *Madame*,” the *Maitre d’hôtel* advised. “Upstairs, third door on the right. One of the waiters will be with you shortly.”

“*Merci*,” Alexandrine replied, moving past Yves and Christophe and leading the way up the stairs.

The blue salon was, well, blue. From the wall coverings and upholstery, to the fine porcelain on the table.

At the opposite end of the room, overstuffed chairs were arranged informally and Alexandrine sank down into the nearest, indicating for Christophe and Yves to join her. The waiter quietly entered the room, bearing a large silver tray on which was a decorative porcelain coffee service. Behind him came Yves’ patron, Charles, and with him two other men, both of whom Yves had met before. Yves and Christophe both stood to greet them.

“Yves, dear boy, I didn’t realise you were dining with us this evening,” Charles greeted him even as he bent down and kissed Alexandrine on each cheek before nodding politely to Yves and Christophe, who both gave a formal bow.

Yves said, “Charles, it’s good to see you again. And no, I wasn’t expecting to join you; we arrived at the same time as Alexandrine and she invited us for dinner.”

“Very good, very good.” Charles turned to the other two men. “François, André, this is the young man I am sponsoring at the *Bibliothèque* to assist with

the Encyclopaedia. He is taking a sabbatical at present to act as tutor and companion to the Baron of Tulle's son."

"I believe we met at *Monsieur* de Secondit's home last month," André interrupted with a warm smile. "You spoke with some intensity on the subject of education for the poor."

"Indeed." Yves nodded politely. "Though I fear I may have overstepped slightly with the forcefulness of my argument that night."

"Nonsense, young man." François clapped Yves on the shoulder with unexpected familiarity. "You must stand up for what you believe in and be prepared to defend your position. Now, who is this young man with you?"

"André, François, this is Christophe de Valliot."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all," Christophe said quietly. His tone that was far from his usual confident manner and Yves shot him a concerned look, but Christophe just shook his head.

"Who else are we expecting this evening?" André asked as he lowered himself into a vacant chair. Taking the opportunity, the others did likewise.

"I've invited *Monsieur* Rousseau, but he wasn't sure he could make it. *Madame* de Puisieux, who said she would bring two of her charges, and *Monsieur* d'Ambrose should be here shortly," Alexandrine advised. "Shall we have coffee while we wait?"

The conversation around the dining table was lively. In particular when *Madame* de Puisieux began to speak of her belief that a female was in no way inferior to a male, a subject about which she was in the process of writing a book. The party split fairly evenly on the subject, with Andre, Charles and one of the young women, being the most vocal in their support. It had amused Yves immensely that Alexandrine, who was something of a feminist herself, took the opposing view, supported by François. Yves joined in the lively debate, but at the same time watched Christophe, who had hardly said a word, unless directly addressed, all evening.

After the dessert course, rich cherry compote in a pastry case served with sweet custard, had been cleared away, Yves pushed his chair back and rose to his feet.

"Shall I pour another round of coffee?" he asked the table. When all except Charlotte, the quieter of *Madame* de Puisieux's charges, had accepted the offer he turned to Christophe. "Will you come and help me?"

"Of course." Christophe rose and followed him across to the sideboard.

"Is everything all right?" Yves asked, his words covered by the clinking of the fresh cups as he set them out on the matching saucers.

"Of course."

"You're sure? Only you've barely said a word all evening."

"I'm fine, Yves." Christophe smiled at him rather wickedly. "To be honest, I am having a great deal of fun watching you. I like seeing this side of you outside the classroom, the passionate side of you. It does make me want to find out though, what else you are passionate about."

"Christophe!" Yves exclaimed, glancing round behind him, but no one was close enough to have overheard.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't embarrass you in front of your friends."

"I never thought you would." Yves laid one hand on Christophe's forearm as he spoke. "I was just worried you weren't enjoying yourself."

"I am, truly. I like your friends. I find myself a little out of my depth with some of the subject matter, but it has been a very interesting evening."

It was shortly after ten before the party broke up. As hosts for the evening, Alexandrine and Charles stood at the doorway, seeing their guests out.

"It was a pleasure to see you again, Yves." Alexandrine kissed him on both cheeks before she turned to Christophe. "And to meet you."

"The pleasure was mine, *Madame*." Christophe bowed formally, and Alexandrine laughed as she reached forward to bestow a double kiss, similar to the one she'd given Yves.

"Charles." Yves shook his patron's hand. "Thank you both for a lovely evening."

"You're welcome. Now, hopefully we shall see you again soon."

"I hope so too. Unfortunately I am being forced to attend the Marquis de Guise's Masquerade tomorrow night and will be wanting civilised company soon after to make up for it."

"Forced?"

"He lost a bet," Christophe said dryly.

"Oh dear, never mind Yves, I am sure it won't be as bad as you fear," Alexandrine said sympathetically.

"Of course it won't," Christophe agreed as their coach drew up. "I'll make sure he has a wonderful time."

Yves rose late on Saturday morning, enjoying a solitary breakfast in his rooms before heading to the library for a few hours, to catch up on the progress that had been made compiling the Encyclopaedia. Roped into assisting with some research whilst he was there, he lost track of time and didn't return to the de Valliot's townhouse until well after lunch.

The first thing he saw when he entered his rooms was the suit, carefully placed over the back of the wooden chair in front of his dressing table. A new pressed silk shirt, and the stockings, which were white but with black embroidery that matched the pattern on the waistcoat, were on the seat of the chair. On the dressing table itself sat an off white wig with small close curls and a set of pins to fix it in place.

Yves sunk down on the end of his bed with a sigh. He couldn't see any way of getting out of going to this stupid masquerade, short of running away and hiding. He was sure the whole event was going to be trying for him, not least having to make polite conversation to the other guests, most of whom, if they knew, would look down on him for his background and occupation. Then there was the dancing. Yves' education hadn't included how to waltz and the thought of making a complete sight of himself as he stood on his partners' feet, or worse, fell in the centre of the dance floor filled him with dread.

A knock on the door broke him from his musings. "Come in," he called, and Christophe strode into the room. A servant followed him, carrying a washing basin, water jug, and clean linen towel over one arm.

"Please put those on the end of the dressing table," Christophe ordered, watching as the servant did as he was bidden before withdrawing from the room.

"You've had a good morning?" he asked as the door closed behind the servant.

"Yes, thank you. What about you?"

“*Monsieur* Olivier had me practicing my fencing drills for two hours this morning. I swear one day my right arm will drop off.” Yves smiled at this over dramatic statement as Christophe pulled up one of the armchairs from the far side of the room and dropped into it. “Then I was forced to dine with father and *Madame* Violette, again.”

“More matrimonial suggestions?”

“Oh yes, and instructions on who I should seek out to dance with this evening, and who to avoid. It seems that she is trying to set me up with the Comte de la Rochelle’s eldest daughter, Thérèse, who is a terrible bore. All she cares about is breeding these horrible little white, yappy dogs.” Christophe grimaced theatrically. “There was also a lecture on how it was highly improper for me to be taking my tutor with me to such a high status event.”

“Well, I am more than happy to let you go alone,” Yves suggested with a grin.

“Happily, for once father didn’t agree with her. He thinks that you need to get out more into society, and possibly that your presence might prevent my friends from talking me into doing anything improper. Anyway, they’ve set off to spend the weekend with the court at Versailles; they are not expected back until Monday afternoon.”

“What time do we leave this evening?”

“I’ve organised our carriage for eight, our evening meal for six. I have to nip out and pick up our masks this afternoon.”

“Masks?”

“Well it is a masquerade, of course there will be masks.”

“Surely the Marquis will arrange for suitable discreet masks to be available when we arrive?”

“Of course, but where is the fun in discreet? You want to stand out don’t you?”

“No, definitely not! I want to blend into the background and just get through the evening without incident.”

“It will be fine. I promise you,” Christophe said sincerely.

“We shall see. Now, I am going to rest for a while and then I shall see you for dinner.”

“Very good.” Christophe rose and bowed his head. Yves fell back onto the soft mattress with a theatrical sigh before Christophe had left the room. He couldn’t help but feel the entire night would be a disaster. Never mind that he might be able to prevent Christophe’s friends from dragging him into something improper, Yves worried that with a few glasses of wine he would find himself acting on some of his own improper thoughts about his companion. And he wasn’t sure that those actions wouldn’t be reciprocated, and then where would they be?

The carriage drew to a halt in the queue in front of the high sandstone walls that surrounded the grounds of l’hôtel de Rohan. Sitting stiffly in his seat as they waited to disembark, Yves was growing more uncomfortable by the minute.

“Relax,” Christophe said gently, leaning sideways into Yves’ body. “It’s a masquerade, not an execution.”

Yves’ throat felt dry, yet his hands were clammy. “I think I’d rather go to an execution, even my own,” he replied.

“You’ll be fine.” Christophe’s gloved hand brushed against the satin material of the breeches that covered Yves’ thigh.

There was no time to respond as the carriage door was opened by a liveried footman. Christophe laid a hand on Yves’ shoulder and squeezed gently before stepping down onto the pavement. Yves took a deep steadying breath, picked up his mask from the seat opposite, and followed him out of the carriage.

They passed under the archway entrance to the grounds and followed the other partygoers along the wide walkway, which led to the grand entrance of the *hôtel*. Though it wasn’t fully dark, lit torches had been placed at regular intervals alongside the cobblestones, to light the area.

“Time to put our masks on,” Christophe said pulling Yves to one side, out of the queue of guests waiting to enter. Yves turned the golden feathered creation over in his hands but made no move to put it on. “Here, let me help.” Christophe dropped his own mask to the ground and took Yves’ mask from him. Lifting it, he reached towards Yves’ face and hooked the small clasps into the powdered wig. The mask sat lightly on Yves’ nose, the lower feathers tickling his cheeks. “There you go, Icarus,” Christophe said running his hand

up over the golden feathers that reached above Yves' head. His eyes fixed on Yves'. "Beautiful," Christophe seemed to breathe the word rather than speaking it. Yves felt his cheeks heat and quickly looked away.

Christophe reached down for his own mask, which he settled over his head, attaching it behind the ears. Made of copper beaten to an extremely fine sheet, it had been cut and twisted to represent the burning flames of the sun. The mask covered not only the upper part of Christophe's face but came down over his cheeks. Yves' gaze was drawn to the full pink lips and strong chin, the only part of his face not hidden.

"Ready?" Christophe didn't wait for a reply, turning on his heel and heading for the door, giving Yves no option but to follow.

They gave their names to the doorman and passed into the large, airy entrance hall. Fluted stone columns, painted white and topped with ornate carvings, were placed at regular intervals along the length of the hall. Intricately carved stonework ran around the top of the walls, just below the high, arched, glass ceiling. Gathered around the foot of the *Escalier d'honneur*, the other guests waited to ascend the stairway to the first floor, where the important function rooms of the house were located. The air was heavy with the sweet scents of lavender and orrisroot wig powder, combined with rose, orange flower and jasmine perfumes which most of the women had liberally used to disguise their body odour.

Yves found himself standing in silence next to Christophe, who was talking politely with an elderly woman in a plain black and gold jewelled mask, her hair covered with a tall, powdered wig. As far as he could tell, she was a total stranger. He couldn't help but wonder again what he'd let himself in for.

At the top of the stairs, the guests passed through an arched doorway, which led into the ballroom. At the entrance, where guests would usually have been announced, waiters stood holding silver trays holding glasses of punch. Christophe reached for two, passing one to Yves, as they moved forwards. At the far end of the room, on a small stage, an orchestra was playing a waltz. On the dance floor itself, couples whirled around in the formal dance. Around them an audience of men and women of various ages, all masked and some in highly creative costumes, watched. Occasionally, one would stride onto the dance floor and cut in, leaving the original dancer to return to the edge of the floor. Low settees and chairs had been set out against the walls, most of which were

occupied by the older guests. The room was hot and noisy, and Yves found himself looking anxiously around for an exit.

Christophe and Yves made their way around the room, stopping to talk to other guests as they did. When they reached the far end of the room, Christophe was greeted with enthusiasm by a group of young men of his own age.

“Go join your friends,” Yves urged.

“Come with me?”

Yves eyed Christophe's friends warily. They were much younger than him and appeared in very high spirits. As much as he enjoyed Christophe's company, he found his friends to be extremely trying. “No, you go ahead. I will be fine here. I shall watch the dancing for a while.”

“If you are sure?”

“Yes.” Yves nodded and watched as Christophe disappeared into the crowd.

Yves slowly made his way around the edge of the room again, smiling and nodding whenever anyone caught his eye.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Yves jumped as a young man wearing a brightly coloured mask trimmed with peacock feathers appeared suddenly at his side.

“*Bonsoir*,” Yves said with a formal bow. He tried to step back as the man crowded close to him but his exit route was blocked by an elderly matron, who tapped him on the shoulder with her fan even as she tutted at him in annoyance. “*Pardon*,” he apologised to her quickly.

“I don't believe we've met, I am Pierre des Roches.”

“Yves Lagarde,” Yves replied.

“I don't know the name; your family isn't from Paris?”

“No, but I am here as companion to *Monsieur* Christophe de Valliot.”

“Oh, you're Christophe's Yves. He's told us all about you.” Yves didn't like the tone in Pierre's voice or the way that he was looking him up and down.

“There you have the advantage of me I'm afraid. He hasn't spoken about you at all.” It was a rude thing to say, but Yves didn't really care. Pierre made him feel uncomfortable, as though he was being appraised for something improper. “Will you excuse me?” he asked bluntly, not waiting for a reply as he moved away down the room.

He liberated another glass of wine from a passing footman and quietly joined a mixed group of slightly older couples who stood by the dance floor. After a while he ghosted away to join another set, moving each time further down the room towards the orchestra and watching the dancers each time he stopped.

Eventually he came level with an alcove, in which stood a marble statue of Eros. Slipping quietly in beside the statue he watched the room and wondered how long he must wait before he could find Christophe and beg for them to leave.

"Hello, again." Pierre appeared suddenly in front of him. "Still alone?"

"Pierre," Yves acknowledged with a stiff nod.

"Christophe shouldn't leave you alone like this." Pierre leered as he spoke. "You could get into all sorts of trouble."

"I assure you, I am quite capable of keeping out of trouble," Yves said coldly.

"That's such a pity." Pierre laughed, reaching forwards and stroking his hand down Yves arm. "Getting into trouble can be so much fun."

Yves looked pointedly at Pierre's hand, where it rested over his own, and then up into Pierre's face. From his somewhat smug expression, he was obviously expecting Yves to let it pass rather than making a scene in public. Yves stepped back out of reach and carefully tucked his now free hand behind his back with a glare at Pierre.

"I'm not interested," he said politely but firmly.

"Pity, I think we could have had rather a good time," Pierre said lightly as he turned and walked away.

Deciding that he couldn't spend the entire evening hidden behind a statue, Yves slowly moved back up the room, nodding occasionally to people he thought he recognised. Behind the entrance a large set of doors stood open, leading to a long hallway. The first room on the right contained a large table with a vast array of food upon it. The centrepiece was an interpretation of the l'hôtel de Rohan itself, made out of cake covered in icing and spun sugar. A long sideboard took up most of one wall, upon it a row large glass punchbowls filled with liquor alongside intricately carved ice sculptures. Guests helped themselves, buffet style, before retiring to one of the small tables set out around the room to eat, but he didn't spot Christophe anywhere.

On the opposite side of the corridor was the games room. Four blue baize covered billiard tables took up most of the room, young men played in pairs or foursomes, amongst them Christophe and three of his friends. They didn't notice Yves as he looked in the doorway. At the far end of the room, a number of guests, male and female, sat in small groups, playing cards. From the clink of coins and the occasional glint of silver it appeared that the stakes were modest.

Yves eased out of the doorway unnoticed and kept walking until he reached an open door, which he slipped through and found himself in the formal gardens. To his left, on a small terrace, a string quartet played softly. He walked slowly down the pebbled pathway, away from the house, torches lighting his way. As he passed the flowerbeds, the air was filled with the scent of lavender and roses. At the far end of the pathway a fountain threw water high into the air, from the statue of Venus, which stood at its centre. Sculpted hedges surrounded the gardens, low stone benches hidden in recesses between them. Several couples had taken advantage of the privacy afforded by the shadow of the hedges, the occasional giggle or slap sounding out of the darkness to give them away.

The bench in the last alcove before the fountain was empty, and Yves made his way over to it, sinking down gratefully on the cold, hard surface. Leaning forwards and looking back towards the house, he could see a handful of couples were now dancing on the terrace. A few couples walked about the top end of the garden, some with chaperones just feet behind them. Thankfully though, at this end of the garden, he was alone and hidden in the shadow of the hedge. He reached up and unhooked the feathered mask from his face, dropping it to the seat beside him. He'd already had quite enough for one evening, but Christophe was engaged with his friends and it would be rude to interrupt and ask to leave. Leaning back carefully against the hedge he closed his eyes and simply listened to the sounds of the garden around him.

Yves woke with a start at the sound of someone clearing their throat just in front of him. Slightly dazed, he automatically started to rise to his feet, ready to apologise for his rudeness. A hand pressed lightly on his shoulder, pushing him back down to the bench.

"There you are; I thought you'd run out on me," Christophe said with a lazy smile as he pushed Yves' mask to the far end of the bench and took a seat beside him.

"No, I just needed some air. I was getting overheated in the ballroom."

“And it had nothing to do with des Roches trying to corner you every five minutes and flutter his eyelashes at you?”

“You saw that then?” Yves shook his head and sighed. “I know he’s your friend, but...”

“But those eyelashes are a sight to behold, not to mention that vulgar beauty spot he’s plastered on his cheek. I suppose we should be thankful that his father took him to task after the last ball and made him promise that he wouldn’t wear a gown.”

Putting his hands behind him on the bench and leaning back he looked up into the sky. “It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?” he continued as he stretched his legs out in front of him. Yves tilted his own head back to look up.

“Yes, it is,” he replied. Above them a crescent moon hung low in the sky; stars shone brightly in the darkness. Christophe shifted slightly beside him, and Yves jumped as Christophe’s hand unexpectedly stroked gently down the side of his face.

“Not as beautiful as you.” Christophe’s voice had turned husky.

“Christophe, what...” Yves tried to pull backwards, but he was already leaning against the hedge and the fine strands of his wig caught in the branches, effectively immobilising him. Christophe turned towards him, placing one leg over Yves’ calves and trapping him in his seat. Leaning forward, he snaked his hand round the back of Yves’ neck.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Christophe repeated, sliding across from his seat so he was straddling Yves’ lap.

“What are you doing?” Yves whispered.

“This.” Christophe leant in closer and covered Yves’ mouth with his own.

Christophe’s lips were warm and soft against his own. Shocked at the sudden onslaught, he found himself responding. In the back of his mind he could almost hear his rational voice saying, *‘no, stop. This is wrong’*. But that voice was overruled by the rest of his body.

Without further thought, his arms slid round Christophe’s waist and pulled him closer. Yves’ mouth pressed back harder, his tongue darting out and tracing the seam of Christophe’s lips, demanding entrance. As Christophe yielded, Yves sunk himself into the kiss, heedless of the sudden painful pull of the pins

which had held his wig in place as it detached from his head to hang like a dead rat on the branch behind him.

Breaking apart for air, Yves slid one hand up Christophe's back and loosened the lace jabot around his neck before trailing kisses along his jaw. Christophe whimpered slightly as Yves swirled his tongue lightly around, tasting the skin just below his ear. Christophe's hand moved up into Yves hair and grasped tightly as he tipped his own head to one side. Taking that as an invitation, Yves continued his way down the column of Christophe's neck, alternating feather light kisses, with sharp nips and deeper kisses that pulled hard against the fragile, pale skin and leaving marks in their wake.

Yves jumped as Christophe's other hand worked its way between them and palmed the length of his prick, which was hard and pressing against the placket of his breeches. Yves slid the hand that was still around Christophe's waist down to the upper curves of his backside and pulled him forwards, trapping Christophe's hand between them. Christophe bucked against him, increasing the pressure on both their groins. Yves' body responded, his hips jerking him upwards. Christophe pulled on his hair, leaning down and claiming Yves' mouth with renewed passion. Together they squirmed on the hard stone bench, lost to everything around them.

Fingers fumbling at the buttons of his breeches made Yves pull back, quickly disengaging his hand from Christophe's arse and straightening his legs so that Christophe slid away from his lap. Christophe moaned with frustration as he rose to his feet.

"Yves," he whined, his hand going to the front of his breeches and pressing hard against his erection.

"Not here," Yves said softly as he rose to his feet.

"Home?" Christophe asked hopefully.

As Yves nodded his agreement, Christophe bent and snatched up their masks in one hand. With the other he grabbed hold of Yves' and tugged him forward across the gardens, leaving Yves' wig still dangling from the hedge. Dodging around the edge of the waterfall, they rushed along the path, occasionally crossing the carefully planted flower beds, and ducked around the side of the house. By the time they reached the main gate, they were both slightly out of breath. Releasing his grip on Yves' hand, Christophe approached one of the footmen and asked for their carriage to be brought round. Christophe

was bouncing impatiently on the balls of his feet and casting longing glances at Yves, who was hard pressed not to grab him and continue where they'd left off.

The footman barely had a chance to open the door and lower the footplate before Christophe all but pushed Yves into the carriage. As the driver snapped reins and as the horses moved off at a sedate walk, Christophe launched himself at Yves. Cupping Yves face with his hands, he looked deeply into Yves eyes before bringing their mouths together into a long, fevered kiss. Yves hands roamed freely around Christophe's body, unfastening the buttons of his waistcoat, pulling the fine silk shirt out of the top of his breeches, and sliding underneath. Slowly he caressed the soft skin that covered the defined muscles of Christophe's abdomen. One hand reached around to the small of his back, fingers splayed across his spine, while the other slipped lower, digits playing around the indented navel and moving onwards, tracing the trail of hair that grew coarser the further down it went.

As the carriage slowed and came to a halt outside the front gate of the townhouse, Yves pulled back and broke their embrace. They were both breathing heavily, their clothes completely askew.

"Here," Yves said, leaning forward as he started to tuck in Christophe's shirt and refasten his waistcoat. Christophe smiled lazily and allowed Yves to straighten his clothes before turning to his own. He was just smoothing down the front of his breeches, and hoping his rudely straining prick wouldn't be noticed, when the footman opened the door. Yves pushed the strands of his hair that had come loose from their bindings back behind his ears while he tried to compose himself, then stepped down onto the footpath and made his way towards the house, Christophe following close behind him.

A butler opened the front door as they approached. "Good evening, sirs, did you have a pleasant time?" he queried as he let them in.

"*Oui, merci,*" Christophe replied politely.

"Do you require anything from the kitchen before you retire?"

"There is wine in our rooms?" Christophe asked, and the footman nodded. "In that case, no, thank you. It has been a long day; I think we shall retire straight away. Please ask that we are not disturbed before ten tomorrow morning."

"Of course, *monsieur,*" the butler replied with a bow before shutting the door behind them and returning to his post.

“Come along, Yves.” Christophe strode purposefully across the hallway towards the west wing of the house, leaving Yves to follow behind him.

Safely out of sight of the butler, Christophe reached back and took Yves by the hand, hurrying him down the corridor towards the staircase that led to his suite. That brief walk from the carriage to the house had given Yves time to have second thoughts. Whilst part of him wanted to take Christophe to bed, to worship his body and make him explode with pleasure, another part of him quietly reminded him that this was wrong. Christophe was his pupil, he was employed to be his companion, and to take him to bed would be a breach of his father's trust in the position he had given him. And it wasn't only the ethics of the situation; if found out, the disgrace could completely ruin Christophe's prospects, not to mention that they could be arrested.

“We can't,” Yves said stopping suddenly and grabbing hold of the decorative newel post. Christophe whirled round on the second step. Leaning forwards, he hooked his free hand behind Yves' head and pulled him closer.

“We are,” Christophe said with determination, his breath ghosting across Yves' lips before he brought his mouth down on Yves'.

The kiss stole Yves' breath. Hard, demanding, and passionate. This time, it was Christophe who took the lead, his tongue pushing between Yves' lips as he tried to speak, invading behind his teeth, and stroking against the roof of his mouth. Yves had no choice but to lose himself in the kiss, his own tongue duelling with Christophe's as they stood at the foot of the stairs. Christophe's hands tangled in Yves' hair, tightening and pulling against the roots. Yves hooked his arms around Christophe and pulled him closer. With the difference in height caused by the stairs, Christophe's groin pressed against Yves' stomach, the hard rod of his erection tenting the fall front of his breeches. Yves' own prick stood completely to attention, painfully hard in his small clothes.

Pulling apart, Christophe took Yves by the hand. “Come on,” he said, giving a gentle tug. They walked up at a sedate pace for the first flight, but as soon as they turned to the second Christophe sped up, until they were running up the rest of the way.

Christophe's rooms were on the third floor of the west wing of the house. Pushing open the door, Christophe led Yves into a stylishly decorated sitting room. No sooner was the door shut behind him than Yves found himself spun around and pinned against its hard wood, caged by Christophe's body.

Christophe's face was flushed, his eyes sparkling. Wisps of his hair were escaping from under the powdered wig he wore. His head was tilted slightly upwards, accentuating the long line of his neck, normally hidden by a carefully tied cravat. Small, dark bruises were beginning to blossom on the pale skin where Yves had applied pressured kisses.

"What do you want?" Yves voice sounded rough.

"Take me to bed?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, dear God, yes. I've wanted you for weeks."

"I want you too," Yves admitted.

"Then, please, what are you waiting for?"

"Have you done this before?"

"Yes, no, some." Christophe's face flushed as he spoke.

"Tell me," Yves coaxed, bringing his mouth to Christophe's neck and licking upwards from his shoulder to behind his ear.

"I've been pleased by someone else's hand." Christophe's skin pimpled beneath his tongue as he circled the tip just below his ear.

"And did you return the favour?" Yves bit down gently on the fleshy earlobe, making Christophe tremble.

"No—I—he, we didn't want to get caught."

"Would you like me to do the same thing? Take you in hand?" Yves continued to nibble and lick his way back down Christophe's neck

"Yes," Christophe breathed the word.

"What else would you like to do?" Yves bit down heavily on the cord of muscle at the base of Christophe's neck.

Christophe gave a small yelp but didn't answer. Instead he surged forwards, his hard body pressing tightly against Yves'. Christophe's thigh ground against Yves' groin, the pressure only serving to send Yves' own need higher. Tilting his head down, Yves captured Christophe's mouth with his own even as his hands moved up and started to unpin the wig, freeing Christophe's hair so it floated loose around his head. Christophe groaned into Yves' mouth as he

tangled his fingers in the freed strands and tugged gently against his skull. Yves bent and shifted slightly to one side, lining up the plackets of their breeches, before surging forwards away from the door with his hips. Christophe pressed against him, at the same time breaking their kiss.

“Yves,” he whispered hoarsely. “I’m not going to last.”

Yves growled in response and pushed Christophe backwards. He steered him across the room with a hand still in his hair, until his backside met the rolled end of the chaise longue. Releasing his grip, Yves pushed Christophe’s frock coat off his shoulders and tackled the buttons of his waistcoat, which quickly followed the outer garment to the floor. Under Christophe’s appreciative gaze, Yves stripped himself down to his shirtsleeves and breeches before reaching for him again. Christophe’s hands gripped the furniture as Yves unbuttoned the fall front of his breeches, easing both of them and the small clothes beneath them down over his hips to his knees. Christophe’s hard dick strained upwards from a nest of dark hair; the foreskin had rolled back to reveal the glans, a bead of pre-cum leaking from the slit. Yves reached forward and stroked his hand down the erect shaft, fondling the lightly furred ball sac that hung heavily beneath it.

“Want to see you too.” Christophe reached forward with one hand, but Yves stepped back.

“Patience,” he said with a wicked grin, though his hand went to the front of his own breeches as he spoke. He didn’t have the patience to draw this out, and while he undid the fastenings at his waist, he toed off his shoes, and then stripped off his breeches, leaving himself standing in just his stockings and shirt. His own prick stood out from his groin, peeking from under the hem of his top.

Yves stepped forward and pressed himself against Christophe, grinding their hard, naked cocks together. Christophe reached out and held onto Yves’ shoulders, their mouths fused once more in an impassioned kiss. When Christophe’s hips began to rock rhythmically against his, Yves pulled away and spun Christophe around, bending him forwards over the back of the chaise longue.

Palming his own prick, he spread the pre-cum leaking from his own slit over the glans before stepping up behind Christophe, pushing between his thighs.

"Close your legs," he growled as he placed one hand on Christophe's hip, the other on his shoulder, pinning him in place.

Yves began to thrust back and forth in the hot press of Christophe's thighs. He could feel the slight scratch of the coarse hairs against his shaft. Each time the exposed sensitive tip of his glans hit Christophe's ball sac it sent a jolt through him, heightening his arousal. With each thrust, Christophe groaned and whimpered.

"Harder, faster," he babbled, and Yves obediently picked up speed, at the same time grabbing at Christophe's hair and tugging.

Christophe reached out and gripped the carved wood at the back of the chaise with one hand, his knuckles whitening as he hung on. With his other hand he reached below him and began to stroke himself.

"*Fuck!*" Yves exclaimed, rising onto his tiptoes and gripping tighter to Christophe's hip. His pelvis slapped against the globes of Christophe's arse, his own balls starting to tighten as they prepared for release. Christophe's hand sped up to match Yves' new pace.

"*S'te plait, s'te plait, s'te plait,*" Christophe chanted.

Giving a final hard thrust, Yves surged forwards and decorated Christophe's balls with his spend. With a cry Christophe followed him, coming over his own fist in messy spurts.

Yves collapsed heavily over Christophe's back, panting for breath. Beneath him, Christophe shuddered. For a while neither man moved. When Christophe began to wriggle, Yves pulled himself upright, disengaging his now limp dick from between Christophe's thighs as he stepped back. Christophe still lay slumped over the end of the chaise; Yves winced slightly at the clearly marked handprint over his hip.

"Are you all right?" he asked

"Hmmm," Christophe muttered sleepily.

"Hey!" Yves cracked his palm lightly across his upturned arse. Christophe stood upright and turned to face Yves, a tired smile on his face. "Are you all right?" Yves repeated.

"Yes, oh yes. Thank you."

Yves laughed as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Christophe. "Oh, no, really, I should be the one thanking you." Searching out

Christophe's mouth with his own, he kissed him slowly. "We should clean up and get to bed," he said after they pulled apart.

"Will you stay with me?"

"For a while, yes, I'd like to hold you."

Christophe smiled as he led Yves through to his bedroom, their clothes still scattered around the sitting room floor.

As he descended the stairs from his rooms the next morning, Yves' thigh muscles ached, reminding him of the unaccustomed exercise of the night before. The house was quiet, and his footsteps echoed round the cavernous hallway as he crossed to the dining room and slipped through the open doorway. A single servant stood by the sideboard, which held ornate silver baskets filled with a selection of pastries and breads beside dishes of ivory butter and dark cherry preserve. At one end stood a decorative tea service, next to which was a rather plainer pot with a large dark wooden hand on one side, which held hot chocolate.

"*Bonjour*," Yves greeted the servant politely, and received a slight bow in response. "I'll serve myself, thank you," he added as he moved to the fully set table and lifted a small porcelain plate and cup. He filled the plate with a selection of the pastries before moving to the chocolate pot. Holding the handle he tipped it forward and watched as the thick dark liquid flowed slowly out the narrow spout into the fine china cup.

The long windows, which ran from floor to ceiling, at the end of the room were open. A fresh breeze was coming in from the garden, bringing with it the scent of honeysuckle from the terrace just outside. Yves carried his breakfast through to the garden and sank down into one of the decorative wrought iron chairs around a small matching table.

Idly, he broke up a crescent shape *kipferl* roll, its poppy seed covering spilling through the gaps in the table top, and dipped the pieces into the hot chocolate before eating them. He'd disposed of two rolls in this fashion before he heard the sound of voices behind him. Rising, he took his cup back into the dining room to refill it.

"Good morning, Yves," Christophe greeted him with a broad smile.

“Christophe,” Yves acknowledged with a formal polite nod of his head, which made Christophe frown. Yves shook his head slightly, his eyes darting to the servant still standing by the sideboard. “I am taking breakfast on the terrace.” Yves moved to refresh his cup of chocolate. “If you’d care to join me?”

“Thank you, Yves, that would be very pleasant.” Christophe picked up a couple of rolls and spread them thickly with butter and jam. Holding them in his hand, he frowned at the sideboard until the servant calmly and efficiently bought him a plate from the table. Yves shook his head with a concealed smile and headed back out to the terrace whilst the servant poured Christophe a cup of tea.

Yves settled back into his chair and watched a small garden bird peck at the dropped poppy seeds under the table. It flew off quickly as Christophe stepped through the window. The servant followed him, carrying his breakfast, which he set down on the table. Christophe chose the chair closest to the one in which Yves sat. Neither spoke until the servant had retreated back into the dining room.

“Did you sleep well?” Yves asked softly.

“I did, but I wished you’d stayed. I missed you when I woke.”

“It wouldn’t have been proper.”

“Proper?” Christophe raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“You know what I mean. If your valet had discovered us, it would have been all over the house, if not the neighbourhood, before midday. Then how long would it be before the news got back to your father?”

“*Mon père* would hardly have been in a position to say anything. After all, while his wife stays in Tulle, he lives openly with his mistress in Paris.”

“Not the point,” Yves said, shaking his head. “Aside from the scandal it would cause, firstly, it is a breach of trust. I am his employee and you are his son. And secondly, well, I am not the right sex for a mistress. We should not have done it.”

“You regret it?” Christophe’s face fell, and he pushed his plate away towards the centre of the table.

“No, Christophe. That wasn’t what I said,” Yves said gently. “I don’t regret what happened, but it was wrong.”

“Why? Why was it wrong?” Christophe asked hotly. “After all, you were only saying the other night that people should be free to chose their own path, to love where they wish.”

“I did say that, and I do believe it. But those are ideals, what we should strive for. They are not the reality of how we live today.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you think it was wrong.”

“Christophe,” Yves sighed. “I am older than you, in a position of authority over you. It would be said that I led you astray, corrupted you.”

“Really? Because that isn’t the way I remember it happening.”

“It would be how it was presented. This may sound selfish, but should your father find out then I fear he would terminate my employment immediately, and even with my patron, I would struggle to keep my position with the library, or find another job. Reputation is everything after all.”

“Reputation be damned! Yves, I want you. Not just as a teacher, but as a friend, and yes, as a lover.”

“Christophe, I—” Yves broke off as the butler slipped through the window.

“Excuse me, *Monsieur* Christophe, but you have a caller. He was most insistent on seeing you immediately. I have put him in the morning room.”

“Thank you, Henri, did he give you a name?” Christophe asked rising to his feet.

“No, *Monsieur*.”

“Very well, I will go see him.”

Abandoning the rest of his breakfast, Yves rose to his feet and followed Christophe out the room and across the main entranceway of the townhouse.

A dark haired man, dressed in a brown court suit with cream waistcoat and undershirt, stood by the fireplace, admiring the gilt framed picture above it.

“*Bonjour*,” Christophe greeted him politely, bowing as the man turned towards them. Yves followed suit with a stiff formal bow, remaining standing just behind Christophe. “May I be of assistance?”

“Christophe Philippe de Valliot?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Christophe replied

"I am Aubrey de Carville, I believe you know my sister, Charlotte?"

"I'm sorry, *Monsieur* de Carville, I do not think that is the case," Christophe replied.

"You deny that you know her, yet she assures me that you promised last night that you would speak to me today about your betrothal."

"Betrothal?" Christophe's voice rose with surprise. "I am not promised to anyone, let alone your sister."

"My sister would not lie to me. She assured me that you were secretly affianced last night, when I caught her coming in from the gardens at the Marquis de Guise's masquerade in a state of dishevelment."

"I was not in the gardens with your sister last night," Christophe interrupted with a glance towards Yves, who was fully aware whom Christophe had been with. Aubrey continued as if Christophe had not spoken.

"Luckily, I was able to get her to our carriage without being seen so that her honour, and yours, was not compromised. But I must insist that your engagement is announced forthwith, and the marriage preparations put into place urgently. "

"Engagement? Marriage? I am sorry *Monsieur* de Carville, I must repeat, I do not know your sister, and I have most certainly not entered into any agreement with her regarding matrimony." Christophe was shaking his head as he spoke.

"My sister would not lie to me!" Aubrey said hotly.

"Well, she is certainly being less than truthful. I was not with your sister last night, or any other night."

"But you do not deny you were in the garden with someone?"

"No, I do not. I will not reveal who that person was, but I can assure you it was most definitely not your sister."

"I do not believe you," Aubrey said bluntly. "You have dallied with my sister, made her false promises, and now you deny even knowing her. You have destroyed her chance of making a decent marriage for a frolic in the garden. You have shamed her and you have insulted her honour and that of my family."

"I've done no such thing!" Christophe was almost shouting.

"I challenge you to prove that you speak the truth." Aubrey pulled off his left glove as he spoke.

"Now, there is no need for this," Yves began, in a vain attempt to diffuse the situation.

"No, I will have the satisfaction." He threw the glove at Christophe's feet. "I challenge you to a duel; pick up the challenge *Monsieur* de Valliot, lest you be thought a coward as well as a dishonourable knave."

Yves knew that Christophe couldn't tell Aubrey the truth, why he couldn't have been the one to dishonour his sister. Yves desperately wanted to explain the situation, but for all his education he couldn't find the words, at least not without completely destroying Christophe's own reputation. Even if he could, would he be believed, the word of a lowly tutor over that of a woman of noble birth and good breeding?

Before he could say anything, Christophe bent down and retrieved the glove, handing it back to its owner. "When, and where?"

"Tonight, at sunset, île des Cygnes."

"Weapons?"

"Pistols."

"No," Yves interrupted firmly. "I believe, that as you challenged, Christophe gets to choose the weapon. In which case may I suggest, the sabre. After all, we are not fighting to the death. Shall we say to first blood?"

"Who are you to involve yourself in this?" Aubrey asked rudely.

"I am Yves Lagarde, I am Christophe's companion and tutor, and I believe I shall be his second for this duel, if, of course, you insist on going through with the whole ridiculous charade."

"It is neither ridiculous nor a charade. My family's honour is at stake. Should I win, I expect *Monsieur* de Valliot to do the honourable thing and marry my sister," Aubrey said stiffly. "Sabres it is. Till sunset." He nodded and strode out the room.

Christophe collapsed down in to the chair and buried his head in his hands. Leaving him to himself, Yves followed Aubrey to the door and watched as the butler ushered him out of the house. Signalling for him to come over, he ordered a small glass of Cognac and two coffees to be brought to the morning room before returning to Christophe.

"What do I do?" Christophe asked looking up from his hands.

"You have two choices, you ignore the challenge and *Monsieur* de Carville will ensure that everyone in society knows what his sister has told him you did, or you go to île des Cygnes tonight, accept the challenge and prove that you didn't."

"I might not win."

"You can win. Did you not look closely at our visitor? He was running to flab. I doubt that he is used to handling a sabre, he certainly won't have received the training that *Monsieur* Olivier has put you through."

"Pistols would have been easier."

"A faster death maybe, but with a sabre the odds are more in your favour."

"Of course, duelling is illegal, and if we get caught, then the outcome matters not, because we shall both be in gaol."

"It is highly unlikely that at sundown we will be disturbed on île des Cygnes."

"I am not sure if that's a good thing or not!" Christophe exclaimed unhappily.

The door opened to admit Henri, carrying a tray of the requested drinks. After he set it on the sideboard, Yves picked up the glass of Cognac and pressed it into Christophe's hand before settling on one of the other chairs.

"Are you sure you don't know Charlotte de Carville?"

"Absolutely! You doubt me?"

"No, of course not," Yves said, reaching out with one hand and laying it on Christophe's knee in a conciliatory gesture. "I am just struggling to understand why she named you."

"Chance? Maybe she saw us and knows that I can't admit who I was with."

"Possibly, and obviously she had been out there with someone she shouldn't have been."

"Dammit, Yves! What if I lose and she traps me into marriage? I think I'd rather be run through with a sabre than marry a woman."

"Don't be so dramatic Christophe, it won't come to that."

"You can't be sure. I must fight for my life it seems."

Yves rolled his eyes at Christophe's statement and watched as he swiftly downed the contents of the glass, wincing at the burn as it hit the back of his throat. Rising to his feet, he began to pace the floor, hands clasped behind his back. Yves sat back in the chair, replaying the events from the garden the night before.

"I think we are missing something here," Yves said eventually.

"I am still at a loss to understand how she came to pick on me as her companion in the garden."

"Charlotte, Charlotte. Are you sure you know no one of that name? It seems familiar."

"Maybe it is not someone I know, but someone you know."

"If that were the case, why did she not name me as her intended?"

"No disrespect, Yves." Christophe stopped pacing and looked Yves up and down before smiling wickedly. "While I find you unbelievably attractive and would elope with you in a heartbeat, let's face it, you are hardly suitable marriage material for one such as de Carville."

"I suppose I am not, but I still say it makes no sense. You must know her, or a close friend of hers."

"No, really, I can't recall anyone of that name and my friends are virtually all male. The places we go do not encourage female customers, or at least, not of the type that this Charlotte must be."

"Do any of your friends have younger sisters? Cousins maybe? Were you introduced to anyone last night?"

"I met a good many people, but once I'd done a round of the ballroom I retired to the game room to make a foursome for billiards with Jean-Jacques, Armand and Denis. There were a few women at the card tables, but they were all much older matrons. What about you? You were in the ballroom for much longer than I."

"Yes, hiding behind a statue and trying to go unnoticed."

"You hid behind a statue? Why on earth did you do that?"

"To avoid Pierre des Roches," Yves said dryly. "He's a very determined young man, but I am not one for the painted, simpering type. Each time I

seemed to lack for someone to talk to he was at my elbow. After I'd finished speaking to *Madame de Puisieux*, who I have to admit I was surprised to find in attendance, I slipped into an alcove behind a rather good statue of Eros."

"I wish I could have seen that." Christophe laughed, and Yves couldn't help but smile back at him. Suddenly Christophe stopped laughing. "*Madame de Puisieux*, the two girls she had with her at Le brasserie Procope, what were their names?"

"Her charges? Helene—" Yves paused, "—Charlotte." Christophe spoke at the same time.

Christophe looked hopefully at Yves. "That must be her. We should go round and confront her, get her to retract her slanderous comments, tell her brother the truth."

"No, we'd never get an audience with her," Yves said reasonably. "I am pretty certain her brother will have her confined to her rooms and turning up to their home may result in them calling the *gendarmes*."

"You're right." Christophe's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Yes, I am, but while we might not get to speak to her, I have an idea."

"What? What do you intend to do?"

"Trust me." Yves rose to his feet and moved over to Christophe, wrapping his arms around him in a tight embrace and risking a lover's kiss to his lips. "Ask Henri to arrange a carriage for me whilst I go and change."

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to someone who might help. I suggest in the meantime, you practice with the sabre. Just in case."

The sky had darkened by the time the carriage drew to a halt on rue de l'Université. Christophe and Yves disembarked in silence, Yves carrying a large wooden case containing two sabres. They walked slowly down the street and crossed the pont des Cygnes to the island itself. Beneath the bridge the swans that gave the island its name drifted on the current of the Seine like pale ghosts. There was a chill in the air, not unusual for a September night. Above them clouds obscured any sight of the moon or stars.

The only building on the island was a lodge, where woodsmen stored logs for use as firewood during the winter months. Beside the lodge was a clearing between the trees, where Aubrey de Carville stood waiting for them dressed in just his breeches and shirt. With him was an older, broader man, who carried his outer garments over one arm.

"Good evening," Yves said calmly, walking in front of Christophe into the clearing.

"You came then."

"Of course." Observing proprieties, Yves gave a formal bow, which both Aubrey and his man responded to automatically. "We have brought the weapons for the duel, if your man would care to come and make his choice for you whilst *Monsieur de Valliot* prepares himself?" Yves laid down the wooden box he carried and unclipped the clasp, opening it to expose the two blades which lay side by side in dark red velvet.

"Go ahead, Jules," Aubrey ordered. As Jules stepped up to the weapons, Yves turned back to Christophe, who was beginning to unbutton his overcoat.

"I'd rather be undressing you in other circumstances," Yves said quietly. Christophe gave a tight smile but didn't respond. Quickly they removed Christophe's outer garments, Yves folding them neatly and placing them on the ground.

"You have chosen?" Yves asked as he returned to the centre of the clearing, where Jules was weighing a blade in each hand.

"Yes, this one." He slashed the blade in his right hand in the air before returning the other blade to the box. Returning to Aubrey, he reversed the blade and offered the sabre handle first. Yves picked up the box containing the remaining sabre and carried it back to Christophe.

"Ready?" Yves asked once Christophe held the weapon; he only received a nod in reply.

Yves led Christophe back to the centre of the clearing, where Jules stood with Aubrey behind him.

"First to draw blood is the winner, no forfeits," Jules instructed

"Agreed. We withdraw to the edge of the clearing while they fight. Three minutes only, then if there is no winner we break for a further three before resuming."

“Agreed.”

The two seconds turned, and Yves laid his hand briefly on Christophe's arm as he walked past.

The duellists stood in the centre of the clearing, a couple of metres apart, facing each other. Christophe's blade hung loosely in his right hand, whereas Aubrey gripped the handle tightly, the blade at ninety degrees from his body.

“*En garde*,” Jules called from the beyond the fighters, who both raised their weapons and took up the correct stance. As they both lunged forwards a woman's voice rang out sharply from behind Yves.

“*Arrêtez!*” The two men stopped short, their blades crashing harmlessly against each other, before they turned to where *Madame* le Breton had entered the clearing. Trailing behind her, Yves recognised the frightened looking young woman as Charlotte de Carville.

“*Madame*, what is the meaning of this?” Aubrey asked dropping his blade and rushing over to his sister. Pulling her away from *Madame* le Breton and placing a protective arm around her shoulder.

“I am here to stop this duel, and to prevent you from making a huge mistake.”

“To stop me from making a mistake?” Aubrey looked grossly offended by Alexandrine's words. “I assure you there is no mistake here on my part. I am defending the honour of my sister, my family.”

“Your sister's honour is not yours to defend, *Monsieur*. What she chooses to do with her honour, or her body, is entirely up to her.” Alexandrine spoke bluntly, making Charlotte flush with embarrassment. “What would this duel achieve? To force two people who barely know each other into a marriage for the sake of propriety and the family name? Did you even question what your sister told you?” The question was clearly rhetorical as she continued without waiting for an answer. “And what if there was a slip of the blade, these are real weapons gentlemen. One of you could easily have died. What then of your sister's honour, the name of your family?”

“*Madame*, my sister would not lie to me,” Aubrey said coldly.

Alexandrine simply shook her head and turned to Charlotte. “The truth this time, my dear,” she said softly.

"I wasn't with *Monsieur de Valliot*." Her voice reminded Yves of how very young she must be, barely sixteen he guessed. "I don't even know who he was, I was dancing you see, and I was passed from partner to partner. After a waltz, my partner asked me to walk in the garden with him to cool down. I'd had rather too much to drink, and it seemed a good idea, so I agreed."

"You don't even know his name?"

"No, when you caught me coming back in and challenged me, I said the name that came first to my mind. You see I'd seen him, with his friend there." She pointed to Yves. "They were on the bench on the opposite side of the fountain. I didn't know two men could."

"So you see," Alexandrine cut in suddenly, "you were about to fight a duel with the wrong man. *Monsieur de Valliot* had nothing to do with your sister. I would suggest that you forget this duel and take your sister home. Perhaps if you don't want her making such mistakes again, you should keep a closer eye on her. Though my recommendation would be to let her make her own mistakes and help her learn from them, not fight her battles for her."

"Thank you, *Madame*," Aubrey said stiffly. "I will take your advice. *Monsieur de Valliot*." He turned to Christophe and gave a curt nod, ignoring Yves completely.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said tearfully to Christophe, who smiled and shook his head at her.

"Come Charlotte, let's go home." Still with his arm around her, he walked towards the edge of the clearing. Jules, who had silently gathered up Aubrey's clothes, followed them into the darkness of the trees.

"Thank you, Alexandrine," Yves said with a smile at his patron's wife once they were alone.

"You are welcome. She had no idea what her brother intended, and I have to say, was quite horrified that she could potentially be married off to someone who suffers from 'the English disease'."

"Ah, yes, about that."

Alexandrine put her hand up to stop him.

"It is not uncommon, Yves, you are not the first I have known who prefers his own sex to the fairer one. However, these things are not well thought of in

polite society, and I fear that young Charlotte will spread her new found knowledge around.”

“I should leave in that case. I wouldn’t want to damage Christophe’s prospects. If not back to the library, then I can always return to my family’s business.” Alexandrine raised an eyebrow at him as he spoke, a slight smirk playing across her lips.

“And you propose to do this without a thought to what I might want?” Christophe said abruptly from behind him, where he was buttoning up his waistcoat.

“But what of your reputation?” Yves whirled round as he spoke. “Your father will not permit me to continue teaching you. I doubt he’ll even let you see me again.”

“I won’t let him do that. I will leave with you.”

“What, so we can both live in poverty? Or do you have a trade you can take up that you’ve not told me about? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I am not being ridiculous.”

“Gentleman,” Alexandrine interrupted with gentle firmness. “I may have a solution to your problem. Obviously, you need a break from society here in town and you don’t want to be apart. So, when your father returns from Versailles tomorrow, Charles and I will call upon him and make a suggestion. It is not unusual for young men of Christophe’s standing to take a tour of Europe with a companion to take in the culture of other countries. A year or so should do it, by the time you return someone else will be the centre of society’s gossip mill and you and your indiscretions will long since have been forgotten about.”

“You think you can persuade my father to agree?”

“Oh, dear boy, believe me, I can be extremely persuasive when I want,” she said with a husky laugh. “Now, I must return home. There is no need to escort me to my carriage, my bodyguard is waiting just within the trees.”

“Thank you, Alexandrine, I am not sure how we shall ever repay you,” Yves said with a polite bow.

“No payment is necessary.” She swept up to him and kissed him with familiarity on each cheek then moved on to do the same to Christophe before fading into the trees.

"So, you feel like seeing the sights of Europe with me?" Christophe asked as he walked up to Yves.

"You'd get into terrible trouble without me," Yves replied taking him into his arms and kissing him soundly.

Epilogue

Two years later

In the late afternoon the hillside meadow lay in the shadow cast by Mount Vesuvius, which loomed above the ruined city of Pompeii. In the distance below them, the sea of the Bay of Naples seemed to almost sparkle in the sunlight. Yves and Christophe lay side by side on the woollen blanket which covered the prickly, dry grass, the remnants of their picnic at their feet.

In the privacy the open space afforded, they had removed their top coats and cravats, their waistcoats were unbuttoned and the linen undershirts creased and rumpled as a result of their after lunch activities. They held hands, their fingers twined together like a complicated knot with no beginning and no end.

"So, where next, *mon cher ami*?" Yves asked.

"I'm not sure." Christophe rolled onto his side to face him.

"Well, we've visited London, Madrid and Vienna, been climbing in the Alps, seen Pisa, Venice and Rome on our way here. There are a lot of countries left to explore. We could even go and visit the new world."

"I think I want a home."

"To Tulle? Or to Paris?"

"No, not go home. I want a home, with you. We've travelled so much in the last two years, I find myself wanting to set down roots."

"Oh." Yves rolled up onto his side, their faces only inches away from each other. "A home?"

"Yes. I want us to have our own place, a villa, here if you'd like. Somewhere we could sit out in the evening and watch the sun set, before going to bed, together."

"Yes, I'd like that too," Yves admitted softly.

“We should have a vineyard,” Christophe declared.

“And how do you plan for us to do this?” Yves smiled fondly at his lover.

“I was talking to one of the old men in the tavern last night,” Christophe admitted. “He was telling me that he has no sons, just a daughter. She is engaged to a merchant in Sorrento who has his own business and has invited him to live with them when they marry.”

“And this man wouldn’t happen by any chance to have a vineyard?” Yves raised an eyebrow at Christophe as he asked.

“Well, yes. He also has a villa, it’s just a modest property but it would suit us well. The vineyard is a going concern. I have the money from my family to purchase it, and after a few years, if we put in the work, it will pay for itself.”

“You appear to be very set on this.”

“Well yes, I thought it was a good opportunity. For us, for our future.”

Yves reached over and pulled Christophe into his arms, their bodies fitting together with an ease borne of familiarity. On the slope of an Italian hillside, where they would make their home and run a successful vineyard, they celebrated their love.

The End

Author Bio

K works by day in the legal profession, at the insistence of the many critters that let her live in their house on the understanding that she provides them with food, warmth and entertainment. When they allow her any spare time, she reads (anything that is put in front of her), knits (mainly socks), bakes (usually cupcakes), and occasionally scribbles stories. She hopes one day to be allowed a large shotgun and a decent recipe for rabbit stew to deal with the damn plot bunny!

Contact & Media Info

[Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THAT DAY IN SPRING

By BJ Sheppard

Photo Description

Two men embrace lovingly. The taller of the men holds back tears as he grips his hand into the others long, dark hair. His face is etched with emotion, resting his chin in the crook of the others neck, his beard rough from lack of care. His eyes are haunted, behind them a story that has sparked a great sense of feeling inside him; his lips quiver, holding back the words he needs to say.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two men have known each other since they were teenagers, and have been in love almost as long. They've laughed, fought and cried together. Through it all, their love never wavered. However, something recently occurred that has shaken them to the core. What happened and how do they pull through it?

Please give this couple the happy ending they deserve. :)

Please no death (of the MCs), threesomes, or BDSM. This couple has been through a lot and needs some fluff. Even though this picture was taken from the TV show Spartacus: War of the Damned, it is not necessary for the story to be historical. I actually prefer a modern love story.

Thank you!

mw138

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: established couples, hurt/comfort, amnesia, non-explicit, tearjerker

Word Count: 28,450

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THAT DAY IN SPRING

By BJ Sheppard

Memories. Memories are like magic; indelible images permanently cast on the brain to relive in the face of sorrow, bound for eternity in the annals of the human mind. They are a safety net that catches you just before the fall. The good memories buoy you when the world confronts you in an attack of such gravity it threatens to break the mast and leave you endlessly floating on a sea of your own making. The bad ones, well, they have their place too, they guide you home in their own way. Bad memories teach you which way to turn when the road forks precariously, your compass breaks and the trail of breadcrumbs you left seems to have been eaten by birds. Lennox and I were lucky. We found a home in each other and we swore all along that no matter where life would take us, we would go there together, each other's Northern Star that would lead us to the place we were meant to be.

Memories save us from ourselves. But what happens when the memories vanish? I never thought I'd say this, but I envied Lennox for every memory he lost; every memory I was forced to collect that I would never share with him; every memory that acted as a cloud that covered the star that would lead me back. I hated myself for not being able to go back, but somewhere deep inside, I hated him more for the bliss that was forgetting.

It's impossible to know where the memories go when the brain can no longer recall them. I will never know what happened inside his head to erase the part of him that kept me from hitting rock bottom. I thought I had found the basement, but there is always another floor to fall through. This is the story of what happened, how two lives were damaged that day in Spring.

Twenty-eight Days Before:

I could only tell what time it was from the way the sunlight bled through the slats of the blinds, casting an ethereal glow around the dark corona of Lennox's messy hair. Near-black tendrils curled about his face, his lips slightly parted in soft breaths as his eyes darted back and forth behind closed lids. I noticed every tiny detail about this man, because, as he had once told me, that is what love is;

it is hidden in the details, tiny observations, collected and committed to memory, stoking a fire inside you as you yearn for the person at whom that love is aimed. I woke before him every day, without fail, and watched while he slept his still-silent sleep, marveling in the luck that had brought me such an unexpected and undeserved gift all those years ago. But there was something different about that morning, a feeling I could not attach words to, but that lanced through my system like white light and adrenaline and the aftermath of the most treasured of experiences. Today was the day.

I shuffled further under the blankets, let my knuckles drift against the warm, hairless skin over his ribs and smiled to myself at how this man, this perfect man, would be mine for the rest of our days. My fingers traced circles around the dark nubs of his nipples; followed a road map painted by the ridges of his ribs. Through my tender advances, he never once stirred, as if the years together had acclimatized him to the wondering fascination of my touch on his skin. It felt like some dam might burst and I would explode with excitement if I kept myself detailing every lithe line of his body, so I pulled my hand away, twisted onto my back and stared up at the ceiling fan, spinning round and round and round above my head, casting a cool breeze down onto me that helped to dull the heat I was feeling. The rotating blades helped me calm myself; fear and nerves knotting inside me were washed away by the light whirl of the circling blades. This day would be a very different day indeed.

I lay there in the silence, letting time be counted down by each inaudible rotation of the blades like a stopwatch, winding down the seconds to the finish line. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

I reached beside me to the dresser, slowly pulling open the drawer of the wooden chest so as not to make a sound that might wake Lennox. This moment had been plaguing me for weeks, playing on my mind in panoramic views with digital audio and the clarity of twenty-twenty vision, but this morning was different, because it was the morning the moment would become reality. I grabbed the small box from beneath a pile of clothes, its weight in my hand heavier than it had been weeks previously when I had found it. I turned the velvet case over and over in my hands; so small, yet so magnificently massive all at the same time. I did not need to open it, nor look at it one more time, as all the fantasies involving this one small item had seen me learn every fascinating detail of what was inside. I closed the drawer and turned back onto my side.

Lennox still rested where he had been before, one hand supporting his head while the other, the left, lay between us on the sheets. Flecks of paint lined his fingernails, and though I hadn't seen any of his latest work, I knew that what he had created would be one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. I knew this because they were made by the most beautiful man I had ever seen. I shifted closer to him until my face was inches from his, my top lip quivering as I fought the need to wake him with a kiss that would derail my concentration and deviate from the way I had planned this moment. It was not possible to love him any more than I did. That love was a part of me, spliced into my DNA as if my life had started the moment I met him all those years ago.

Gently, I placed the box on the white covers, lifted the lid, and pulled the ring out, carefully, between my thumb and forefinger. Again, I noticed the weight of it, though rational thought told me that this one symbol would mean nothing more to us than a visible reminder of the chance to celebrate our love before the eyes of our friends and family and have it recognized in the state of Massachusetts. Before my mind could wander away from the beauty of the moment, I gently slipped the ring on the fourth finger of his left hand, closed the box, and stored it away in the drawer.

Only seconds passed, but it felt like eternity before his eyes fluttered open, sleep blurring his vision until he blinked a few times and those brown eyes found me before him.

"Good morning," he croaked, beaming at me with the smile that had the power to reduce me to nothing more than a quaking mess, even twenty years after I first saw it.

"Good morning back," I answered, nerves crippling me as I waited for the moment he realized what I was doing.

Lennox leaned towards me, kissed me deeply as I closed my eyes and let myself get lost in his presence.

"Have you been watching me sleep again?" he asked.

"I couldn't help myself," I answered, which was, and had been, true for decades of my life. "You know I can't keep my eyes off of you."

He laughed, a deep rumbling laugh from deep in his chest, as he flipped over onto his back, his golden skin glowing in the morning light as it poured between the blinds. As he turned, his hair migrated across his face, and he lifted his hand to brush it from his eyes. As he moved to place his hand on mine, he

saw the ring, his eyes widening as he looked, first at his hand, and then to me. I licked my dry lips, and shuffled slightly closer.

“When I met you, I was nothing,” I began, reciting the speech that I had been revising and rehearsing every second of every day leading up to that point. “You made me everything I am today, and I will never be able to repay you for all the love and happiness you have given me.”

His eyes were still wide as they vacillated between the new addition to his left hand and the man at his side professing his love.

“We have had the most beautiful life together. But now I want to make it more. A dedication to love you until there is no more life in my body; until the world ends and there is nothing left of me but dust. And even then, I promise to love you still.”

I shuffled out from beneath the covers and planted one knee on the floor beside the bed, taking his ringed hand in my own.

“Lennox DuWitt, will you marry me?” The words were so soft they were barely a whisper, and yet seemed to echo into the silence that followed them.

Once again, Lennox looked down at his hand, and I noticed the moisture welling in his eyes. With one solitary tear rolling down the side of his face, he nodded to me, unable, it seemed, to speak a word. Instead he pulled me back onto the bed, right across to his side until I was lying on him.

“Are you serious? You want to marry me?” he asked, as more tears trickled from his eyes.

“As a heart attack. I should have done this years ago, Baby,” I admitted. “There was never any question that you and I were meant to be together.”

And, with that, he pulled me into a kiss so deep I thought he might swallow me whole, and I would let him, willingly. This was the man I wanted to be joined to forever, and after so many years of being by his side, I was about to be a part of him for the rest of our days. That morning was something I would never, ever forget.

One Hundred and Fifty-nine Days After:

I sat across the bar watching Warren as he deftly spun a vodka bottle in his hand, winking at the woman next to me as he slid another shot her way. After

flirting with the aging blonde, he replaced the bottle on the shelf behind the register and came back to face me, throwing a rag over his shoulder and completing the image of the classic stereotype of every bartender from here to Cheers. This little trip had become a part of my routine on the way home every night, and true to form, Warren, masquerading as the quintessential straight barman-type, when in actual fact he was a flaming queen that ruled the scene with exaggerated panache, did not once fail to make me feel worse in my predicament. Warren was all hard lines, sweeping sandy blonde hair, with a waistline that I envied on a daily basis. We had met through a friend of a friend, but in the weeks following the incident, we had grown closer as I sought refuge in his place of work. Though there wasn't a bad bone in his body, I could tell that my continued presence as a prop at the end of his bar was starting to grate on him, if only for the simple fact that mine was a predicament without a simple solution. I averted my gaze, trying to keep from seeing the sadness behind his eyes, warring with the frustration he no doubt felt at this waste of a man sitting before him. He grabbed the rag from his shoulder, making large exaggerated sweeps across the sticky bar top and sighed, a little too loud.

"You can't keep doing this, Ryan," he said, as I looked down into the glass of ginger ale clenched in my hands. "It's killing you, man."

"What's the alternative?" I asked. A question I'd asked a thousand times before but for which I had never received a satisfactory response from the man.

"You already left," he replied. "You don't have to keep torturing yourself by going back every day."

"I've loved him my whole life, Warren. I can't just leave him like that. None of this is his fault."

And that was the truth. Lennox had done nothing to deserve what had happened to him, had never courted the thing that had created a rift between us that was so wide it seemed impossible to cross. I kept my eyes averted from Warren's, praying he wouldn't see how close I actually was to just giving up all together. And the truth was, I had thought about what he was suggesting endlessly since I decided to leave. Could I simply just cut and run after all we had been through? Could I save myself at the expense of the man I loved? And every time I asked myself these questions, the answers were always the same. I couldn't do a damn thing but the thing I was doing.

I turned the tumbler of ginger ale around in my hands, wishing it would magically transform into something stronger, something that would take the

edge off whatever I was feeling. But I was driving, so I knew that part of the night would have to wait; wait until I was locked in the dingy apartment I was subletting in the district neighboring the one where our house was located, where Lennox was now probably settling down to read a book or grab some sleep.

The whole idea of him being there alone made my heart hurt, so I tried to push it from my mind, taking a long pull from my glass until the ice clinked against my teeth,

“Of course it’s not his fault,” Warren countered, placing a calming hand on the back of my own as I set my glass down on the bar. “But there is no benefit to you staying. You are driving yourself into the ground, Ryan. When was the last time you slept?”

“It’s been a while,” I laughed, though the joke died as soon as it left my lips.

“He’ll be fine without you,” he answered, his tone soft, trying not to corner me when I was feeling as low as I was. “He’ll just assume you had to go away.” His voice lilted at the last, almost pleading with me to put myself first, assuming that what had happened several times before, Lennox’s fear and confusion, would never happen again.

“And every day he’ll worry when I don’t come home. He’ll call, and I’ll have to lie. I’ve had enough of lying to him. I don’t want to do it anymore.”

Our eyes locked, and he knew I was never backing down. True, I didn’t share our house with Lennox any more. I had left, and he was none the wiser, but, if it were in my ability to save him the grief of realizing that, to spare him feeling that loss because of something outside of his control, then I vowed to take every measure I could to keep up the charade. He might never be the same again, but the least I could do was to try and be the same for him. After all the years we were there for each other, I needed to be there for him; maybe now more than ever.

I pulled my hand from beneath Warren’s as I climbed off the bar stool, grabbing my jacket from the slick bar surface and throwing it on over the yellowing shirt I was wearing that was long past needing laundering. Straightening my collar, I did my best to straighten out myself as well, pulling myself up into a stance of confidence, while underneath it I had none.

“Thanks, Warren. I appreciate it.”

And I did.

Driving back to the apartment, I took every side street I could, three rights and a left taking me in huge sweeping squares across the city, until after an hour had passed, I was parked back outside my old house. It looked different, smaller somehow, and though I was not going to go inside, I could imagine every little thing Lennox was doing on the other side of the door. I imagined him washing dishes, or settling down on the sofa to eat a late night bowl of Captain Crunch. I sat and just watched the house silently, creating a world behind the door I would not be a part of again. I did this more often than I cared to admit, but it was a routine I had developed that made me feel just that little bit closer to the life I had abandoned when the going got too rough. This wasn't the first, and most certainly would not be the last, time I would sit outside the house we bought together and conjure images of normalcy behind the walls of the house that was no longer my home.

The top bedroom window went dark after a while, and I knew Lennox had gone to bed, ready to close his eyes to another day that would never matter again. I fired up the engine, put the car in drive, and headed straight back to the apartment, wishing to return to a day that only ever existed in my own mind. As I parked the car in the lot outside the run-down apartment complex I refused to refer to as home, I gripped the wheel until my knuckles turned white.

The frustration was overbearing, like a child on Christmas Eve just praying for the clock to chime twelve and for it to be tomorrow already. But in my world, tomorrows were pretty hard to come by.

Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Ninety-nine Days Before:

Before he arrived, high school was like a war zone, it was dog eat dog and only the alpha would ever survive. I was lucky to be on the side of the big dogs. No one knew how good I was at math because they were all too focused on how many wins I'd had for the wrestling team. I guess you could say I was a jock, but to me I was a nobody, because nobody really knew a thing about me except I had mastered the double-leg takedown at the age of fourteen.

As a sixteen-year-old kid in high school, I was still just a one-trick pony. I would have given up that mantel long before I actually did, were it not for the fixed place at the lunch table and my ability to evade getting chucked in a dumpster at every juncture. Wrestling was my mask, and I wore it so well no one would ever have been able to tell it was not my real face at all.

There was always a loneliness that came with pretending to be something you're not. There was never a soul to confide in, anyone to trust, anyone to press me to be the person I truly was; all that loneliness to the extent that, though I knew I was different, I never truly knew what it was that made me that way. That all changed the day Lennox arrived.

Every guy in the wrestling club seemed to want to be my friend and take me down all at the same time, and it confused me why it was like this. Sure I was taller and physically bigger than most of the guys in the club, but most were my friends from the lunch room. Put us in a singlet and it was like we were trained to attack, to seek dominance over the other boys, and though I didn't much like it, it was just something I'd become used to in order to stay on top.

I was fiddling with my mouth guard, ready to take on whoever coach was going to throw at me. I wiped my shield on the royal blue nylon of my shorts leg, distracted in my own thoughts, when I heard the door swing open and the crash of someone literally falling into the gym.

Not with a fizzle, always with a bang, Lennox DuWitt tumbled into my life. Through the roaring laughter of the other boys in the class, I looked up to see the boy right himself quickly, untangling his sneaker from the ball net that had sent him flying. He was five foot and change, his dark hair falling carelessly around his shoulders, his face burning in embarrassment so it matched the color of his bright red singlet. I didn't know why I noticed any of this at the time, but I figured it was because he wasn't wearing the school colors.

"Gather 'round boys, let's get this show on the road," Coach yelled as we all gathered in a circle with the big guy at the head of it. The new kid stumbled over, standing back from the boys in the circle, trying to stay undetected. It seemed pointless that he would try after that less-than-graceful entrance, but I took my mind off the smaller kid and paid full attention to the Coach.

"Okay, today we'll do the usual warm-ups, then we'll work on some new moves," Coach said, his huge voice bellowing and ricocheting off the parquet floor like he was speaking with the voice of God. "New kid," he shouted, making the new arrival stumble back, shock on his face at being singled out. "You ever wrestled before?"

"No, sir," the boy replied, his voice lost in the wake of the Coach's booming baritone.

"Okay, son," the Coach replied. "I'm going to pair you with one of our best wrestlers; have him teach you the basics. You okay with that?"

“Yes, sir,” the boy replied, shaking his head a little too enthusiastically.

I should have known it would fall to me to teach the newbie, but it wasn't until Coach called my name and sent me off to the neighboring hall with the new guy in tow that I realized I would not be doing much of anything besides teaching a rookie how not to get his head ripped off or his arms pulled out of their sockets. Part of me was annoyed that I'd be missing the practice, but another part appreciated the respite. If I was out of the class, then it seemed to me that my title as the best wrestler for my age was intact.

I led the new kid into the empty room, closing the connecting door between us and the other athletes when we were safely inside. The sound of grunting and horsing around died as the latch clicked shut, and I was alone with the kid.

The kid headed over to the far wall, dumping his pack down on the floor and stretching out, his arms raised high above his head, his spine almost audibly cracking as he made himself bigger with the stretch. I assessed him covertly out the corner of my eye, careful not to be caught noticing the way his skin was so smooth and pale everywhere that the singlet didn't cover. With his arms raised like that, I could see a faint outline of ribs under the fabric and two tiny points where his nipples had hardened with the ecstasy of the motion. I didn't know why at the time, but my own singlet began to feel too tight, every inch of his body that I noticed making sweat collect at my brow and sending shivers down my spine. As he released his arms, he turned to me. Still staring from the corner of my eye, I quickly covered it up by ripping padded mats from a pile in the front corner of the room. I laid them out into a square big enough for two people to grapple on and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, meeting his eyes for the first time since he had fallen into the room. They were dark pools, almost black, with a slight golden tinge to the edges that softened the lines of his angular face. I still had no idea why every detail was registering with me, as I slowly moved towards him.

“So, first time wrestling, eh?” I asked, as I dropped down cross-legged onto the square of mats.

“Yeah,” he said, sitting across from me, mimicking my position. I forced my eyes to stay away from the shorts of his wrestling singlet, the way they crept up between his legs, revealing further inches of milky, hairless flesh all stretched over what looked like lean muscle. “My dad wanted me to join up. Said I had to stop getting lost in my comics and start acting like a real man.” He punctuated the last two words with exaggerated air quotes, and together we smiled as he rolled his eyes.

I was stuck in the moment, the laughter dying as I became unsure of what to say next. I wasn't sure where it came from, but the next words out of my lips were puzzling, even to me.

"I like math." I felt so stupid, I felt my face flush.

"No way?" he asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, taking a conspiratorial tone. "Quite a pair of nerds, aren't we?" Again we laughed, and again, our eyes met, static electricity running from the top of my head, down through my chest and settling in my lap.

"Don't tell anyone," I said. "I have a reputation to uphold." And I winked at him, which led him to look down at his hands as they fidgeted in his lap. The whole situation was ten kinds of awkward, but there was something about this kid that I seemed to be drawn to.

As if stumbling from a trance, he looked up suddenly. "I'm Lennox," he said. "Lennox DuWitt."

"Cool name. I can't decide if you sound more like a Bond villain or a magician," I joked, which he met with a crooked smile that revealed deep dimples at either side of his mouth.

"I'm Ryan Matheson. Wrestling superstar and closeted math genius." Again with that smile.

I felt like fire ants were crawling over my skin, except there was no pain, just a warm glow that I don't think I had ever felt before.

"Nice to meet you, Ryan Matheson," he replied with a thousand-watt smile that displayed all of his gleaming, pure white teeth. Why was I noticing all of this?

To shake myself from the trance Lennox had me under, I leapt to my feet, started stretching my arm muscles, lunging to elongate the muscles in my legs. Lennox just sat there and stared, his eyes a little wide for whatever reason. "So we gonna wrestle, or what?" I asked him, as his eyes trained up to my face.

"Uh," he stuttered. "Maybe we should stay sitting down for a bit?" he asked, his tone baffling me as to its meaning.

"Why?"

He cocked one eyebrow, nodded his head towards what I thought was my legs.

“Just sit down,” he said a little more forcefully.

I let my gaze wonder down my body, trying to locate what he was hinting at with the suggestive nod of his head.

“Oh, God,” I whispered, mortified when I reached the point of his focus. Somehow, without me knowing, my body had grown excited; my cock engorging under the thin spandex of my suit, and the outline was perfectly visible. It was so visible in fact you could see every last vein that throbbed and every single line of my package. I quickly put both my hands over my groin, trying my hardest to recover my modesty, expecting a roar of thunderous laughter from the boy before me. I quickly sank down, crossed my legs and leaned forward, doing all I could to cover both my shame and as much of my body as possible.

“I...” he began, but I raised one hand away from my groin to halt him.

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Just don’t.” I shook my head, realizing that this new kid had the power now to take me off the popularity map with just one word to the right person.

“Hey, it happens,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, not taking his eyes off my face. “Happened to me once in church. *That* was embarrassing, I can tell you.” He nudged my arm, smiling as he willed me to look him in the eye. I smiled a little to myself, but the damage was done. How would I ever look Lennox in the face again? “I think it’s these suits they make us wear. They’re just too sexy. I feel like He-Man wearing this thing. How are we not supposed to get turned on wearing this stuff? It’s almost pornographic!”

I couldn’t contain my laughter; it came bellowing out and through the small hall.

“So don’t sweat it, okay? You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” He gestured again down to my groin. “Nothing at all.” And the little guy winked at me.

Though words seemed to fail me, my body seemed to be back to its usual state of flaccid nondescription, so once again I uncrossed my legs. “So, how about we try this again? Ready to learn a thing or two?”

Lennox looked down at his lap, and flushed. “Think I might need a minute myself,” he said, rolling his eyes and looking around the room, trying not to focus on my own wide eyes. “I’ve got some comics we can read. I was never

really excited about wrestling anyway.” He reached behind him slowly and grabbed his bag, unzipping it, and shuffling through the contents. “You like *Batman*?”

One Thousand and Seventy-seven days before:

I was so nervous my palms were sweating like rivers. If he noticed, Lennox made no attempt to let go of my hand, as I fiddled in my jacket pocket for the keys. This dream of ours had been years in the making; scrimping and saving every penny we could, taking shortcuts, eating off-brand foods, forgoing gym memberships and date nights just to arrive to this point. Though Lennox didn't bring in much more than we needed to live off every day, my job had been mostly earmarked for the ever increasing savings that had led to the down-payment on this house. Though I earned more money than Lennox, this house was a joint effort, a collaboration of both of our lives coming together to achieve something we had been talking about since high school. But in that moment, as we approached the door, hand in sweating hand, the reality was so great for me.

We had seen this house many times before, we knew exactly what it looked like, could recall every room and what we planned to do with every square inch of the property. But each step towards it felt like an eternity. The work needed was astronomical. I was working such long hours, that time to work on it would be limited. And with the bulk of our savings spent on buying the house, we would be unable to afford to keep our apartment while restorations were being done. This whole plan, the years spent on executing it, was starting to feel like a really bad idea.

“You got the keys?” Lennox asked, pulling his hand from mine, trying covertly to wipe the sweat from my own hand on his pants leg. He rubbed his hands together in excitement and raised his eyebrows with an impatient smile.

I drew the keys from my pocket, dangling them between my thumb and forefinger. “Right here,” I said as he made a grab for them. Pulling them just out of his reach, he missed by inches and we tussled on the browning lawn of this strange house that was now ours. We scrapped and played for a while. I was doing anything I could to delay him seeing the magnitude of the work ahead of us. Though we had saved for years just to be able to afford even the deposit on the place, the real work was still laid out ahead of us. Finally, he pulled me into his arms, our faces inches from each other, his top lip brushing

against my bottom one. He breathed a sigh between my lips, and closed his eyes as his tongue painted a languid line across my upper lip, tasting my smile as I pulled him in closer to my body. I let my eyes flutter shut, let him guide me with his kiss. I may have been physically bigger than him, but there was never a question over who was in charge. Electricity jolted in my veins, much like it did every time I had kissed him since the first time, and I moaned into his mouth. He let his tongue dart into my mouth and taste my own, breathing a sigh of contentment into me that only served to fuel my desire for the man. Lennox snaked his arms under mine, one hand cupping my ass while the other stroked my back and then...

Ripped the keys from my hand, struggling from my grip and running up the path to the steps.

I watched him bound up them two at a time until he was at the door, dangling the keys in his hand much like I had done moments before.

"Come on, Baby," he yelled to me, as I stood and smiled at the childlike excitement that was beaming from him. "Let's go home."

Home.

I jogged towards him, slowing my pace when I reached the steps; desire, excitement and fear all warring inside me as I took in the image of my man fumbling to find the right key.

When I reached him, I pulled his hands into my own, took the keys, and located the correct one, confused by the sparring feelings and breathless from the mild activity. "You will be the death of me, Lennox DuWitt," I breathed, much to his appreciation.

"Don't go dying on me just yet," he laughed. "I can't fix this place up on my own."

His playfulness never ceased to amaze me, and, as he pushed the key into the lock and I heard the bolt relent, I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, Len," I said, pulling him away from the threshold. "If we're going to do this, let's do it right." And with that I swept the man off his feet, pulling him up until he was cradled in my arms like an overgrown child. "I think it's only fair I get to carry you across the threshold of our new home."

"That's the honeymoon, you freak," he laughed, nuzzling his face into the crook of my shoulder.

"Well when that day comes, I'll do this all over again."

I nudged the door open on its creaking hinges and carried Lennox through the door.

Inside, it was dark; the heavy, velvet drapes all pulled to against the mid-afternoon sunshine.

The drapes, of course, would have to be burned, but I let my eyes adjust to the darkness, let my vision strip away the current decor and my imagination decorate it in the splendor that littered countless of Lennox's sketchpads, all documenting era styles and interior preferences that we had stayed up countless nights discussing.

Lennox wriggled down from my arms, keeping one hand on my bicep as he looked around. I knew him well enough to know that he was seeing the same things I was; seeing the plans we had dreamed up and the sketches and mood boards he had designed all coming to life against the blank canvas of the dilapidated, old house. I also knew him well enough to know that he could not remain that still for much longer. He let his hand fall from my arm and like a spitfire, began sprinting from room to room taking in every tiny detail he could. I just stood back and watched him fly between the lounge and the dining room, waited as he disappeared into the kitchen and came back around full circle into the lounge. I drank in the view as he swept a hand across the fireplace and blew the dust from his fingers, giggling. I watched all this, the whole while lost in every tiny detail that made me love him more than anything else in the world.

He walked slowly back over to me as the warm feeling settled into my heart, reaching for him and pulling him close. "So, what do you think?" I asked as he cuddled into my side, my voice just a whisper in his ear as I planted a soft kiss on his temple.

He looked up at me with misty eyes. "I love it," he said. "It's ours. It's finally our home."

I pulled him in closer, maneuvered him around until he was pressed up against my front, and stared into those deep, dark eyes. "You are my home," I whispered, as a single tear escaped his brimming eyes.

Lennox reached around me, running his fingers through my short hair, balling his fists into it as he dragged my mouth to meet his. And we kissed, standing in the empty shell of the house that was everything we had hoped for and was now ours.

Six Days After:

I didn't want to be in the house alone. Without Lennox everything was just too quiet; like something in the silence was taunting me, muttering under its breath a mantra that sounded a little too close to loneliness. I pulled my feet up under me, closed my robe tightly around me as the air conditioning breezed over my wet skin. It was the first time I'd been home in days, but the doctors assured me that I would be contacted if there were any change in Lennox's condition. I thought I would have more trouble with the hospital since we were not married, but since Lennox and I had listed each other as our emergency contacts, the doctors just talked to me as if I were his blood.

I shifted in my seat, curling in on myself further, trying not to think any more of blood. It had been everywhere; coating the car in fluid seemingly too dark to have come from a human being; casting a shocking contrast between itself and the pallor of Lennox's skin. Try as I might, I could not stop picturing him there, me bound in the seatbelt, his body hunched over the dash, still and unmoving.

I had to keep busy, had to do something with my hands, keep my brain distracted before I broke down again. I lifted off the couch and slowly paced the wooden floorboards until I found myself in the kitchen. Autopilot senses grabbing the wares to make coffee before my brain even realized what it was doing. I grabbed a cup from the draining board, ignoring the mounting pile of dishes in the sink, as I shifted from cupboard to cupboard trying to focus on the job at hand. I found the coffee and filters above the machine, the sugar on the work surface, a spoon in the drawer. Since I hadn't been home for days, the milk in the fridge had gone sour, so I busied myself emptying the lumpy remains from the carton and throwing it in the trash. Every motion I made served only to drag me back to the accident, as the throbbing bruise across my chest protested my activity. My wrist, still wrapped in a bandage was the worst of the pains, niggling me with every tiny movement I made to place the filter into the coffee machine, to fill the machine with water, to add beans to the grinder. I carried out each part of the process meticulously, and before I knew it, hot java was pouring into the carafe like molten lava. I trained my eyes on the drip, counting slowly in my head to keep my mind from wandering. As the coffee brewed, I paced up the stairs slowly, still counting in my head as something to do.

Our bedroom was dark, the drapes drawn, where normally the space would be flooded with bright rays from the spring sunshine, which was the cause of

the temperature rising in the city precipitating the need for the AC to be switched on. The bed itself, a hard king-sized mass of Tempur goodness, was abandoned, an island in the centre of the room that I didn't think I'd ever be able to sleep in alone. I had slept on the couch the night before, unable to make myself get into the bed without Lennox, unable to stand the smell of his pillows or the negative space where his body should be.

I pulled the robe from my shoulders, let it drop to the floor, and stood before the full-length mirror. My body was dotted with tiny, fading abrasions, slices and bruises from glass that had made its way into me as Lennox hit the... *Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine*... the bruise across my chest was still as angry as the previous days, an indigo indent spanning from one shoulder down to the opposite hip, like a sash awarded as a prize. The only prize I felt I deserved was for having fucked up the most.

I lifted my bandaged hand to my chest, trailed my fingers over the bruising, pressing down hard to revel in the sting both from the bruise itself and the pain in my wrist. I pressed harder, wincing as my eyes watered, almost enjoying causing myself the pain. This was a product of my own doing, of my carelessness. I had been given the greatest gift of all and with one lapse in my concentration I stood to lose it all.

My hand trailed further up my body, hooking my fingers around the chain that hung there. The thin silver thread was weak, weak enough to easily break. I wanted to pull it apart, to destroy it like I destroyed everything else, but I resisted the urge, instead turning the two golden rings over in my fingers. Our rings. Rings we never got to wear.

The floodgates broke and the tears came easily, causing me to hunch over at the waist, grasping the mirror as I buckled in agony. Lennox. My Lennox. What had I done?

I sat naked on the floor, my own face a drama mask of helplessness reflected back at me through the limited light that allowed me to see my own sorry reflection. I sat and cried for what seemed like hours, until the only thing that could break me from my own emotional wreckage rang out through the silence that punctuated my desperate gasps.

The phone rang.

Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Ninety-seven Days Before:

It had been two days since that afternoon in the gym with Lennox, and I hadn't seen him again since. He shared none of my classes that I knew of. I had no idea where his locker was or where he lived or how to contact him. Not knowing anything except that I liked him was weighing pretty heavily on me. I replayed the details in my mind of the rest of wrestling practice, after the incident happened. We sat on the mats for the whole hour, talking about comics and movies we had seen, what we liked and disliked. It shamed me that through all of this I didn't ask enough questions to even find him in school the next day. Now, two days later, I was feeling an ache for my new friend, staring at the clock as it ticked toward the end of my history class. I had heard nothing Mrs. Pennington had said the entire hour and as the final seconds counted down, I shoved all my books into my bag, ready to leave as soon as the bell chimed.

The halls were a mess of students all running to get somewhere other than where we were, an end of school frenzy that was damn near lethal if you got in anyone's way. I made my way silently back towards the other side of the school building, a longer way than usual in case I ran into Lennox by his locker, wherever it was.

As I rounded the final corner to my locker, the crowds began to thin out, allowing me easy access to dismount my backpack and put the last textbooks back inside the mess that was my locker. I fiddled, distractedly, with the combination before it popped open in my hand and the door released. I pulled the two heavy textbooks from my bag and shoved them into the deepest recesses of the locker, not needing them again until the following week. As I pushed the heavy tomes back inside their education casket, a small folded piece of paper fell out and landed between my feet.

This was no cause for alarm as my locker was so stacked to the brim with old papers and sketches and discarded candy wrappers that things tended to fall out on a daily basis. I picked up the small piece of paper and unfolded it, expecting to see a scrawled math equation or a crude note from one of the team about a cheerleader with a nice pair of tits or a fat girl wearing the wrong outfit. The paper was too nice to be part of my usual stationery, and as I smoothed out the leaf, my face broke into a wide grin.

Ryan,

Meet me by the bike-sheds after school if you want.

Lennox

His handwriting was curly and artistic, the “y” in my name linking in a swirling loop that joined it to the following letters. My name had never looked so good written down before and my face started to ache with the smile still in place, so much so that I felt like the Joker from one of Lennox’s comic books.

I looked down the hall for the nearest clock and realized school had let out ten minutes ago. I relocked my locker and grabbed my pack and headed the quickest way I could to the parking lot where the bike-sheds were located.

Outside, the sun was unseasonably hot, hanging directly overhead and blinding me slightly as I made my way towards where Lennox would be waiting. I hurried quickly to where I had locked my bike up that morning, scanning the lot for any sign of Lennox. He was nowhere to be found, and my smile started to fade. I had taken too long looking for him. I must have missed him altogether. I unlocked my bike and pulled it from the rack, lifting up the spindly kickstand with the back of my sneaker.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt someone behind me grab my arm and thrust it into an arm lock, that, holding my bike as I was, I was unable to get out of. The shock of the confrontation all but rendered me useless as I dropped my bike and started to try and counter the lock, stopping as I heard a familiar laughter peel through the corrugated iron sheds.

Lennox released my arm as I spun round, terror on my face, a look of smug amusement on his. “Gotcha,” he exclaimed, as I rubbed at the ache in my throbbing shoulder.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked, shocked at the strength contained in the little guy.

“I have no friends, Ryan,” he began. “I have nothing but time to read up on this stuff. Not bad for my first try, right?”

He looked so proud of himself, I couldn’t help but laugh at his enthusiasm. And when he was off guard, I tackled him, throwing him down onto the grass so I was straddling his hips, his wrists pinned above him. We laughed so hard our bodies were shaking.

“Okay. Uncle!” he screamed as he wriggled beneath me. “Come on, big guy. Let me up, let me up!”

I released him and rolled onto my side next to him in the grass, our little fingers only centimeters away from each other as we lay there squinting in the

sun. I tried not to notice the close proximity of our hands, but before I could really think about it, the tips of our fingers gently connected, and we looked over at each other, smiling.

“Wanna go grab a soda?” I asked, not moving my hand away from his.

“Sure thing,” he replied. “Let me unlock my bike, and I’ll race you.”

We dashed to the bike shed where I retrieved my fallen bike and backpack and he fiddled with the flimsy lock of his own bike until it was free.

“Do you even know where we’re going?” I asked, as I hooked one leg over the seat and readied myself for the ride.

“No,” he called, peddling away at top speed. “But I’ll still beat you there.”

I couldn’t help but smile, a warm feeling spreading through my limbs that had nothing to do with the heat and everything to do with my new friend. I raced off after him, determined to get as close to him as I could.

Nineteen Days After:

It seemed wasteful to just sit around the house whilst Lennox rested, drowsy under the weight of all the drugs that were keeping him placid in his pain. I had returned to work for short stints a few days before, and though I was unable to focus on anything other than Lennox while I was there, I needed to keep up my hours as his hospital bills had begun to add up. I drove home in silence, the radio off as it distracted me so much that I was afraid to drive. It seemed so stupid that a little under three weeks ago I had driven this route subconsciously and now I had to pay attention to everything going on around me, as if there were something out to get me, to add more injuries and threaten to take more than already had been lost. I pulled up into the drive and switched off the engine. Only then did I realize that all the muscles in my upper body were clenched tight, my hands a vice grip around the steering wheel, and my shoulders hunched so tight they were nearly up to my ears. I exhaled slowly, letting all the tension gradually release from my body, unfurling my fingers one by one from the steering wheel. I took my time gathering myself before I stepped slowly out of the car, my legs feeling unsteady as I placed them one at a time on the gravel driveway. It was important to me that I showed no signs of distress when I went back into the house. Though I expected Lennox to still be resting, if he were to see me tied up in knots like this, then it was likely to have

an effect on his mental state, and all I really wanted was for him to recover with nothing more than the physical scars he had sustained.

As I unlocked the door, the scent of cooking hit me like a wall, faint sounds of Motown music blaring from the stereo. To say I was alarmed was an understatement, as this was the first time Lennox had really been coherent enough to even move about, let alone get out of bed and cook a meal. I closed the door gently and placed my briefcase beside the hat rack. I found him in the kitchen, swaying softly to Martha and the Vandellas as he cracked two eggs into the frying pan, unaware of my presence.

"Lennox?" I asked, leary of seeing him so energetic after the trauma he had been through.

"Oh, hey Babe. You're home," he called over the music, dropping what he was doing to rush over and hug me, kissing me gently on the lips. I pulled him close, extended the kiss and let my hand run over where I knew his wound was in the back of his head.

"You okay?" I asked, as he pulled out of the kiss to return to his place at the stove.

"Yeah, just starving. I woke up feeling like I could eat a horse. You shouldn't have let me sleep in when you left."

"You need the rest, Baby," I said, though I was unsure whether or not he heard me.

I looked around the house. Everything was as it had been when I left, no signs at all that he had been up for long. I was amazed at how together he seemed, and the feelings warred inside me, concern battling with relief. I stopped staring, realizing how self-conscious he would feel having me stare like that after all he had been through. I let myself wander up to him as casually as possible, snaked my arms beneath his as he set to cooking the eggs. I kissed gently beneath his ear, observing the ugly scarring hiding just beneath the thickness of his dark hair.

"You hungry?" he asked, as I squeezed him tighter to my body, the grip one of relief that seemed to ease me to no end. Maybe everything would be okay now he was on the mend.

"Famished," I whispered into his ear with another kiss, reveling in his smile as he turned to look at me over his shoulder.

“Brilliant.”

I held him for as long as I could, until he was ready to serve the meal. Then I let him go long enough to serve the meal of eggs and bacon, and place the plates on the side.

“The TV isn’t working. Can you call someone to fix it?” he asked.

The television had broken before the accident, but I brushed off the remark, figuring it was a small thing to remember in all that he had suffered through. I grabbed the plates and led him to the dining room. We ate in silence, the flavors of the fried food causing my stomach to grumble as I consumed it at full speed. I couldn’t even remember the last time I had eaten something that wasn’t from a coffee shop or the hospital cafeteria.

He placed down his knife and fork, and rubbed gently at his temples.

“You okay?” I asked, not even attempting to hide my concern.

“Yeah, just a bit of a headache.”

“I’ll get you some painkillers and a glass of water,” I offered, clearing the table as I made my way back to the kitchen and opened the cupboard where we kept the medication the doctor had given him for the residual pain.

He washed the medication down quickly, draining the last of the water with it.

“Maybe you should go lie down?” I asked, squeezing his shoulder.

“Yeah, I think I will.” He got up from the table and kissed me, before mounting the stairs and disappearing from my sight.

Though it was good that he seemed to be more alert, something about him was plaguing me, though I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. I hoped as the days passed, things would get easier for him. I hoped everything would be okay.

One Thousand, Six Hundred and Eighty-four Days Before:

That day was like a dark cloud had descended over the house. All it took was one phone call and Lennox felt like he was being ripped in half; one half mourning, the other a child again, relishing in the Karmic retribution that came with the death of his father.

Malcolm DuWitt had always been hard on his son; so much so that it often scared me to imagine what the man was capable of. Years of both mental and physical abuse towards Lennox had led me to despise his father, but whilst I was happy he was gone, and would merrily have danced on the old bastard's grave, I kept my feelings buried so as to not effect Lennox as he sought a way to reconcile his current grief with the negative feelings toward the man who had made his formative years a nightmare.

The first time I had met Malcolm, he made me feel terrible, like my presence was not welcome in his house. He warmed to me for all of two seconds when he found out I was a wrestler, but as soon as our relationship came to his attention, it was like a leper had stepped into his life, and the man could never look me in the eye. Every chance he got, he would stop me midsentence, put me down verbally and make me feel like the smallest person on earth. This was nothing compared to the cruelty that Lennox was forced to endure; and when graduation came around, Lennox and I fled from our neighborhood and never once looked back.

As a final nail in the coffin of their relationship, Malcolm withheld all financial support to Lennox when he decided to attend art college. My SAT scores and personal recommendations afforded me a full scholarship, whilst Lennox was forced to work two jobs to pay his tuition. We found a cheap apartment together in a shitty part of town, and I got a job as well. Using all my income to sustain our living expenses alongside studying for my finance degree, Lennox focused on just making enough to pay for school and working every second he had free just to not be kicked out of school. Times were hard, and every day I watched him struggle, I hated Malcolm that tiny bit more.

I sat silently staring at Lennox, who hadn't moved for what seemed like an eternity. From the second he had replaced the phone into its base, he had been as still as a statue, and I was at a loss as to what to say or do for him. I gave him a minute more, letting the silence stretch between us like a hundred miles of bad road, before I leant forward, carefully placing my hand on his knee.

"Len? You wanna talk?" I asked, my voice a little more than a dry whisper.

He looked up, his eyes wide and focused on my own. I could almost hear the cogs turning in his brain as he processed what he wanted to say. I didn't expect his reaction to be what it was.

Without any hint of warning, Lennox threw his head back, the sound of gleeful laughter ripping through the room. "Oh, God," he heaved between fits of giggles. "The old bastard finally died."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. After decades of being in love with this man, I never witnessed him being so cold, so cruel and emotionally detached. The chill emanating off him made me recoil from him. I removed my hand from his knee and sat back, leaning away as he bent at the waist, unable to contain his laughter. I expected it to all be a cliché, like the people in movies who start out laughing and that laughter turns to hysterical tears. But Lennox was not letting up. I stood up suddenly, catching his eye.

"Lennox, stop," I said, loud enough that he could hear me over his wails of chortling. "Your father is dead, this isn't like you."

"Because you know how I react when my father dies," he said, between heaving breaths. "It happens all the time." The inappropriate joke set him off again until he collapsed on the couch, burying his face in the pillows to muffle the sound as his shoulders ratcheted up and down in a staccato rhythm.

I leaned down to him, grabbing his wrist in a vice grip and yanking him up until his face was inches from mine. "Stop it, right now," I screamed, a string of spittle flying from my mouth as I spat the words at him, sobering him up enough to cease his laughter.

"Why?" he said, gravely, his eyes squinting with withheld anger. "You hated him as much as I did. Why the hell shouldn't I enjoy this? That man gave me nothing. Nothing but abuse and fear, before he wrote me off all together with nothing but a feeling like I'd done something to cause all the pain he had inflicted on me. All I ever did was try to please him, Ryan. That was it. And he kicked the shit out of me. He hated me. He turned against me when I told him who I really was. What kind of man does that to his own kid?"

My eyes locked on his and I noticed them begin to soften as his breath steadied.

"You aren't like him. This, what you're doing now? This isn't you. It's something that he would have done."

I knew I'd said the wrong thing immediately. With all the force in his body he yanked his hand free from mine, using the momentum to push me back away from him. I wasn't prepared for him, and as always, was completely shocked by how much strength the smaller man had in his body. The motion sent me flying backwards, the back of my knees catching on the coffee table and sending me sprawling backwards across the floor. He made a small motion to go to me but stopped.

"Maybe I am like him," he whispered as he looked down on me, his eyes filled with sorrow, regret, and defeat. "I'm sorry," he said as he walked quickly to the door, grabbing a jacket before disappearing across the threshold, slamming the door in his wake. I lifted myself up onto my elbows, watching the space where he disappeared, noticing how the glass in the door had splintered with the force of his departure.

Lennox didn't come back for hours. I sat in the lounge, waiting for him until well after two a.m. Finally, as I felt my eyes closing, I heard his key turn in the lock and sat upright on the couch, studying him as he walked through the door, eyes down, shoulders hunched in defeat.

I'd seen him get like this before. He was a hothead when he was angry, but as soon as he calmed down, he was back to being my sweet, gentle Lennox. My spine cracked as I climbed off the couch, slowly moving towards him as he hung near the door, shamefully keeping his eyes trained on the wooden floorboards.

As I reached him, I slowly pushed my body close to his, letting his head fall onto my shoulder and felt his arms snake around my waist and up my back, taking handfuls of my shirt in his fists as he relaxed into me. And finally he cried. I held him as he let himself feel the loss. It was conflicted, a confusing concoction of loss and anger, and I held him as it all washed through him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, between sobs.

I squeezed him tighter, running my fingers through his hair the way I knew would calm him down. Together we sat on the couch until the sun began to rise over the city. We talked about his father, about the physical characteristics Lennox had inherited. The color of his eyes was Malcolm, but the warmth in them was all from his mother. He was short like Mrs. DuWitt, but toned and sinewy like his father. He had Malcolm's hot temper and propensity for cold detachment, but his mother's kind heart.

As we fought to keep our eyes open, entwined in each other's bodies, he turned his tired eyes towards me. "Promise me," he said. "Promise me you'll never let me end up like he did."

"I promise," I whispered back, running my hand across his cheek, tracing where tears had fallen and dried several times that night. "I promise I will spend every day of our lives reminding you of all the good inside of you. I will spend every day until the last day I have left making sure you know exactly who you are. Because you are the most wonderful man I have ever known."

“You think?” he asked, and it made me laugh that after all this time he still couldn’t see all the beauty that I saw so clearly.

“I know, Baby. I know exactly who you are, and you are nothing like he was. If you ever think that again, I’ll be here to remind you. I promise.”

We fell asleep that way, nestled in an embrace that glued us together; our own family, found in a time when we needed it most, surviving through the worst of our battles.

Seventy Four Days After:

“The TV isn’t working. Can you call someone to fix it?”

I stopped where I was standing, unable to move. I couldn’t do this anymore. It had been months of this same bullshit and I was tired as hell. I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep. I loved Lennox with all my heart, but this man wasn’t Lennox any more. What he was now was just a faded Polaroid picture of the man I loved. A looping hologram that sounded like my Lennox, and smelt like him, but was incapable of being the person he really was.

I’ll never forget that moment. It felt like there was an anvil in my stomach that was weighing me down, making me want to simultaneously vomit and cry and run. My instincts were stronger than I was that day. I decided to leave.

I had never got around to fixing the television. It seemed cruel to give him the access that would alert him every day to what had happened, a window into the outside world that steadily moved on whilst he was frozen in place. The TV sat dusty and unused against the far wall of the lounge, never again to be watched, never letting him know exactly what he was missing as I allowed him to be reduced to this sorry state of exile. I’d cancelled the papers as well. His cell phone and laptop were locked in the trunk of my car, and as of now I hadn’t heard him ask about them. This house was locked in the state in which it had existed before the incident, much like I felt, and like our relationship truly was. What we had been was arrested in time, atrophying like a hollowed-out car sitting on breeze blocks in someone’s front yard.

I knew when I walked out it would only be for the night. I was never fully capable of ending things, but I couldn’t stand to suffocate one more minute in this house that was now just a tomb for the memories that, to Lennox, never were and never would be.

I walked over to Lennox, as he served the eggs and bacon up on the same plates he used every night. Nothing ever changed.

“Think you can manage both servings?” I asked, my voice heavy with so much defeat that even I could hear how lazy I had gotten with the charade.

“Why? You not staying for dinner?”

“I can’t, Len. I have a business trip. Mr. Porter needs me to go to New York and meet with some clients first thing.” I was lying through my teeth, but it came so much easier than the truth ever would.

“A bit last minute isn’t it?” he asked, just a question with no hint of suspicion surrounding it.

“Yeah. Things have been tricky with this one company and they need me to head down there to calm them down. It’s my account so I couldn’t say no.”

“When do you have to leave?” he asked, scooping the last of the bacon from the second plate onto his own.

“Just came back to get some clothes, then I’m heading out.”

“Okay,” he said, turning and heading for the dining room; a small peck on my cheek offered as he went past.

I fled the downstairs, taking the steps two at a time and closing myself into my room before I lost it completely. I pressed my back against the door, rubbing at my tired eyes with the heels of my hands, taking huge breaths to try and calm myself. I was doing this. I was really leaving.

I grabbed a travel bag from the closet, started filling it indiscriminately with everything I could think of for at least a few nights away. The thing about Lennox’s condition was that anything I forgot, I could just come back the next day to collect and he’d be none the wiser.

When my bag was full, I opened the door to the en suite and dashed inside. Toothbrush. Toothpaste. Face wash. Soap. Shampoo. I grabbed all I could and chucked it into the bag.

I turned on the faucet and let the water run a while until it was as cold as it could get. When it was chilled enough to sting, I started splashing my face, hoping the rush of adrenaline would be stimulus enough to get my ass out the door before I changed my mind. The water invigorated me enough to get me moving, and before I could stop myself or think too hard on it, I was down the stairs, bag in hand, ready to walk out on twenty-odd years of a life together.

"I'm going now," I yelled, praying he'd just yell back, and I wouldn't have to see him as I left him behind.

I wasn't that lucky. He came round the corner drying his hands on a rag, and pulled me close to him. I closed my eyes as he kissed me, savored the taste of his mouth and the feel of his smaller body pressed against me. My eyes began to sting.

"See you," I said, as I turned and closed the door behind me, the faint sound of his voice telling me he loved me echoing in my wake.

I made it to the end of the street before the anvil in my stomach jarred me the wrong way. I quickly pulled the car up to the curb and threw the door open as my gag reflex lost the battle to keep my feelings and any residual food inside. Having skipped dinner, all I accomplished was dry heaving bile into the grass, much to the chagrin of a passing woman walking her dog.

When it felt like I had vomited out my soul, I straightened up, wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my suit jacket. I righted myself back in the car, flipped the AC on full and took huge breaths to calm myself. I knew I wasn't really leaving. How could I? Even if I never went home, Lennox would sit and worry about me afresh every day. I had to go back. I had to go back every day. But for that night, I was on a business trip,

I pulled the car back onto the road and headed away from the house.

The hotel I checked into was a standard Holiday Inn not too far from my office. The woman at the desk smiled too brightly and the elevator ride up to the room took too long.

The room itself smelt strongly of lemon cleaning products and the sheets were that itchy, over-washed cotton that was most likely older than I was. I tried not to think about what would happen if I turned a black light on in the room, and quickly unpacked my bag. I was undressed and wearing only my boxers and a plain white tee before ten minutes had passed.

And that was it.

I called down to reception, ordered an entire bottle of vodka and several bottles of coke, and sat back waiting for the delivery.

I achieved nothing that night but the fueling of my own self-hatred. None of this was about me. Not one second. I had a duty to Lennox, and though I knew it would never be the same, I had to at least pretend it was. I had to spare him

the trauma of any more loss in his life. I had to sacrifice my own happiness for his, even if he would never really know what I was doing.

That night was lonely and painful. But it was the first night I had slept well in the last three months.

Seven Days Before:

It was rare, but sometimes there was just no talking sense into Lennox. Sure, a superhero-themed wedding might have sounded fun and whimsical, as well as being a throwback to the first time we met, but it took a late night drunken visit from our friends Warren and Bradley, respectively dragged up in Wonder Woman and Catwoman costumes to really push the idiocy of the idea home. So with those less than favorable ideas cemented in my brain for all eternity, we finally settled on a low-key, classic interpretation of the modern wedding, only without the church. He listened when I told him I didn't want anything extravagant. He heard me when I said a union at the Courthouse was preferable. He paid attention when I limited the guests to twenty to minimize costs. He certainly took it all in when I forbade him from making us wear kilts on account of how neither of us had any Scottish heritage at all.

But with all that in mind, Lennox, ever the artist, threw himself into crafting a wedding worthy of British Royalty, with each tiny detail meticulously pondered over for hours on end.

A week before the wedding, we'd had just about enough. The house looked like the inside of Bridezilla's psyche, and we could barely move for samples and scrapbooks and swatch pads in every shade of the rainbow. We'd taken everything that had littered the lounge and dining room, and all but thrown it into Lennox's studio to clear the house in preparation for the rehearsal dinner. We were holding it early because we needed an excuse to drink copiously and be relatively distracted from our upcoming nuptials and the stress of the big day.

Essentially, it was just a dinner party, but to keep Lennox busy I gave him free reign to do as he wanted as far as decorations went.

I sat with my feet up reading the newspaper as he kept to his tiny corner of the lounge, strategically cutting flower stalks down to measure exactly seven inches. Tiny vases surrounded him, a tight semicircle boxing him in that extended to the coffee table and all across the mantel. The TV was flickering

with some nondescript real life movie about a girl ballerina dealing with some form of tragic disease and I was distracting myself with the bleak stories of local crime rates in the city. The whole thing was a guise. What I was actually doing was staring at Lennox out of the corner of my eye, his face scrunched up in concentration as he measured stems against his ruler, making diagonal cuts that all went in the same direction and all fit perfectly with his plans. As he made each cut, his tongue would poke out the side of his mouth, giving him a childlike innocence that brought me back to high school and the days when we first realized our love for each other. To me, he was the most beautiful thing in the room; that was saying something as the lounge filled more and more with extravagant flower displays of matching shades of white and turquoise.

"I think you've got enough, Baby. You must have at least thirty vases of flowers and we only have three tables," I said, breaking him out of his workforce reverie for just a second.

"I bought them all, and they won't last until the wedding, so no flower will get left untrimmed," he giggled, returning back to his arduous measuring and cutting routine.

I kicked my feet down off the arm of the couch and placed them on the floor, scrunching my toes up in the brand-new, patent leather brogues that he had picked out for the occasion. He had requested I wear them all week in order to break them in so I wouldn't limp to the altar, but after two days they still felt like Italian leather torture devices and I was sure they were gradually filling with blood and strips of skin which they had stripped from my feet.

"Can I take these things off yet?" I asked, twisting my feet around in a vain attempt to stretch the non-relenting leather.

"Unless you can perform an upbeat Charleston in them, then no," he quipped, not taking his eyes off the last of the flowers. When he made the final snip and delicately placed the flower into his final vase, he looked up at me, lifting one eyebrow in question.

"I couldn't do a Charleston in sneakers, Len. These shoes aren't magical. Just painful."

He hopped up from his cross-legged position, hurdling over the vases as he moved towards me.

"Those dance lessons will not go to waste. Come on, get up," he said, putting out a hand to lift me.

I groaned, placing my hand in his as he swept me up from the couch. He dusted my shoulders off and patted my head. "Just relax," he commanded, leaving me standing there whilst he muted the television and hit play on the iPod dock attached to the stereo. As the slow string arrangement of Etta James' sultry hit song, "At Last", started to flow through the house, he rejoined me with a smile, placing one hand on my shoulder and lifting his other up to signal that I should assume the stance I had learned in our dance class. Rolling my eyes, I begrudgingly placed one hand on his waist and my other entwined with his beside us, level with his shoulder. "Remember what Rita taught us?" he asked, pulling me closer.

In all the weeks of dance classes, I had left it to Lennox to take the lead, despite the fact that I was technically the leading partner in the slow waltz. He pulled me towards him, and I clumsily followed him back as we twirled in awkward circles, my new shoes stepping on his bare toes at awkward intervals.

"Sorry," I muttered after one such event.

"Don't apologize," he said. "You're doing great."

We danced that way, his lean body swaying gracefully with the music while I held my muscles tight and fumbled along to keep up. It was like watching a figure skater perform a routine with Frankenstein's monster, only less coordinated. As the music died out, I sighed and let my muscles relax, unhinging my clenched fist from Lennox's as I mopped away sweat that had gathered on my brow more from nerves than actual exertion.

"Wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked, standing on his tiptoes to give me a brief, chaste kiss on my lips. I surprised him by grabbing him around the waist and lifting him up until his face was close to mine, a small yelp escaping his lips in shock. And with that, I covered his mouth with my own, kissing him deeply before spinning him around in circles. He tucked his legs around my waist as we twirled, my careless imitation of dancing making him giggle out loud.

"This is not dancing," he yelled as we spun faster and faster.

"It's much more fun this way, Baby," I yelled back, reveling in the glow he got when he laughed with such abandon.

I swung him around faster, so much so that my head was starting to swim and my circles were getting wider and less uniform. "I'm going to be sick," he yelled, as he uncurled his legs from around me and let the force of the spin

carry them in an arc around us, trying desperately to find a way to reconnect his feet with the floor.

I began to slow down, barely able to stay upright, both of us laughing at the sheer childishness of my actions. When he was safely on the floor, supporting himself against the couch, I tried to keep myself from blacking out or falling down, stumbling around carelessly as I reached for something with which to steady myself. Of course, in all my clumsiness, the only thing I could find was the mantel, displaying all of Lennox's flowers and boasting hours of hard work. As my hand reached out to steady myself, two of the vessels tumbled from the surface, the ceramic vases breaking with a crash against the back of the television. It was like watching it in slow motion; the shards of pale glass scattering and tumbling down to the floor as drizzles of water gathered around the stand of the television, one single trickle running down the lit screen.

I pushed myself away from the television, balanced on the arm of the couch as the box began to spark, huge white jets of light pouring from the back making loud cracking sounds as the light from the screen died. I stared on wide-eyed, knowing that Lennox would most likely kill me for being so clumsy again. But as I turned to face him, he was folded up in hysterical laughter, tears streaming from his eyes.

"What?" I asked, bewildered by his response.

"Your face," he yelled. "You look terrified."

"I am. I broke the TV!"

He laughed louder, pulling himself along the couch until he stood between me and the useless contraption that used to be our idiot box. He took a stance between my thighs, putting his hands on my shoulders as I looked up into those big, dark eyes; two globes of onyx in his face that were as deep and alive as drowning pools. He leaned down and kissed me, pulling back after a second and chewing at his bottom lip.

"Think we can register for a new TV?" I asked, only joking, my mouth curling up in a smile.

"I don't think any of our friends are *that* generous," he replied, kissing me again and resting his forehead against mine.

"Guess we'll have to find other activities to pass the time," I whispered, a low, seductive rumble deep in my chest.

“Race you to the bedroom,” he replied, grinding his hips into mine.

We lost an afternoon that day, and needless to say, dinner was late.

Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirteen Days Before:

The darkness was closing in, cool wind whipping against our faces as we traversed the bike path down to the river. For weeks we had performed this same ritual; spending as much time together at school before gathering at one of our houses for dinner and a movie, then a late night bike ride down to the city to stare out across the water. I held back, peddling half speed as Lennox raced ahead, his hair sweeping fluidly behind him, resembling a dark river. I watched his lean legs pump the pedals and the way his biceps tightened as he gripped the handlebars. Even in the fading twilight, I could still see every inch of the kid, in large part because in the weeks since we met, I had studied him for so long I could not forget any detail of him.

Even when I closed my eyes, there he was; a fully formed image that resided in the back of my mind. I was still confused by the feeling I got when he was around, but I figured since I'd never had a best friend before, that this was how all guys felt about their closest friends. He was definitely the closest friend I had ever had, everything about him seemed to radiate magic and buoy me if ever I was feeling low.

I could still make out his perfect silhouette ahead of me as the night grew darker, the rushing sound of the wind and his far off whooping all that I could hear over my own breath and my heartbeat in my ears. I watched him closely as he deviated from the bike path, cutting between two benches and dismounting his bike while it was still going at full speed. He let it tumble to the ground and abandoned it on the grass as he jogged slowly closer to the bank of the river. In all our time together, which was not much if I was honest, I had never told him how these nights by the river were my favorite time of my day. I cycled faster to where he had abandoned his bicycle and let mine fall beside it, the handlebars of mine by his back wheel, forming a yin yang in the grass. I raced over to where he sat, his arms resting on his bent knees as he looked out over the river towards the gleaming lights of Cambridge, lit with the buzz of a Friday night in the halls of Harvard.

I came to a skidding stop beside him, slamming down hard into the grass in a skid worthy of the high school baseball team, making him jump with my sudden and dramatic entrance.

"What you thinking about, buddy?" I asked him, nudging his arm just to feel the contact.

"*Batman*. What else?" he asked with a crooked smile that made my insides feel like they were melting. He was so incredible that I had to look away, picking at a patch of grass next to where I had landed, between where my arm rested and where his leg now lay against the moist surface.

"What about him, Len?" I asked, knowing I was sure as shit in for another of his amazingly well thought out and a little too energetic rants.

"I just finished *Knightfall*. Just got me thinking."

He'd been talking about *Knightfall* for weeks. He was behind on the previous summer's comics, but he'd finally been catching up and the story was getting him more riled up with each installment. He would go on for hours about the new bad guy, Bane, and how lethal he was because of his huge size and his devious ways. I loved to sit there and stare at the pictures with him while he detailed the back story I had missed and the symbolism that I was clearly too dumb to figure out. When he talked about comics, it was like a part of him he never got to use found the freedom to come out and play, and I felt blessed he invited me to be his playmate.

"So, what happened?" He looked over at me.

"Stupid question, Ryan," he laughed. "He won. Bruce Wayne always wins."

"So, why do you look so sad?" I whispered, chucking bits of grass onto his cargo shorts and rubbing them off soon after in a continuous loop that, if I was honest, was just an excuse to touch his leg. My touches started to last longer, and he looked down at me and smiled.

"He just wants to help people, you know?" I nodded as he looked back across the river.

"He's just this normal guy who uses what he has to help people. To protect them. It just seems like such a cool thing to do; helping people you don't even know because it's the right thing to do."

I stopped to consider it a moment, unsure of what he was really saying, but feeling there was more unsaid in that sentence than the words that he had spoken out loud.

"You want to become a vigilante, buddy?" I asked with a chuckle.

He smiled and pushed me.

"No, doofus," he said. "I just like that there are people out there looking out for others."

I placed my head on his leg. "We look out for each other," I said, unsure if it was the right thing to say.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I replied. "If you ever need protecting, I'll protect you, Len."

I turned over onto my back and stared at him, his gaze meeting mine, a wide smile on his face.

"I'll protect you, too," he whispered.

Our eyes stayed trained on each other for the longest time, and in that moment I understood the feeling I had whenever Lennox was around. He was everything to me; more than a friend, more than anything I'd ever known before. And I meant every word I had said to him. I would protect him, and I hoped I would get the chance to do that for as long as I lived.

Time stood still. I reached up and pressed my hand onto his cheek, which was cold from the dropping temperature of the approaching night. I let it rest there as he closed his eyes and pressed his cheek further into my palm, rubbing it against his baby soft skin.

He leant down to me, and I wondered what was going to happen and if whatever it was would change everything forever. As our lips gently brushed each other's, I physically felt the world shift beneath us. Everything changed as he brushed the tip of his tongue against mine.

My world changed as he became a part of me; as he became mine. We kissed slowly before he pulled back and looked back over the water, a small smile on his face.

"Len?"

"That was just like I thought it would be," he said, avoiding my eyes.

I sat up in the grass, draping my arm across his shoulders. "You wanted to do that?"

"I did it, didn't I?" he said, elbowing me in the ribs.

"Can we do it again?"

And we kissed once more; the sound of the flowing river our soundtrack, backlit by the silence of the city and facing a future that was never going to be the same, in the best possible way. We kissed passionately as the reality of life with Lennox wrapped its arms around me, making me feel, for the first time ever, like I had found my place in the world.

We were one. And Lennox tasted like infinity.

Twenty-two Days After:

The same smell came flooding from the kitchen. The same dulcet Motown hit of yesteryear. The same man standing at the stove, cracking eggs into a frying pan. It was like déjà vu, only I fully recalled the last time I had seen him do this. It was yesterday. The concern was racing down my spine like someone had walked over my grave as I put down my briefcase and rounded the corner to the kitchen.

“Oh, hey Babe. You’re home.” Same greeting, different day. I was weary as I closed in to greet him, observing the way he moved, hoping he’d take a different route back to the stove or come in for a hug instead of a kiss. He kissed me. Same as yesterday.

“You okay?” I asked, as if reading from a script.

“Yeah, just starving. I woke feeling...”

“Like you could eat a horse?” I asked, interrupting him midsentence.

“I was just going to say that,” he chuckled. “You read my mind. You shouldn’t have let me sleep in when you left.”

And just like that we were back to the script.

It was like the movie *Groundhog Day* in the open scenes where Bill Murray was trying to figure out what was causing him to wake up on the same day, every day. Only I knew what the cause of this was, and I was too terrified to admit it to myself.

I played my part like a pro; wandering into the kitchen, snaking my arms under his and kissing him just below the ear. The scarring now looked ominous instead of the hopeful reminder of his survival. I felt sick to my stomach.

“You hungry?” he asked, as I fought to swallow down the bile rising in my throat.

"Famished."

"Brilliant."

I squeezed him tighter, this time not from desire, but from devastation. What was happening to him? I was feeling sick to my stomach and the smell of the greasy eggs and bacon were coalescing with that feeling, causing my mouth to moisten like it does the second before you vomit. I released him and walked away, trying to find my breath, my control, and my composure; trying not to alarm him in any way. But something was wrong. I'd been feeling it for days.

"The TV isn't working. Can you call someone to fix it?" he repeated, an automaton on an endless cycle.

Again I grabbed the plates and led him to the dining room and again, after eating his meal, the meal I barely touched, he placed down his cutlery, and rubbed gently at his temples.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just a bit of a headache."

"I'll get you some painkillers and a glass of water." The repetition was unbearable.

"Maybe you should go lie down?" I deadpanned.

"Yeah, I think I will."

He excused himself, walked away, and through the alarm bells ringing in my head, all I could think was one word.

Help.

Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Ninety-five days before:

Some people can't stand the clap of thunder or the strobe effects of lightning. I wasn't one of those people. I lay in bed that night counting the minutes between the loud crashes of the weather pattern, trying to locate the distance of the storm overhead, like I had done my whole life. I counted twelve as I pulled my sheets up under my chin, rubbing my hands together to generate as much heat as I could. Rain pounded on my window in a constant barrage of muted sound, and it soothed me like the hypnotic beat of a metronome. I closed my eyes in the dimness of the room; rid myself of the sight of silhouetted trees

dancing against the far wall through the open drapes. I focused only on the sound and nothing more.

As the storm grew closer, the sound between thunder claps and lightning came quicker, first ten, then eight, then six. With my eyes closed I tried to predict its location, tightening my closed eyes every time I thought another sound would ring out through my room. Every time I guessed it right it felt like I controlled the storm, that I commanded it with sheer force of will and it gave me a rare sense of control. The rain slammed harder against my window; once, twice, and a third time, harder than before. It took me a while to realize that it wasn't the rain, but something else.

Though the room was frigid, I pulled back the covers, and dressed only in my boxer-briefs, went to the window to stare out. As I approached the glass, one more loud noise shook the fixture with the aid of a small stone, and as I traced the yard for its origin, I could make out a dark shape standing beneath the window, partially obscured in the darkness.

Had it been anyone else, I would have been scared, but I would recognize the lines of that body from miles away. I could see the curve of this shoulder and the severe definition of his jaw even through the rain-splashed glass panel. Lennox was indelibly marked in my memory.

He looked up at me from beneath the sheet of his dark hair, wet and slicked against his face. But the way he held himself told me something was very wrong.

I pulled a T-shirt over my head and ran to the stairs, bounding down them two at a time and threw open the door. I could make his shape out, stationary on the lawn; waves of defeat pouring off him like heat. Something inside me screamed to run to him, so abandoning all reason, I bolted outside in bare feet and my thin tee and boxers. I skipped down the steps of the stoop two at a time on the balls of my feet, my clothes sodden within seconds of my being in the path of the rain. I ran across the lawn, my feet sinking into the damp earth, making sloshing sounds with every step I took closer to Lennox. I almost body-slammed him when I reached him, the slick ground allowing no purchase for my bare feet.

"Lennox? You're soaked. Come inside," I yelled over the roll of fresh thunder, taking his slick hand in mine and leading him down the path to the stoop, leaving dark, muddy footprints in our wake. We rushed up the steps until we were finally back inside the warm sanctity of the house. I didn't want to

wake my parents, so we kept the lights off. I stripped off my T-shirt and used it to wipe the mud from my feet as Lennox removed his sneakers. I wrapped them in the T-shirt and in silence, led him to my room at the far side of the house, away from where my parents were sleeping.

Safely inside, I shut the door, wedging the chair from my desk beneath the handle to maintain as much privacy as we could. Lennox began to shake violently, the shock of the cold rain wearing off and taking with it any resolve he had to keep his shit together. I pulled off the thin sweater and T-shirt he was wearing in one go and abandoned them on the floor. He still wouldn't look at me, and the feelings his evasion caused were starting to churn inside me and my nerves started to manifest, and within seconds I was shaking beside him.

I moved slowly, reaching up and sweeping his damp hair off his face, tucking the thick, wet tendrils of darkness behind his ear. I nearly cried out when I saw what I saw.

Blood trickled freely from his nose, his lip was cut straight through, and the start of a nasty bruise was forming under his left eye. My heart started to break for him, and I thought I might lose control, scream and yell, put my fist through a wall. Someone had hurt him and I wasn't there to protect him. The guilt ripped through me as I did my best to stay strong, because in that moment, my strength was all I had to give.

I grabbed a towel from the dresser and draped it across his shoulders, and he pulled it in tightly around himself, as I fumbled with the button on his jeans, pulling it open and then carefully taking off what remained of his drenched clothing. He was glorious, standing there naked and trembling, but even defeated and bruised, Lennox DuWitt was still the most beautiful sight that I had ever seen.

"Climb into bed," I whispered, stroking his hair and kissing the side of his face that wasn't blossoming with damage. "Get warm, I'll be right back."

He seemed to panic, grabbing my wrist to stop me from leaving. "It's okay," I assured him. "I'm just going to get something for your lip. I'll be down the hall and back before you realize I'm gone. I've got you. I won't go anywhere."

He nodded and turned to climb under the covers that had cooled in my absence.

As I returned to the room, I replaced the chair under the door knob and went slowly to the bed with the bowl of warm water, the cotton balls, and the

peroxide I had taken from the bathroom. I set them all down beside the bed, stripped off my own wet clothes, and looked around for something to replace them with. Lennox reached for me, shook his head once and when I put my hand in his, he pulled me in beside him under the covers. I shuffled in until our naked bodies were touching and all at once the world was okay; we were together and the feel of his cool, lean thigh against mine meant that nothing could hurt us. Lennox and I were a team, and together we were always so much better. I put my hands on either side of his face, pulled him down for a chaste kiss on the forehead. He closed his eyes and reveled in the security he found beside me. He didn't need to say a word, because I felt every bit as safe as he did.

I didn't need to ask what had happened that night. Though Lennox's father had never gone this far before, there were times he had pushed him around, slapped him a bit, but for the most part, the emotional abuse was the worst. Over our time together, our nights at the river, Lennox had revealed more and more about his past with his father and what he was forced to endure when his mother would travel for her job. The bruises on his face had Malcolm DuWitt written all over them, his signature written in bruises and blood upon the face of my lover.

I leaned back, grabbing the bowl and the cotton from the nightstand and set to work clearing the blood from his nose. He flinched on occasion as I dabbed away the flecks of dried red, but Lennox never once complained or asked me to stop, and his bravery and determination made me want him even more. Even when I applied the peroxide to his cuts, he didn't say a word; his silence both eerie and strangely ethereal.

When he was all cleaned up, he started to look more like himself. The previous tension in his body dissipated as I ran my hands over his skin. I became more aware of our nudity; the first time outside the locker room we had bared ourselves to each other. But a question was chewing at me, gnawing at my consciousness, and begging to be asked. Though the timing was all wrong, I let my lips whisper the question that in that moment they seemed to need to speak.

“Why did he do this?”

Lennox broke eye contact with me, looked down into his lap, and inhaled a big breath that seemed to swell him to twice his size. He reached across me, fumbling on the floor for his soaked, discarded jeans, and pulled a folded piece

of paper from the pocket. As he righted himself back in the bed, he handed me the paper, never once meeting my eyes,

I took the paper, its edges moist from the rain and opened it up, nervous about what I would find. With the sheet flat on my lap, I inhaled sharply when I registered what I saw. There in front of me was a perfect comic book rendition of a man; his abs tight and his pecs visible through the costume. He stood, regally, his hands on his hips as a cape billowed behind him.

And his face was my face, every detail perfectly drawn to capture my likeness.

“Wow,” I whispered, and slowly he lifted his head to finally regard me. I was lost in the lines of the image and swelling with pride that he would do something so beautiful for someone like me.

“This is so beautiful,” I said, my eyes starting to prickle with the warmth I was feeling for the trembling boy at my side. “You made me into a superhero!”

“You are a superhero,” he said, so quietly I could barely hear a word. “You’re my hero.”

I kissed him gently, careful not to split his lip open and start the bleeding again, but he pulled me closer, forced the kiss to deepen and dragged me down under the covers with him, evidence of his impressive arousal pushing against the flesh of my naked thighs. I was lost to this boy, a slave to his every desire and his desire right then seemed to reflect my feelings.

That night we made love; a consummation of the relationship that I had found against all odds and now refused to ever let slip from my hands. That night we became men together, and solidified a bond that had started with an unnamed attraction and blossomed into something that made me feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

Eighty-eight Days After:

I thought about just calling from the road on my way back to the hotel, but I couldn't bring myself to brush him off like that. Though I had spent every night sleeping apart from him, Lennox still needed me, and though our friends went to visit him when they could, the bulk of his care still fell to me. I drove silently through the streets, in the car he would never remember, until I found myself back on the street where our house was located.

Every day it was harder and harder to get out of the car. Every day was the same, and though to Lennox it felt like nothing was wrong, each day made the whole thing seem more real to me. And at the root of all of this, I missed my Lennox so very much. I knew what I would find when I walked through the door and just once I wanted to find something else. I suppose it didn't help that I had been restocking all the eggs and bacon every week, but for once I wanted him to deviate just a little from the monotony of that one daily routine. The day was so nondescript, so pointless.

Just another day off from the coffee shop where he had nothing to do but stick around the house being lazy. The twenty-sixth. It was always the fucking twenty-sixth.

I turned off the engine and hauled in a deep breath. I would stay for a few minutes, make sure he was okay, swing by and see Warren and be back at the hotel by 8:30 to drink this day into oblivion.

I was unsure how much more of this I would be able to take as I neared the door, already sickened by the smell of fried eggs and bacon brimming on the other side of the wooden barricade. How much can one man truly take before he breaks? Lennox, in his brokenness, would never understand what I was doing for him, and the thought made me feel selfish. It wasn't about me. I had to keep repeating that like a mantra just to get me across the threshold. I stood in the hallway, dropped my briefcase down and played my part like a pro, my defeated vocal chords fighting with the Motown track I could no longer fucking stand. I turned off the music and walked to the kitchen.

"Oh, hey Babe. You're home."

It was the twenty-sixth again.

The Day Before:

We lay there, folded in each other's arms, slick with a post-coital sweat and panting from the exertion. Lennox draped one leg over mine, placed his head on my chest, and snuggled in, the way we had fallen asleep together ever since we started sharing a bed.

Outside, the storm picked up, the wind blowing the shutters so they nudged against the house. Whilst Lennox lay there, no doubt counting my heartbeats, which were elevated by our sexual adventures, I continued to count the seconds

between rolls of thunder, my eyes closed and tightening when I predicted the next would fall. It was a holdover from my childhood; one that I had maintained throughout my life after the first night I made love to Lennox, after which I was even more enamored by the sound of a storm outside. Behind my closed eyes that screwed shut tightly every ten seconds, I could still see Lennox as a boy, standing in my yard, his hair slicked over his face, thinking his life had ended. I can still remember every detail of the rest of that night when I proved that it had only just begun.

“Are you sleeping?” he asked, his voice vibrating against my chest.

“Nope,” I replied. “Not even tired.”

“Well that’s a kick to the ego,” he laughed.

“The sex was phenomenal, Baby,” I said, planting a kiss on the top of his head. “My body is well and truly ready to collapse after that. But my brain...” I let the sentence trail off, knowing he would pick up my meaning.

“Big day tomorrow.”

“The biggest.”

It was the night before the wedding, and though I trusted he had everything worked out and that it would all go off without a hitch, something inside me was still racked with nerves. I couldn’t quite get a handle on what I was feeling, since I had known I wanted to marry Lennox since I was sixteen years old, when it wasn’t even an option for us. I guessed it was the fact that, though I was bound to him in every way important, we would have to stand up and make a big fuss about it in front of our friends. I don’t know why this realization surprised me, since I had set these wheels in motion by placing the ring on his finger, but outside of a sporting arena, I was always nervous to be the centre of attention. I knew Lennox had similar issues, so I kept my anxiety to myself in a vague attempt at reassuring my self-assured fiancé. Fiancé. The word tasted foreign even when spoken in my mind. Fiancé wasn’t a thing. That’s why the wedding had been planned and executed so quickly. Fiancé was a limbo between together and forever. I wanted no part of it. I wanted to drag the man down to that courtroom until he was bound to me for all eternity and could never get away. Only then would my nerves subside.

The storm rang out again as I squeezed my eyes right at the moment it sounded. I could control the storm outside, but only Lennox could calm the storm I was feeling internally.

It took a while to realize what he was doing, running his fingers gently across my chest to the side of his head. With my eyes closed, I paid attention to the shape he was tracing; the outline of a heart with our name inside, the name we had decided to take for our own. Matheson-DuWitt. I chuckled when I realized.

“Excited?”

“You have no idea. The storm is making it worse.”

“How come? I thought you didn’t mind storms?” I asked, as he shifted himself off my chest and lay on the pillow beside me, facing me as I turned over to face him back.

“I love storms,” he said with a smile.

“Then what’s up, Baby?”

“Just brings it all back. That night.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said, running a finger gently across his cheek.

“We’ve come so far, and we are so close to having everything we ever dreamed of. Tomorrow, life will be complete.”

“My life was complete the second you fell into it,” I giggled as he slapped me on the arm.

“Literally.” I paused and took a breath. “Tomorrow will be great. It’s just another day. This,” I said motioning to us both. “This has been complete since back then. The rings change nothing. I’ve been your husband since I was lucky enough to meet you. You have to know that, right?”

His smile grew so wide I thought his jaw might snap, and I knew I’d said just the thing he needed to hear.

“Still, I don’t think I can sleep,” I said after a moment.

“Me neither,” he replied. “And you know I feel the same. I’ve loved you since I didn’t know what love was. And I will love you forever. Until we’re old and senile and die on the same day like in *The Notebook*.”

“You better not forget me though. I am not coming and reading our life story to you on the off chance you remember my name once in a while,” I laughed as he threw himself on top of me, straddling my legs as he initiated a tickle fight.

"I could never forget you," he said, forcing his hands under my armpit as I shrieked like a girl, which, on a broad guy of six-foot-two, sounded absolutely ridiculous, and it was evident Lennox thought so too, from the way he laughed even harder.

"You better not," I panted, pulling him off me and settling him back at my side, drawing him in for a deep kiss. His body melded to mine in a way that always made me marvel at how well we fit together; like two puzzle pieces, and without one, there was no way to tell what the picture was.

"Never," he promised.

But, like all promises, *that* one was made to be broken.

One Hundred and Ninety-seven Days After:

I sat across the table from the man, nodding intermittently at the things he was saying that I was so far from listening to I couldn't repeat if he asked me. I was sure my face was a mask of indifference, so every thirty seconds I would nod my head and smile to feign my participation in the conversation. This was the first date I had ever been on, and everything about it was warring against my instincts to just get in the car and drive back to the house to see Lennox. My hand tightened around the frosted glass of whisky rocks at the thought of his name, and I took a long, hard pull from the drink, nearly draining it in one swig.

Terrance was an investment broker from Winchester, only a few miles outside of the city proper, and our awkward blind date came courtesy of a friend of a friend of someone Warren went to college with. He had catalogue-model hair, was five years my senior, and had so many teeth he could be killed by ivory poachers. His shoulders were a mile too wide for his body, and his suit, I suspected, could be sold for the price of a small yacht. He was attractive, sure, and the man in me felt a deep stirring in my loins that had no doubt resulted from months without being able to touch Lennox absent the feeling that I was taking advantage.

After months of destroying myself with guilt, and Warren's constant nightly barrage of platitudes that I should move on with my life, I had finally relented to his demands, if only just to show him what a colossally bad idea it would be.

I drained the last of my drink, and raised my glass to Warren who was stood, arms crossed, assessing me behind the bar. With an enthusiastic thumbs

up, he poured another drink and ran it over, clearly enjoying being able to eavesdrop at a closer range. As he placed the drink down, I fired daggers at him from my eyes, causing his quick retreat as I made a hasty start on the fresh drink.

The amber liquid burned going down, and I welcomed the numbness that accompanied it, covertly looking behind Terrance for the clock mounted on the wall. We had been there for one hour, and I had barely said a word.

“Can you excuse me a moment?” I asked in my nicest faux-pleasant voice. “Nature calls.”

He stood up as I left the table, the picture of chivalry, and I spared a moment to assess his broad body, clearly gained from years of gym membership and careful diet.

In the bathroom, I braced myself against the sink, assessing my reflection in the mirror.

What was I even doing there? This felt so much like cheating that the thought of going back out there made my skin feel like it might crawl off my body. The liquor had numbed most of the residual guilt, but the thoughts that crossed my mind when I thought of Terrance’s huge muscular body and the things he could do with it spurned an extra flash of guilt. I could sleep with him, sure. We could have a night of meaningless sex and it would end right there. But I could never get involved with another man while the situation with Lennox was so precarious. As much as the idea of sex wasn’t entirely unwelcome, my heart was still trapped in that house with a man who thought I was out of town on business.

I splashed my face with cold water to try and wash the traitorous thoughts away, and dabbed at my skin with the rough blue paper towels. With a deep inhale of thick, bleach-filled bathroom air, I readied myself and returned to the table.

Again, the handsome man rose as I moved to take my seat, and my nerves once again got the better of me. He resumed his casual conversation, regaling me with stories of his nephew at Harvard and how he was alumni of some other boring shit I didn’t care about; all the while I was polishing off drink after drink in the hopes I would just black out and the night would be over.

As I swallowed the last of my sixth whisky, Warren startled me out of my trance.

"You okay there, buddy?" he asked, his face a mix of consternation and concern.

"Uh huh, I'm fine," I scowled.

"Maybe you guys should call it a night? You're looking a bit out of it."

I rose from my seat, stumbling, and causing Terrance to rise as well as Warren steadied me on my feet.

"Maybe I should call you a cab?" Warren asked, as he reached in my pocket and removed my car key, placing it into his jeans pocket.

"Good idea," I replied, turning to Terrance. "Sorry, Terrance. I guess I didn't realize how much I was knocking back."

"That's quite alright. As long as you had a nice night."

"Oh he did," Warren chimed in. "But I better get that cab sorted and get him home to bed."

"I can drive him," offered Terrance.

And that's how I ended up in Terrance's car, parked outside my Spartan apartment at 9.30 p.m. on a Tuesday.

As he idled by the curb, the silence seemed to stretch on forever. I unfastened my seatbelt and inhaled deeply, the scent of his cologne mixing with the fresh air.

"I had a nice time, Ryan," he said with a smile.

"I did as well. Guess I was pretty nervous."

"It's okay to be nervous. I heard about what happened, and it's completely understandable to feel that way, being back out there. Trying to leave certain things behind." He placed his hand on my knee, squeezing it gently before shifting it up to my thigh.

My body froze in shock. A strange man, who wasn't Lennox, was touching me, and I was scared half to death. The fear mingled with a hidden desire, and I turned to look him in the eye, speechless.

He moved slowly, clearly giving me a chance to back away if I needed it, but as his face drew near, my lips parted, perhaps to protest, but were silenced by the kiss. His lips were soft and felt so foreign against mine, and as his tongue slipped into my mouth, I let him fall into the kiss, tasting the remnants

of whisky that no doubt lingered on my tongue. He knotted his hand in my hair and shifted closer to me, and it reminded me of the way Lennox would initiate sex; back when we were whole and the world hadn't pulled us apart.

Lennox.

I pushed him back with so much force that he hit the driver's door with a thud.

"I'm sorry," he uttered. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm very sorry."

"No," I said. "No, it was my fault. I just..." I couldn't find the words. My face was burning red, tears threatening at my eyes and I felt like my tie was choking me; like I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. "I'm not ready," I whispered, opening the car door. "I'm so sorry, but I have to go."

Slamming the door behind me, the fresh air hit me full force, almost knocking me to the ground. I stumbled clumsily and righted myself, making a swift beeline away from the handsome man and his unwanted kisses. The tears streamed down my face, and I was acutely aware that I could barely stand up, more than aware that Terrance had gotten out of the car and was ready to help me if I needed it. But I was determined to put as much distance between myself and the man as possible. Without looking back, I stumbled up the last of the stairs, shoved my key into the lock and slammed the door behind me, crumbling into a pile on the other side of the threshold.

I lay there for hours, feeling like all the tears might help to wash away what I had done. But even after I had cried a river, I still couldn't wash away the betrayal. I cursed the world for the hand it had dealt me, and when the tears would no longer come, I pulled myself up and threw myself into bed, not even bothering to take off my shoes.

That was the moment I was truly defeated by the whole sorry situation.

One Hundred and Thirty-two Days After:

I'd given up hoping for change; dreaming of a day I'd walk through the door and Lennox would do something, anything, different from the day before. I'd given up talking to people at work, discarded focusing my mind on elaborate fantasies of the wheels in Lennox's head finally spinning forward, and the rings being back on our fingers, ready to start a new life together. Instead, I rehearsed my lines in my head; an actor on the stage of my own life. I

had tried to say something different, to lead the conversation away from where it usually went, but when I left my character, Lennox barely seemed to notice, steering us right back to the words we had both become accustomed to.

I had no friends to really rely on, other than Warren, and even my visits to the bar had decreased in the past weeks. I was a shell of a person, and though he was frozen in time, even Lennox had started to notice how the light had disappeared from my eyes; the light he put there that had been stolen by the events that led us there.

I had long since abandoned any intimacy I had previously showed him before I decided to leave each night, and his reaction to my frosty demeanor had been met with one of his own. I had tried to convince myself that that was a good sign; that somewhere inside him, his mind was starting to grab hold of some of the memories we were reliving, and their minute deviances, for keeps.

The bedroom door stayed closed as I packed fresh clothes and discarded the old ones into the hamper; the smell of eggs and bacon barricaded outside the door as the familiar scents were starting to choke me. I would never eat these foods again, an olfactory reminder of all that had changed in just a few short months.

When everything was packed, I hurried down the stairs, hold-all in hand, and yelled an unenthusiastic goodbye to Lennox as he sat, alone, at the dining room table, lost in the diet he had carved for himself which was inexplicably adding the pounds around his middle. He would never truly be able to grasp where those pounds were coming from.

“See you tomorrow,” I yelled as I opened the door to exit, stage left.

“Enjoy your business trip.”

The cool air was always a welcome, the smell of burnt asphalt and freshly mown grass a rewarding respite from the unfamiliar scent the house had gathered in my absence. I hurried, double speed to the car, opening it remotely and throwing myself inside after chucking my bag onto the back seat.

I sat, hunched at the shoulders, a picture of defeat with my hands gripping the steering wheel. Deep breaths refused to calm me and my chest felt so tight I could barely breathe. I reached inside my shirt, liberating the chain hanging there and gripped my hand tightly around the two gold rings that it held. My breath eased. My chest lightened. These were totems from another time, the only things left tethering me to a time that had all but been lost to one second of

careless distraction. The rings were not what they used to be, but to me, they signified a love that most people never got to experience; one that I had enjoyed for longer than ever expected and one that, though gone, would always live on in my memory, even if it was locked inside Lennox's, abandoned and forgotten.

I started the car, drove away, and let my own repetitive routine recommence.

That Day in Spring:

Whoever invented the bowtie needed to be shot immediately, as I clumsily fiddled with the knot, my large, ape-like knuckles making it all but impossible. As I faced the mirror, awkwardly messing up the simple technique, I felt two strong hands run up the back of my shoulders, pull my hands away, and deftly tie the knot as if there were nothing to it. When Lennox was satisfied I looked presentable, he let his hands drift away, sweeping them gently down the back of my shirt as he disappeared from my periphery, emerging a second later with my jacket in his hands, holding it open to allow me to finish the look. I bent backwards, arching my spine down to his height as I shoved my arms through the sleeves. Smoothing the front panels gently, I appraised myself in the mirror giving my reflection a crooked smile. I didn't look half bad.

"You look perfect," Lennox said from behind me, as I turned to face him, armed with a courteous response. What I saw took my breath away. With his hair tied back in an intricate, fish-tail plait, the defined angles of his face were more visible than I had ever seen them. The white of his tux jacket seemed to illuminate his pale skin, hugging to his body so tightly it was like a second skin. In all the years we had spent together, not even at his graduation had Lennox ever looked this way; an ethereal glow emanating from him due to how comfortable and handsome he was looking.

"You..." I stuttered, unable to find words worthy of him. "You look perfect."

His smile stretched wide as he stepped close to me, running his hands under the fabric of my jacket around the turquoise cummerbund that matched his own. While he was dressed in a white jacket, mine was black; his idea of tipping our hats to age old tradition, though our marriage was far from it. His body lay perfectly against mine, shifting himself upwards to meet my mouth in a gentle, loving kiss. I pulled him as close as I could, wanting to savor every

second of this day, to commit it to memory so I would never lose the feeling of being exactly where we should be; together, and for all time.

The kiss deepened as he groaned, rubbing himself against me, causing heat to flare from under my collar.

“Whoa there, Baby,” I whispered. “We don’t have time for that.”

“Yeah, and this suit was not made to accommodate excitement,” he said, looking down at his skintight dress pants that almost looked painted on, and blushing. “Are you ready to do this?”

When everything we needed for the humble ceremony was packed into the car we had rented for the day, we climbed into our respective seats, the unfamiliar cushioning, and the tight clothing causing us to shuffle around to get comfortable. Avoiding creasing our jackets at all costs, we fastened our safety belts and I gunned the motor, listening with a smile to the roar of the vintage motor. I looked across at the man I loved, as he fiddled with the Superman pin that his friend Cameron had given him as his something blue. He was determined to adhere to as many traditions as possible; a silent declaration of our right to marry, like every other person out there. His friend Elton had had a floppy disk that contained his first manuscript melted down and made into a bracelet, and Lennox was wearing it with such pride as his something old. We skipped over something borrowed as we were wearing rented tuxes, and the something new was due to happen in about an hour’s time. I took his hand in mine, mainly to stop him from fiddling with the pin any more, but mostly for my own comfort, just to feel the realness of him, to feel the contact.

“You ready for this, Mr. Matheson-DuWitt?” I asked with a smile, butterflies flying around inside me at just the mention of our new name.

“I’ve been ready my whole life,” he said back, squeezing my hand. “You got the rings?”

I patted my jacket pocket. “Right here, next to my heart,” I said with a goofy grin. He socked me in the arm as I pulled away from the house for the last time as an unmarried man.

We drove in silence, comfortable and content, each step we made closer to the courthouse causing a crackle of excitement to fill the vehicle like static. Each click of the dial that signified another mile had passed was like a countdown to our big moment. I imagined all our friends waiting there, ready to shower Lennox with rose petals. I imagined the beauty of his smile as we

finally cemented our relationship in a promise that would last forever. I had never been more ready for anything in our entire lives.

As we stopped at a crossroads, waiting for the light to change, he reached across the car, and put his hand on mine on the gearshift. I looked him dead in the eye and saw my life so clearly before us, what was meant to be happening was finally happening on this day.

The light changed and I put the car in gear and headed forward, as Lennox whispered from his seat. "I love you, Ryan. With all my heart."

I felt my eyes prickle, my voice catching in my throat as I turned back to him to answer his words with some equal dedication of my own that could express just how I felt about the man at my side; my partner in crime and the love of my life

Those words never came.

I will never forget the way my stomach bottomed out; will never be able to erase the terror that ran through me right before the truck hit us. And I will never, ever be rid of the earsplitting sound of the car crushing like a tin can, and, as I lost consciousness, the sound of Lennox's seatbelt breaking and his head colliding with the dashboard. Blood looks so dark when falling onto stark white silk, and that contrast has been burned into my memory for all time, a macabre ending to what should have been the happiest day of our lives.

Fifty-nine Days After:

My office was feeling more like a tomb with each passing day; everything that I loved about my job slowly dwindling down into nothing until I dreaded being in the humble space. The ficus in the corner was dead from my lack of care and my desk chair felt like I was sitting on concrete. I was trying desperately to ignore the smell coming off the shirt I had been wearing for three days, the tie with the red wine stain on it, and how tight my pants were starting to get from lack of caring for myself. I had learned long ago that when you're having a bad day, things can only get better.

In this instance, that platitude couldn't have been more wrong, as the phone rang; caller ID presenting a number I hadn't seen in months.

As I pulled into the parking lot of the coffee shop, I knew exactly what had happened. Lennox sat on the curb, his head in his hands, and an icy chill went

through me as I realized what I would have to say to him. This conversation never got any easier. We had had it too many times already, and each time it pierced my heart even harder than the last.

I pulled into an open space and stared at him, his shoulders bobbing up and down with the tears he was crying under the loose curtain of his dark hair. I was frozen, watching the picture of my lover, lost, alone, and confused. I found myself unable to move, watching his colleagues inside the coffee shop look out on him in concern. He hadn't worked there in weeks; following the accident we had kept him away from the place. It had been sheer dumb luck that he had wound up existing in a perpetual day off of work, but things like this were unprecedented. He had never tried anything like this before, and the thought that he might have to experience this again was breaking my heart.

I fought the urge to cry along with him as I swung open the car door and settled both feet on the tarmac, checking to see if my weary legs would hold me upright, before I walked over to where he was sitting, not even bothering to close the car door behind myself.

I hitched my tight trousers up and crouched down on the sidewalk beside him, taking an uncomfortable seat on the hot concrete. He didn't look up at me when I placed my arm gently across his shoulders, just shook his head, and continued to cry into his balled up fists.

"Len?" I said, gently. "Lennox. Look at me?"

He took a moment to gulp a deep breath and finally, when he had composed himself slightly, he raised his head to face me. His eyes were deeply bloodshot and his face was puffy, providing a perfect frame for the complete loss that he was battling inside. I felt bile rise in my throat. I had wanted to shelter him from this. I had wanted him to stay in his bubble and never have to deal with anything to do with that day in Spring. I knew that in order to get him back to the house, I would have to evade all his questions, and help him get lost in a sedative that would take him into tomorrow, where the pain and the loss would be long forgotten.

"I don't understand," he said, through his sobbing. "They're lying. They have to be lying!" His yell a precursor for a fresh wave of grief, as more tears poured down his flushed cheeks and trickled to his chin before falling into his lap.

"What happened, Baby?"

“They said I don’t work here anymore. They said I hadn’t worked here for weeks. But I remember. I was here yesterday. I fucking remember it,” he screamed. “They’re lying to me, and I don’t know why!”

“Why don’t we get you home, Len? We can talk about it there, okay?” I rubbed my hand on his back, trying to soothe him. He shuffled away, pushing at my arm.

“No, tell me what’s going on!” he demanded. “What the fuck happened? I lost my fucking job; you look like shit, and I have this,” he said, pulling back his hair to reveal the large scar snaking down the back of his head. “Ryan, please!”

“Len, please. Let me take you home.”

“No, not until you tell me,” he said, his face pleading with me, every ounce of his pain displayed there like a mask of mourning.

“Okay,” I sighed. “Okay.”

I didn’t want to do it. I couldn’t even begin to ready myself for what I was about to say. But I knew him; knew how terribly stubborn he was, and the only way I was going to get him into the car was by telling the truth. I rubbed my hands roughly over my face as I readied myself, carefully considering my words.

I pulled the chain from inside my shirt, letting the two rings dangle in front of him as a tear ran down my face.

“We were on our way to get married,” I said, my voice thick and coated with sorrow.

“We got married?” he asked, tentatively touching the rings hanging in front of him.

“We never made it there,” I said, slowly placing my hand in his. “There was an accident.”

His eyes widened in horror as his hand jetted back up to the angry scar on his head. I simply nodded an assent to the unspoken question.

That afternoon we sat there for nearly an hour, as I recounted everything that had happened since our happy day had turned to tragedy. He was inconsolable, and it took all the effort I had left in my body to scrape his damaged self off the curb and into the car; to take him back to the house where

we had lived so happily, and feed him a sedative that would put an end to his suffering, rendering him comatose once more until the clock ticked off every second left of his memories of that day. I lay on the couch that night while he rested silently in bed, relaxed into a dreamless sleep that would deliver him from the curse of his memory. I didn't sleep for one second that night, and when the sun began to rise in the distance, I was filled with a relief that allowed me to close my eyes for a short while. That was the only time I was grateful for the effects of the damage the accident had done to Lennox, and continued to do to me.

Two Hundred and Forty-seven Days After:

The fake smiles and tender words had died months before. The best I could manage was forced civility, all emotion I had previously felt being stored in a lock box in the same place where Lennox's memories were hidden. I had lived the twenty-sixth for far too long, and in doing so I had stagnated as much as he had, and the pressure of repetition had broken me. Where Lennox had a scar that you could see and touch, all my scars were on the inside, building up and hardening until the scar tissue halted the function of everything else in my life.

I gave up. I picked up my bag, opened the door, and fled the house once more.

"Enjoy your business trip," he yelled, as I walked away even more numb than the day before.

Seven Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-seven Days Before:

"Quick, Len," I whispered. "No one's around. Give me a kiss?"

He leaned himself against me and leaned into me, kissing me quickly but with a deep passion that we had practiced every minute we had alone.

"There," he replied. "That's all you're getting."

I poked my bottom lip out, feigning sadness as he laughed at my childlike expression. His laughter was infectious and soon I was laughing with him, the sound of his joy like a blanket that made me feel warm all over. The kid had a power over me that was like nothing I had ever seen or experienced; the ability to put me into a trance just with his proximity, the power to make me do whatever he asked without question.

He turned away from me, flipping the pages of his textbook, and pretending to read about something to do with geography. I knew he was pretending because the book was upside down, and from the way he was staring at it, it was clear nothing on those pages was registering at all.

“What’s up?” I asked, my brow furrowing in concern. “Did something happen?”

“No, why?” he asked, seemingly confused.

I reached across and turned the book up the right way.

“Oh,” he said, before letting out a frustrated sigh and falling back against the grass, his hands covering his face.

We were sitting in a remote part of the school grounds; a secret place we had discovered that only stoners and smokers ever really passed by, which was practically deserted during this, our only shared period together. I let myself fall back next to him so we were both lying, side by side, his face still shielded by his hands. I could see him perfectly, even though my eyes were squinted to protect them from the sun as it glared down on us from overhead, and I could tell there was something on his mind.

“You know you can talk to me, right? About anything you want?”

He let his hands drift away from his face, crossing them over his chest as he stared up into the sky, his eyes closed a fraction to avoid the sun’s glare.

“I know,” he said, quietly. “It’s stupid. Don’t worry about it.”

An uneasy silence settled between us, and my stomach began to knot. I couldn’t stop myself panicking, thinking he had had second thoughts about me, that he didn’t want to be my boyfriend any more. Even though it was a secret relationship that no one knew about except us, the thought of losing it made my skin prickle in gooseflesh.

“You can’t say that,” I whined. “I’ll just worry. Tell me. Please,” I said, nudging him over and over until he started to giggle and sat up, looking down at me.

“It’s nothing bad. Seriously, Ryan, don’t worry.”

“Tell me,” I chanted, over and over, tickling his ribs until he squirmed.

“Okay, okay!” he yelled. “Just promise you won’t get mad?”

“Why would I get mad?”

He got really quiet and again I started to panic. Whatever it was he was hiding was clearly a big deal to him, and his silence became unbearable as he sat before me fiddling with the laces of his sneakers, doing all he could to avoid meeting my eyes.

I gave up on waiting, blurting out my question before I lost my moxie. "Don't you want to be with me anymore?" I asked, the concern more than evident in the sad way I asked the question.

His eyes shot up to mine and widened. "Of course I do," he yelped, his voice lilting up at the end, clearly expressing his own panic that I had even dared to ask him what I had. "Why would you even ask that?"

"No reason," I replied. "It was all I could think of."

"Well, you're wrong." His face grew grave.

"Stop it, Baby," I said, as he flushed. I'd started calling him that recently and every time I did, his face turned slightly red and his smile was impossible to disguise. "You're making me nervous." He stayed silent, until I prodded him to speak. "Tell me!"

"I love you," he blurted out, and my face froze in shock, our eyes locked, and the temperature seemed to rise a thousand degrees.

Love? What was love? I was seventeen years old. What could we possibly know about love? I'd only ever had Lennox as a romantic partner, and I was still so confused about what that meant. No one ever talked about people being gay, and even though I knew that's what we were, I still couldn't fully understand the full implications of it. I had had exactly one girlfriend my whole life, in middle school, and that only lasted a week. And then there was Lennox. I knew I couldn't stand to be anywhere but with him. I knew he was the best and kindest person I had ever met, that he made me smile every day without fail, that sexually I couldn't keep my hands off of him. But was that love? I had never even thought about it.

"You love me?" I asked, baffled entirely by the concept.

"That's what I said," he shot back, slight anger tingeing the words. "Forget it," he whispered. "Forget I said anything."

"No, I don't get it."

"What's not to get? I love you. I love you with all my heart; every single thing about you makes my life so much better. I love you."

“But how do you know?” I felt stupid, really dumb that I couldn’t fathom how a person could know such a thing.

“I just know.”

“But how?”

He sighed and fell back down to lie in the grass. “It’s lots of little things. Like how when we are inside, your eyes are the bluest I’ve ever seen. But when we come outdoors they have a golden glow that I can’t stop looking at, and it’s so confusing I can’t even mix that color in my paints. You have five freckles on your back that look like a star. You always look at me in a way that makes me feel complete, especially when you think I don’t notice. Your favorite book is *The Great Gatsby*. You’ve read it fourteen times and it’s the only book you’ve ever loved. You have one copy on your bookshelf with a corner turned down and one line highlighted because it is the most beautiful thing you ever read. You never get full when you eat. You taste like candy all the time, even though you never eat it. You open up to me without realizing it because we are so comfortable together. You make me feel like a real person, like I’m the only person in the world, and I never, not once, feel bad when you are around. Your touch can heal me in ways I can’t figure out. And you are so smart, so fucking smart that the fact you are being so dumb right now makes me crazy.” He gasped in a breath as he stopped, shaking his head and put his arm over his eyes.

The silence seemed to envelope us. I don’t know why, but I felt like he might be crying, his eyes hidden from my view. I lay down beside him, gently placing my hand in the one covering his face and squeezed. “So it’s the little things?” I asked, gently.

“All the little things, yeah.”

“Oh,” I said. I got it. I really did. “I guess,” I paused, as he took his hand away from his face and turned to look at me. “Well, I guess that means I love you too,” I said, a huge smile morphing my face into something that made his eyes widen and his body turn towards me.

“You guess?”

“No, Len. I know. I could list a thousand things like that about you. A million even. If that’s what love is, then I love you so fucking much.”

He launched himself at me, pulling me close, attacking me with a barrage of kisses all over my face.

"He loves me," he yelled, straddling my waist, his arms high above his head as if in victory.

"He loves me too!"

I couldn't contain my laughter. So *that* was love. It felt so good to give it a name. I pulled him down until his face was inches from mine.

"I'm going to love you forever," I whispered, pulling his face to mine for a kiss. We didn't even check who was around, because he loved me and I loved him and that was all that counted.

Twenty-seven Days After:

"Transient Global Amnesia," Dr. Gardiner said, not taking his eyes off the computer screen as an image began to form before him.

I tried not to pay attention to the small sniffing noises coming through the speakers or look through the glass window at Lennox on the other side. He was lying still, contained within the huge hollow MRI machine that looked more like a coffin from a sci-fi movie, about to be shot into space. It had taken hours of explaining, of recalling the events of the past three weeks to even get him out of the house, and he hadn't stopped crying, and it was abundantly clear that his tears had still not stopped as he fought to maintain control to avoid having to repeat the scan.

"It's rare, but it could be what we're looking at," the doctor replied from his trance as the image grew longer. "You say he has no recollection of the accident?"

"He has no recollection of anything. He thinks it's some random day. He doesn't remember the accident, getting engaged. Anything." I was so frustrated, my observations sounded like I was angry at the doctor. The truth was I was angry at the whole situation. We'd been through enough already; this was just too much for us to deal with. "He'll forget we were here tomorrow. He'll just get up, cook the same fucking meal, and say the same useless things. What's wrong with him, Doc?" My voice was desperate. I wanted Dr. Gardiner to fix this; to give me an explanation, a magic bullet, anything to fix what was broken inside Lennox's head.

"The mind is an incredibly complex organ, Mr. Matheson. If what you are saying is true, this is a very rare and very under-researched area of medicine.

There are exceptionally few cases of this type of injury documented and the results from those are all different.”

“So what does that mean? Will he come out of it?”

The doctor sighed as the MRI completed on the screen. He turned towards me, a look of sympathy painted across his face, so obvious I wanted to slap it right off. “No two injuries are the same. This scan shows no sign of any physical injury. But his coma lasted much longer than we would have expected. There is no way to know if these symptoms will eventually subside, or...” he paused, cautious of finishing the sentence, as my grip on my temper threatened to completely dissolve.

“Or if he’ll be like this forever...”

I turned to the window, watching as the platform that Lennox was lying on slowly re-emerged from the mechanical cocoon. I felt so hopeless. I couldn’t imagine our lives being changed in such a devastating way. Sure, I was eternally grateful that my carelessness hadn’t ended his beautiful life, but the threat of repeating that same day for the rest of our lives was a fate worse than death. How could I live like that; frozen in time, never moving forward with our lives? Never experiencing anything new because the memory of it would just be lost from his mind forever?

“You have to be patient, Mr. Matheson. Unfortunately, all you can do is wait.”

“So, what now?”

The doctor paused to think. “You could ask him to keep a diary, and present him with the truth each day? It might help to document his days, so he could read about them each morning.”

“So you want me to break his heart every day, and then have him spend the rest of his fucking awful days reading about things he has done but will never remember? Forget that. I can’t hurt him like that.”

Through the window, Lennox sat up on the metal platform. His eyes were puffy and swollen and he rubbed at them. He looked so lost, all I wanted to do was take his pain away any way I could.

“What other choice do you have?” The doctor asked from behind me.

That was the question. I was suffocating between the rock and the hard place, and all I could do was stay there; to wait the course and pray that something, anything, would change.

Lennox gripped the hospital gown around him, and in my mind, all I could hear was the final crashes of the accident; only this time, that sound was my heart shattering, a collision inside me so catastrophic, I thought I'd never be whole again.

Yesterday:

I was on autopilot as I fished the keys out of my pocket, jamming that all too familiar gold key into the Yale lock and twisting it until the door popped open. Like every day, I placed my briefcase down by the door, and walked towards the kitchen ready to participate in a soul-destroying badminton match of words I had played hundreds of times before; the outcome always the same.

One foot stepped in front of the other as I rounded the corner into the kitchen, taking no time to assess my surroundings. They never changed, I thought. Why bother?

Lennox was not standing at the stove.

I walked further into the room, looking for any sign of his presence. All that I found was a pan, slowly simmering on the stove. I opened the lid, for no other reason than curiosity. I leaned in, inhaling deeply as the rich aroma of marinara sauce assaulted my senses. It was a specialty of Lennox's and it seemed like forever since I had smelled the mouthwatering scent.

"Oh, hey Babe. You're home."

Lennox came up behind me and snaked his arms around my waist, laying his head against my back. I tried not to get too drawn into the familiar feeling, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I knew that getting too close would only hurt me further, but there was a tiny part of me that craved the intimacy we had shared; that wanted nothing more than to wrap myself in him and get lost in his body, just for one night.

I pulled his arms tighter around me, leant back into the embrace and it felt more like home than I had felt in months. He stood up on his tip toes and kissed my neck, and the familiar scent of his skin, that I had been denying myself, flooded my head, making it swim with a recollection so strong it threatened to overpower me. I breathed another deep lungful of his unique scent into myself and let him fill me, lost for a moment in the sensation of the past.

I turned myself around in his arms, not once trying to restrain myself from him. It was as if I were the teenage boy he had fallen in love with; all hormones

and a desire to be connected to this man in any way I could. I stopped when I saw him. His hair was tied back, exposing the strong lines of his face. I reached behind him, pulling the braid of hair around and into view. It was tied in the same fish-tail plait it had been the day of the accident.

“You changed your hair?” I asked, wearily.

“Yeah. Just wanted to do something different. It was a mess. You like it?”

“I love it,” I said, fighting the wave of nostalgia that threatened to mow me down like a truck.

He smiled, running his hand along my face. “When did your hair get so long?” he asked, running his fingers through it carefully. I had forgotten to cut it. I cursed myself for the oversight, reprimanding myself and promising to rectify it the next day in an attempt to keep his days free from deviation, determined to avoid anything that might harm him more than necessary.

“It needs a cut,” I said, as he bunched his fist in it and pulled me down towards him.

His lips were as soft as they were on the banks of the river, and my control departed as I took him in a kiss that buckled his knees. I held him up in my arms, pressing forcefully against his mouth, savoring his taste as he clawed at my shirt, desperate for the closeness. I pulled him from the ground, let his legs circle my waist, and backed him against the counter top, placing him down on the surface as we ground our uncontrolled arousal against one another. I hadn't felt so alive in such a long time, like every hair on my body stood to attention and every inch of my skin was crackling like a lightning storm.

I pulled his hair from its braid, running my fingers through the complicated plait until the hair fell carelessly around his shoulders. I put my face to it, inhaling the familiar scent that had abandoned me in my absence. He lifted his face up, giving me access to his neck and I fed there, hungrily lapping at his smooth, pale skin in a way I knew drew him crazy. He ground himself against me, starved for my touch. We spurred each other on, our hands roaming over the familiar contours of our bodies, desperate to connect; the passion building to a fever pitch that I feared would destroy me once and for all.

Then I stopped. I had to. It wasn't right to torture either one of us this way. Suddenly, I was back in the kitchen in the house we had shared for years. Before.

“Why are you stopping?” he asked, his face etched in concern.

Subconsciously, I ran my hand across his hair, my fingers running the line of the fading scar that tainted his otherwise perfect skin. "You seem awfully pleased to see me," I joked, trying to avert any rejection I may have caused by ceasing our passionate embrace.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in so long. It's weird. I woke up missing you."

It was such an odd sensation for him to explain, but it was one I understood all too well. I had missed him like crazy; like a piece of myself had been carved off and without it I was useless. This was just my body's way of reminding me where I belonged, and I hated myself for not being able to quit this life; for not being able to leave this all behind and find my own happiness. "I know what you mean," I whispered, leaning in for one last chaste kiss.

I backed away from between his legs, rubbing the sweat from my brow with the sleeve of my shirt. Lennox hopped down from the counter with a smile and his classic signature wink that had me yearning for our old life. This was the most animated and *himself* I had seen him since the accident. His demeanor made me ache inside, and I thought if I stayed in that house one second more I would lose my shit completely.

He moved silently around the kitchen, swaying to the music as he went. Only then did it dawn on me that I didn't recognize the song. While I was used to the same old Motown classics, this tune was far more modern, an electronic piece that was at complete odds with the music that had played in the house for the longest time. He lifted the lid from the pot and began to stir, bringing the spoon up to his lips to taste the flavors before chucking in another pinch of salt and stirring again. After another taste, he nodded his head, replacing the wooden spoon in the pan and drawing out another spoonful. He cradled the drips with his hand and brought the spoon over to me, putting it up to my lips.

"Taste," he demanded, and my lips parted as he placed the spoon between them. The sauce was too hot but the flavors swept over me, causing me to audibly moan in the euphoria of the taste that I thought would be lost to me forever. "You like it?" he asked, smiling up at me with that glorious smile that I had always found myself getting lost in.

"It's perfect," I replied. "You've not made this in a while."

"Felt like a change," he said, walking back to the stove.

I started to poise myself to inform him of my business trip that didn't exist, but halted myself from saying a word. I wanted to lose myself in the evening, to

spend time with Lennox like he used to be. I wanted to stay exactly where I was and though it might break the remaining pieces of my heart, I couldn't manage to care one bit at that moment. I wanted to taste our old life, to immerse myself in what should have been and to drown in the man I had loved for my whole adult life. I wanted to be selfish and pretend the last months had never happened; to have him wash every bit of pain away from me and to be myself for one night before returning to the awful reality of my loneliness.

"I think this is just about done. I could fry up some shrimp and cook it with some rice. Sound good?"

I just nodded as he went to the fridge, opening the door and reaching past the fresh eggs and bacon I had been bringing every day since before I could remember. He pulled out the shrimp in one hand and two beers that had been long forgotten, handing them to me so I could remove the caps. I dutifully complied handing one back to him, clinking our bottles together as he reached into the cupboard for the rice.

"Cheers, Babe," he said, lifting his bottle in a toast. "Why don't you go put your feet up and I'll get this finished."

I smiled, elated by how much he seemed to enjoy taking care of me. I couldn't place it, but there was something so alive about him that I felt myself falling for him all over again.

"And you can tell me all about your business trip."

I stopped dead in my tracks, my beer slipping from hand and crashing to the floor, splintering into a thousand moist pieces. "What did you say?" There was no way in hell he could have remembered that trip. "Lennox, what did you just say?" I said more forcefully. He met me with a look of alarm.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "I just asked how your trip went. You looked so sad leaving yesterday I just wanted to make sure you were okay?"

I crossed the kitchen in two strides, taking his arms in my hands and shaking him, like I could loosen an explanation from him that way. "Len, this is important, okay? What date is it?"

"Ryan, you're scaring me."

"Len, please! The date?"

"It's the twenty-seventh," he screamed at me. I turned to the calendar, and sure enough, the paper reading the twenty-sixth had been stripped from the pad,

revealing a fresh sheet I never thought would be seen in this house. I grabbed him in my arms, held him so close, determined never to let him go. And I cried. Which only served to scare him more. He pulled me from around him, staring up at me with a shocked and scared expression.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, a hand on my cheek. “Are you okay?”

“I’m better than okay,” I cried, throwing my arms back around him.

“Let’s sit down,” he said, switching the flame off on the stove and taking my arm, leading me to the couch. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I braced myself for the conversation, for the talk that would ruin what started off such a perfect night. I would tell him everything, and it would scare him and hurt him in ways I would never understand, but I owed him that much. We had moved forward one day, and I was unsure it would last, but if it did, if some miracle brought him back to me, then he needed to know everything I did.

We sat down on the couch, and I told him everything. I pulled no punches, and together we cried, as the past finally found us, and confronted us in a way we could never have been prepared for.

Today:

We stayed awake as long as we could, but as the sun started to fill our room with early morning rays, I lost the battle with exhaustion and fell into a deep sleep, my body tangled around Lennox as if he were the missing piece of me. When I finally roused, I was alone in the bed, tangled in the sheets. Lennox was nowhere to be found.

And then it hit me. That smell. Eggs. Bacon.

My heart sank, and the tears prickled freshly at my eyes. It had only been one day, but it had felt like the beginning of a new phase of his recovery. But I had been wrong.

I redressed and headed to the bathroom, washing my face in cold water in an attempt to wake myself from what felt like the best dream I had ever had, but in reality was just a nightmare. When I had rid my eyes of tears, and made myself as presentable as possible, I headed down the stairs to find Lennox at the stove, cooking the same meal he had cooked daily since he sustained his injury. I watched him longingly, praying for only one more day like the one before. He looked up when he saw me enter the room and smiled a weary smile.

"I was going to bring you this in bed," he said. "You should take the day off."

"Why?" I asked, with no defeat or venom in my voice.

"Because you just got home, Ryan. You just got back here after months away from me and I need to talk about this."

"You remember?"

"I remember everything from yesterday," he said. "Before that, the things I lost are still gone, but I remember everything we talked about."

Relief flooded me like a hit from a potent drug. I ran to him and grabbed him into my arms, held him to my heart as he reached around me and held me back. He was here, he remembered it all. I don't think, in all my life, I had ever been as happy and relieved as I was in that moment.

In all the talks of what had happened, I had omitted the proposal; never once spoken a word about the wedding. If he couldn't remember that day, then our lives would lead us there eventually. Until then I would keep these rings around my neck, and wait for the right time to put one on his finger as he sleeps; to make him my world all over again. He pulled back and looked up at me with a smile.

"Go back to bed," he said. "I'll bring you breakfast."

He kissed me as we unwound our arms from each other, and I smiled.

"What?" he asked.

"You can bring me breakfast," I smiled. "Just anything but bacon and eggs." He looked at me with a confused look etched into his beautiful face. "I'll explain when you get back to bed," I said, laughing as I left the kitchen, to head back to the bed where our lives would begin all over again.

I couldn't wait for all the tomorrows that previously he would never have known. I couldn't wait to give them all to him, every day, for the rest of our lives.

End/Beginning

Author Bio

My name is BJ Sheppard and all at once I found myself an author. Such a strange sensation to actually feel you deserve the thing you had aspired to for many years. After all, all it took was computer access and an inner world that reads like a Sheryl Crow song to pound the keys and translate my crazy ideas onto the page. I feel like I could have business cards printed. Maybe wear a black roll neck and perch my glasses on the tip of my nose. I could drink whisky and smoke a cigar and do all those really stereotypical things I imagine all writers do. Perhaps I could get laid a little more? This is not the end. Nor the beginning. Hell, it isn't even about me. My boys write themselves; I really don't have that much say in the matter. As long as my characters need a voice, I have two chubby typing fingers and a need to please—watch this space: there is more to come.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Insight Out! Blog](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THIS HOUR I LOST

By Indra Vaughn

Photo Description

Two men are sharing a bath filled with bubbles. The one on the right fills pours champagne directly into the other's mouth. They are both laughing, looking elated.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two are together against certain odds and chances. The one on the left is the rich, party boy, maybe even a millionaire. Never had to work, never gave much care, felt entitled, likes the finer things, never saw himself mingling with the other people and side of the world. Not terribly friendly, sarcastic, aloof, etc. Beautiful and "ice princess" if you will.

The one on the right has always had to work hard for everything he's got. I'm not sure I see him as a father, but maybe he's been left behind to care for his two to three younger brothers. He's modest, but he definitely has bigger dreams. He works with his hands creating beautiful furniture or homes. He doesn't put up with people's shit, least of all from a spoiled guy who knows nothing about his world. Please don't write him as the typical everyman that is innocent. He's been around the block and then some. He's scrappy... rough.

They meet by chance. They fight, but right after the rich guy ends up with amnesia and runs into the other guy whose motives you get to determine decides to convince the other one they are married and takes him back to his place as husbands.

I'd like it if both men were in their late twenties to mid-thirties. These two should fight and have fire, I wouldn't even mind this to be dark and gritty. Please no super fluff! Make these two guys WORK for their HEA. Please no insta-love. I also don't want gay-for-you at all. Please make both gay or bisexual. NO family angst due to sexuality, drugs/alcohol issues, or anything else. I want the issues and struggle to come from the two men and them falling in love. I want there to be an awakening of betrayal once it's revealed. I want ANGRY sex. This should be a complete story from meeting, amnesia, to the adjustments and falling in love, to the reveal, to the HEA. Everyone's idea of

romance is different, but I imagine these two as having atypical ideas and styles to romance. Surprise me with something that makes me melt into a puddle of goo.

This image is perhaps after one of their epic fights. They have come inside after getting dirty or throwing dishes, something. They are at the point where they say fuck it and decide to get naked and drink champagne and start laughing... finally bonding. Or perhaps they are celebrating the rich dude's birthday that the other has made up a date for. You can tinker with the idea a bit.

Sincerely,

Jenn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: action/adventure, suspense, blue collar, rich guy, amnesia, enemies to lovers

Content Warnings: violence, dubious consent due to amnesia

Word Count: 22,937

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

To Jenn: I hope you enjoy the story. Thank you for leaving this prompt; it really inspired me to write. I tried to fit in as much of your request as possible so I hope it satisfied a need.

To the Love's Landscapes organizers: Thank you so much for your hard work, it's an honor to write for an amazing event like this.

THIS HOUR I LOST

By Indra Vaughn

*Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept and accept the end
Of a love or a season?*

—from *Reluctance* by Robert Frost.

Chapter 1

Travis

From the Ciampino Airport to the center of Rome, the drive could take anywhere between forty minutes to an hour and a half, depending on traffic, time of day and the amount of buses full of tourists on the road.

“Maybe I should’ve thought twice about renting a car though,” I say to cousin Gino in the back. “I have the feeling people drive a little differently in this country.” The gearbox lets out an unhealthy screech as I shift from third to fourth. I eye the shift stick dubiously. “Is it supposed to do that?” Of course cousin Gino doesn’t answer. He always was a taciturn little shit, but that isn’t why he is quiet now.

He is quiet, because he is dead. Currently residing in a very tasteful silver music box adorned with an unobtrusive but expensive golden carved lily, I would be slightly disturbed if he did reply. I have to admit, when I peeked under the lid of the original urn, I expected there to be more ash in death to someone who’d carried around such a rotund belly in life.

A woman with large sunglasses in a Smart car cuts me off and I stomp on the brake. The nose of the large BMW dips, and I cringe when cousin Gino tumbles off the seat.

“Oops.” A glance over my shoulder tells me the music box is as hermetically sealed as promised, at least. Apparently it’s illegal to smuggle dead bodies out of the country, so I had the music box especially made. Don’t let it be said I don’t love my family. “You’re lucky you left me all your money and the house in Martha’s Vineyard, or I’d have dumped your ashes in the Sound.” It isn’t like Gino would know the difference. There is, after all, only one death.

But he did leave me all his money—not that I need it, and I already live in the house in Vineyard Haven—and I am his closest relative. So, while the urge to leave him on the mantelpiece in one of the spare living rooms was fairly strong, I booked a ticket to Rome on a whim. After a grueling flight in first class, where the champagne was lukewarm toward the end, here I am.

On the plane I had imagined putting my foot down and racing to the city center in a convertible, hair blowing in the wind. I would dump cousin Gino’s

ashes at the *Forum Romanum* where he'd met his one and only love fifty years ago—and whatever God is listening, please don't let me die a sentimental fool—then go home again.

After checking out the local gay clubs of course. I always wondered if what they say about Italians is true. I'm only a watered-down quarter Italian, and since my hair is fairly light and my name is Travis Rupery Jones, after my very wealthy and very deceased British grandfather, no one has ever guessed.

"All right, old chap," I say to cousin Gino, digging up my old Eton accent. "Let's go pollute the streets of Rome with your remains." I aim for the city gates.

I arrive at my hotel forty-five minutes later and a good deal more stressed-out. There's a pretty bellboy waiting by the five-star entrance, and it shows how tired I am that I don't even give him a once-over. He mumbles something I don't catch when I hand over my keys and head inside. I leave my luggage where it is, but twist back quickly to fish cousin Gino out from under the front passenger seat. It probably isn't considered polite to have a hotel employee carry up your dead relatives, even in Italy.

Since this is one classy establishment, it doesn't take me more than five minutes to get checked in. The room is gorgeous, of course, with a balcony overlooking the lovely street below. Traffic zooms around, and from up here it looks like ants on crack. The enormous king-size bed looks so inviting I can feel my limbs grow heavier on the spot, but I know better than to lie down right after a transatlantic flight. If I sleep now I will never shake the jet lag, and I'm only here for a week. Instead of splaying face first in the thousand-count Egyptian cotton sheets, I shuck my clothes and take a slightly too-cool-for-comfort shower.

Cousin Gino waits for me on the windowsill, enjoying the view, and I figure I'll get rid of him first so I can see Rome without having his ashes on my mind. I want to visit the Colosseum of course, but I also want to take a look at the so-called Chubby Moses, who sits in a fountain less than a mile downhill from the hotel. It sounds like a good plan to my tired mind. And then after that, I'd like to find a sweet Roman boy to fuck.

I take care getting dressed, aiming for well-tailored but comfortable, since I'll be doing a lot of walking. The Forum is pretty far, so I'll take a taxi for Gino's goodbye.

The bellboy is also where I left him, and this time I do check him out. Maybe he could keep me company tonight, but no. Straight as the proverbial arrow, this one. He does hail a cab for me though, and his fingers curling around the tip I press into his palm are neatly manicured. I do like neat hands.

The wild taxi ride through Rome's crazy traffic leaves me queasy, and by the time I think I have to tell the driver to stop, he slows and double-parks, completely ignoring the angry horns behind us as he calmly tells me how much I owe him. Euros look like fake money to me, but I do like the bills. Especially the soft pink ones; you'd never get away with pink cash in America.

I take a couple of grateful breaths as the cabdriver pulls away behind me without caring if traffic is going to let him in, but all I get is a lungful of fumes. I move up the sidewalk, toward the *Forum Romanum*, with cousin Gino resting firmly in the crook of my elbow.

"You'd better not get me arrested for this," I tell him, checking for any Italian police, "or you'll end up in some grimy Roman carabinieri toilet bowl." I laugh at my own joke, and no one even blinks an eye. Europeans, man. They don't give a shit if you're crazy, as long as you don't address them directly. The streets are full of an eclectic blend of people, and I have to admit I like it. It's so easy to get used to the bland richness of Martha's Vineyard, despite the beauty of the place. Everything is so clean and recycled, it sometimes bores me out of my mind. Not Rome. Rome is vibrant and gritty, and... oh.

I reach the top of the hill I was climbing and the view steals the polluted air straight from my lungs. Rome is vibrant, yes. And gritty and busy and loud, but Rome also rests on the foundations of modern society. I am staring at stones stacked into buildings by hard-working people over two thousand years ago.

This, this is the heart of Rome, the place where Romans gathered and did business, hooked up, hung out. I can almost see them wandering the streets in their togas, even though I don't actually know if they wore those or if I've been lied to by Hollywood.

My original plan was to just walk up to the ruins of one of these buildings and discreetly scatter the ashes, but I see now that no matter how discreet I could be, cousin Gino would be carried away on the gentle breeze and cling to unknowing passers-by. While the idea that he might travel to several different countries is so funny to me it makes me laugh, I don't actually want to do this to anyone. There is a lovely tree not far from where I'm standing now, a thick

gnarly thing that looks like it's going to stay put for decades, come what may. The thought that these ashes might soak into the ground, reach those thick, strong roots and be soaked up along with earthy water, pleases me deep down, and I begin to walk.

Rome is green, for a city. There are several trees planted seemingly haphazardly all over the place. A lot of these are orange trees, and despite it being March, I can see oranges dangling off the branches. I bet it would be an epically bad idea to eat one of those. The fruit must be polluted down to their pips.

I'm surreptitious when I glance around. Just another tourist wanting to see the Forum from a higher vantage point, soak in the history, strengthen the bond with his forefathers. Or a quarter of them anyway. The rest would be drinking tea and playing cricket.

The music box in my palm is heavy, thick silver with a few small but beautiful gems. I'm glad to see the custom job was worth its money. No one discovered cousin Gino on his last cross-Atlantic trip. When I press the button for a merry little tune to start, the hidden compartment opens and there he is. For now, I snap it closed again. I wonder if I shouldn't just try and dig a little hole, but no, that way the ashes would never be able to reach the roots. I glance left and right; there is no one watching me. I casually approach the tree trunk—

“What are you doing?”

I spin around so fast I nearly fall over. Before me stand two cops in uniform, their guns and batons hanging off their belts like flashing neon warnings. My Italian is rusty, and it might be to my advantage to play the dumb American.

I say play...

“Is there a problem, officers?” I flash my whitened teeth. That's usually the first thing Europeans notice about Americans anyway. The two Carabinieri exchange a look. *Oh no*, it says, *one of those*. I widen my inane grin even further.

“Were you going to take a piss?”

My grin drops. “Excuse me?” The left cop's accent is heavy but perfectly understandable.

“No pissing in public,” the right one says, and I gape at him. “Step away from the tree.” I do what he says, because he does, after all, have a gun. And a

very menacing mustache. It curls up on his top lip like a bristly, hibernating caterpillar. We step onto the sidewalk dividing the park and the road. The left cop asks for identification. I left my passport at the hotel, but I have my wallet with my driver's license.

Hoping it will be enough, I reach into my jacket, balancing the music box in my right hand, when somehow it is snatched away from me. My first fleeting thought is one of the cops took it, but they look as bewildered as I do. A figure darts away from me, right into traffic, darting through cabs and bikes and mopeds.

"Hey!" I shout, running out onto the road, because *that's cousin Gino*, the only parental figure I've had in my life since I turned eighteen. One of the cops makes a grab for me, yelling hard in Italian. I can't make it out, but I think he's trying to stop me so I dodge him. Horns cut through the air like blunt, screeching knives, my left side is hit, and I lose my balance. My head lands on something hard, and then I can't think anymore.

Despite cars passing by my face way too close for comfort, the roar of traffic sounds far away. Something presses down on my shoulder, and I flinch a little when I'm dragged back roughly. A face appears in my vision and I squint at the bright sunlight. There's something strange about the sky, and I don't think I've ever seen trees like the ones rising high behind the man looking down at me. They are tall and thin, but their crowns sprout out like a bunch of broccoli heads.

The man snaps his fingers an inch away from my nose and I jerk my watery gaze to meet his eyes. He looks like a policeman, but... not.

"Are you okay, sir?" He sounds like it's not the first time he's asking, and his accent is strange. I don't answer right away because my head hurts and I'm not actually sure I *am* okay. The guy glances over his shoulder uneasily. There's another policeman talking to someone on a... scooter? What the hell?

"Will you be okay here for a minute?" my dress-up police guy asks, although I have to say, that gun looks pretty real from where I'm sitting. I nod and he walks over to the scooter. I watch the three of them talking from between the safety of two parked cars, and I gingerly touch the side of my head. Those kinds of bumps always feel bigger than they are, but geez. My cheek stings when I accidentally graze it with my fingertips. I must look a picture.

The second guy walks over and stares into my eyes, left, right, left again. "Do you need an ambulance?"

"No," I immediately say. "No hospitals. It's just a bruise."

"Are you sure? Can you tell me your name?"

"Travis Jones," I say and climb to my feet to prove—to him as well as myself—that I am, in fact, okay. My head throbs, and so does my hand where I must've broken my fall, but it's not as bad as I feared. "I'm fine," I say. "Really." I offer a little smile, but it's not returned.

"If you're certain," the guy says, shrugging as he spreads his hands. "Do yourself a favor and hail a cab, eh? You don't want to wander about the city for too long." He hesitates, waiting for something. I have no clue what so I keep my face pleasantly blank. "Was it important? The silver box, I mean."

I gasp. "Yes!" I say. "Yes, it was."

The guy shakes his head. "Pity." He sighs and puts his notebook away. "It's long gone now." And then they're gone too, the scooter, the strange policemen, leaving me standing there nailed to the ground. Yes, that box is important, but I can't for the life of me remember why.

And where the *fuck* am I?

It doesn't take too long to figure out I'm in Rome. Not too many places have a Colosseum parked in the middle of the city. I wander around until I find a little coffee shop, get myself an espresso and squeeze between a rickety little table and the wall. The city moves along on the other side of the window, an odd juxtaposition of harried locals and awestruck, dawdling tourists.

As I sip the strong coffee, hot enough to burn my tongue, I take stock. There is a keycard for a hotel room in my wallet, so yes, a taxi can at least bring me back to my room where I'll hopefully find my passport and my way home. If this strange case of amnesia doesn't clear, I'll have to go see my doctor. But why am I here? Have I been here long? Why is that silver box so important to me?

The last thing I remember is talking to my groundskeeper, George, about what perennials he'd plant once the weather turned. I try to think, but my head only starts to hurt harder, and the coffee turns to acid in my stomach. I should've gotten a bottle of water instead, really. I gather everything back up in

my wallet, and aim for the little fridge by the counter when something catches my eye outside.

A man hurries past the window, glancing over his shoulder. As he crosses the street in quick, brusque strides, I see his profile and I *know* him. How could I possibly know *anyone* in Rome?

My headache forgotten, I push through the door and onto the street. I want to yell, tell him to slow down and wait for me, but I don't, although I couldn't say why. Instead, I follow him down a cobbled alley, taking a right into a street where no tourist in his right mind would wander, and watch as he walks into a nondescript building. I should follow him in. He might be the only person who could tell me what's going on. But I wait, watching the door from across the street.

Chapter 2

Malachi

The wad of cash feels heavy in my pocket, incriminating, and I hurry into the shop. Papa's old desk still sits where he left it, in the darkest corner of the warehouse at the back. I stuff the money in the top drawer before opening the curtains. I need to finish those dining room chairs today if I want to get paid for that job, but the work is boring, my mind is elsewhere, and I still feel sick to my stomach about taking that box. I didn't turn around when I heard brakes squeal and people shout, but I have a vivid imagination.

I wander around the warehouse, first opening the curtains in the corner where the office is set up, then opening blinds all around the large, open space. It smells of sawdust and veneer in here, a scent that has always managed to soothe me in the past, but today nerves crawl under my skin like bugs. There must be mold growing somewhere nearby; the dankness of it makes me want to sneeze. This place isn't what it used to be.

I strip off my sweater and reach for my gloves when I hear a noise behind me. Shifting my aim, I grab hold of the Maglite I keep on the second shelf with my tools. I turn around slowly, but it's Enrico who steps out of the shadows.

"Jesus Christ." I put the flashlight down. "What are you doing here, Rico? Why aren't you in school?"

"I didn't want to walk on my own," my little brother says, his eyes on the floor. "Someone followed me."

"Oh God." I bury my face in my hands. "C'mere." Rico steps closer. I take a deep breath, kneel down, and look him in the eye. "You know you're safer in school than here. Stick to crowded streets, okay? They're only trying to scare you so they can put pressure on me, but they're not going to do anything to you, okay?"

"I don't like being scared," Rico says. He has Mama's big brown eyes, but his hair is lighter, like Papa's, like mine.

"I don't like being scared either. Look, if it happens again, just call me."

"I tried, but I'm out of money." He holds out his phone and I sigh.

“Fine. Stay here. I’ll go put some minutes on it. Lock the door behind me and don’t open it for anyone, all right? And start sanding those chairs; if you’re not going to school, you can be useful in here.”

“Yes, Malachi.” Rico nods. He tries to smile, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. I can’t keep doing this. We can’t stay here. *You picked a bad time to die, Papa.*

There is a little corner shop not far from my furniture store, and I plan on going there quickly to buy more minutes for Rico’s phone. Then I’ll have to rush back to get my work done. As soon as I’m outside I feel a pair of eyes on me, and fuck, I don’t have all the money yet. I can’t pay them. I try to look around without making it seem suspicious, but there is no one on the street apart from this one guy who clearly isn’t one of the Caivano brothers’ people.

He’s staring at me though, so I let my gaze travel over him without giving anything away and turn right. He pushes away from the wall and crosses the street. Ah, shit.

“Excuse me,” he says in English, and I slow my stride. A lost tourist? Here? “Excuse me,” he says again, like I didn’t hear him the first time. I turn around, hands in my pockets, appearing relaxed but ready to bolt if I need to. He’s a good-looking guy. Well-groomed, nicely dressed, American, and... oh no. He’s the guy with the music box.

He’s stumbling over his words, and there’s a big bruise forming on his left temple.

“Are you all right?” I ask him, remembering the squealing tires.

“Oh. Um, yes. Look, I know this is... strange, but... I...” He rubs a hand through his dark hair. His face goes red and he looks away. “Shit,” he mutters. I relax a little, even though I still have no clue what’s going on. He doesn’t look like he’s about to punch me in the face, anyway. “Okay, look. My name is Travis Jones, and this is going to sound really weird, but... I had a little accident this morning, and I seem to have, um, lost my memories of the last few days? Then I saw you and you looked familiar, and I thought maybe we met. And...” He laughs uneasily. “I don’t even know what I expected from you.”

My eyebrows go up in disbelief as I watch him turn red to the tips of his ears. Oh man, he must’ve hit his head hard, and the police just left him to wander Rome on his own? Jesus.

I think fast, taking in his expensive haircut, the thick watch on his wrist, as he runs his hand over his head again. The cut of his clothes, the light, alluring

scent coming off him: everything about this guy spells money. I take a step back, drawing him closer into the shadows of the buildings behind us. If he remembers I stole that box and goes to the police, I'll be arrested and Rico will be taken away from me.

He stares at me and I notice how his gaze drops to my mouth before he catches himself.

"You don't remember me?" I need to make him trust me, before I ditch him. I let my eyes fall half-shut as I look at him intently. Let's see what conclusions he draws. "It's Malachi. Mal. We, uh... you know." I glance away, to the sky, then back at him. His eyes widen, as do his pupils, and I watch him give me another once-over, seeing me no doubt, in an entirely different light.

"We hooked up?" he whispers. "Last night?"

I don't say anything, just smile at him with a hint of secrecy, like we shared something intimate and wonderful. "You really don't remember?"

"I... no. I'm so sorry. I—" His eyes flick from my face to his hands and back again. "You don't... I didn't tell you anything about a silver box, did I? I know it was important, just not why."

A stab of guilt makes my stomach twist, but I think of Rico, afraid in our father's furniture store, about the gun that was pointed at my head less than a week ago, and I push it aside. "A silver box? No, I'm sorry. I... Look, I really have to—" I point in the direction I was heading. "Do you need some help? Getting back to your hotel, or something?"

"Is that where we..." He frowns and shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. And no, thanks. I'll just grab a taxi."

"If you're sure. Don't hang around here, okay? It's not the best neighborhood, and you look... out of place."

"Do I?" He smiles at me and I see a glimmer of someone else there, someone carefree and a little arrogant, someone who most likely never had to work with his hands, or worry about loan sharks threatening to cut off his fingers, one for every week not paid. A terrible idea begins to form.

"You know what, Travis? Why don't I come with you, make sure you're okay. You look a little pale."

"You don't have to do that." That's what he says, but his eyes flash hotly, if only for a second, and I smile.

"It's no trouble. I just need to go into that shop over there for a minute, and then we can be on our way."

"Um." He looks at me with a hint of wariness and I soften my smile. He relaxes a little and nods. "Okay, I'll wait here."

"I won't be long." I hurry into the corner shop and buy a pay-as-you-go card for Rico's phone. When I return to Travis, he is going through his overstuffed wallet, looking at what seems to be a hotel keycard. Man, does he really not remember anything? My stomach turns when he looks up at me, and I feel a little sick.

"Just going to drop this off," I say. I glance at the card in his hand. "And then we'll take a taxi, okay? You don't look like you can walk that far."

"Okay," he says, but there's tension in his shoulders.

I quickly unlock the door and hand Rico's phone over to him. He's sanding the chairs like I told him to, and I kiss the top of his head.

"I'm going out for a little while. Don't—"

"Open the door for anyone, I know," he says as he rolls his eyes at me.

"That's right. Call me if you need me. I can be back here in twenty minutes."

"All right."

Travis waits for me outside, squinting against the sunlight like it hurts him. "Come on," I tell him, pointing in the direction of a more touristy area. "We'll be waiting forever for a cab here."

We walk side by side for a while, and Travis keeps side-eying me. It's funny really, in a way. I try to imagine what he's thinking, if he's regretting this supposed hook-up, and then I realize how frightening this must feel for him.

"So you remember nothing at all?" I ask him.

"Well, I know who I am and where I'm from, and stuff. I just don't know how I got here."

"Here as in, this part of town?" I grab his elbow as he nearly crosses the street without looking. A moped zooms past. He startles and presses closer for a second, then steps away again, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Here, as in Italy."

"Oh my God." I stare at him. "You don't even remember coming to Rome?"

"No."

I stick my hand in the air when I see a taxi waiting by a red light not far from where we're standing. The driver gives me a thumbs-up, and I turn to Travis again.

"I'm sorry," I say, surprised to find I mean it. "That must be awful."

"Well, I plan on getting out of here today or tomorrow. I just wish I knew what that silver box meant. Or what I'm doing here."

"Maybe you'll find a clue at the hotel." The taxi pulls up and I open the door, letting him climb in first. Travis tells the driver where to go, and he winces when we pull into the stream of stop-and-go traffic.

It's strange to be in cab in my own hometown. Driving here is terrible for anyone's peace of mind, and I either walk or ride a bike everywhere. Travis is silent beside me, so I turn toward my own window and look at my city through the eyes of a tourist. I've lived here my whole life. I don't see these remnants of the old world anymore. In fact, I've come to hate this place, fear it. I realize for the first time I desperately want to get out.

"We're here," the driver tells me in Italian, and Travis pulls out his wallet. He's about to hand over a bill but I tut at him, taking it and his wallet, too.

"That's way too much." I rifle through the wallet, my eyes catching on the row of black and golden credit cards. And fucking hell, he must have more than a thousand euros in here. I pay the driver, hand back the wallet, and get out of the cab.

"Thanks," Travis says, looking awkward. He stares at the huge hotel lobby. There are three porters outside dressed in crisp uniforms. A Rolls Royce pulls up under the awning, and my eyes pretty much fall out of my head. I've walked past this place before, but I never paid attention to it, really.

"Didn't we come back here last night?" Travis whispers, looking unsure.

"Uh, yeah. But it was dark. And I don't remember your room number."

"It's okay, it's on the card. Let's go up."

I follow him inside. He might not know what he's doing here, but he enters the huge building with its red velvet covered lobby, chandeliers looming over us like frozen-in-time golden rain, like he belongs here. I try not to feel

impressed. He takes a quick look around, then turns toward a wide staircase covered in red and gold carpet, and I follow him up to the second floor. Inside, the place is a maze, numbers and hallways making no sense, and we laugh when we get lost more than once.

"I'm so sorry," he says when he finally slides the card into the right door. "You must think I am crazy." He's a little out of breath and his eyes shine with something feverish. The room inside is unbelievable, and my mouth drops open.

"Fuck," I say, taking in the enormous canopy bed, the little living room, the view through the large windows. To my left, the bathroom is bigger than my own bedroom. "This place must cost a fortune."

"I take it you didn't get a close look last night." Travis advances on me, and his hesitation is gone. He's on his turf now, surrounded by things he recognizes from home. The closet is open, revealing a few suits and other expensive clothing. Two watches lie abandoned on a desk. One has a thick leather band; the other's silver or platinum, I don't know, but thinner, more elegant than the one he's wearing now.

Travis kicks off his shoes and doesn't stop until I am trapped between him and the sofa behind me. "How about we get reacquainted," he says, and it's collide with him or fall back on the couch. I choose the falling, but it makes no difference. Travis keeps coming until his knees are bracketing my hips.

"I don't—"

"Did I fuck you?" he whispers in my ear, and an unwelcome thrill shoots down my spine. He takes one of my hands in his and traces the calluses on my palm with the tips of his fingers. "Because I think if you'd fucked me I'd still feel it. Man like you, with hands that big..." He pulls back a little and offers me a filthy grin. "Do you kiss?" he asks, and I manage a fast *no*, so he veers off course and his mouth grazes my jawline instead. He sets his teeth to my earlobe and I feel his breathing accelerate. Without warning, he worms a hand between the two of us into my jeans to palm my cock over my briefs. My head spins, because *fuck* I'm so hard and I hadn't even realized. "Oh yeah," he groans, squeezing me. "Can I fuck you again? It'd be a shame to leave Rome without remembering how that felt."

I want to say no, but I'm here now. I've gone this far, and if I want to get what I came here for, I might not have a choice. He takes my silence as

consent, or he knows I could throw him off easily if I didn't want him. When he says, "Turn over," his breath is so hot in my ear I shiver and do what I'm told.

Expecting to feel his weight on me right away, I jump when he undoes my shoes, then takes off my socks, and massages the backs of my legs.

"You're so tense," he tells me, which only makes me tense up more.

God, this is such a bad idea. I haven't bottomed for anyone since—

"Do you want a drink first?"

"No, I'm good," I say, taking a deep breath and willing my muscles to ease up. His hands move to my hips. He pulls me up a little so he can get underneath and undo my jeans. He leaves my briefs on and then lies on top of me, parting my knees with his. He's naked, and I'm surprised by my curiosity, but I keep my forehead tightly pressed against my arm. His dick is hard and heavy between my crack, and he rocks his hips a little, pushing my erection into the couch. I haven't gone soft at all.

"So, what did we do yesterday? Tell me everything. Where did we meet?"

"In a bar," I say, breathing slowly and deeply as he runs his hand over the back of my thigh, bristling the hairs there. "We had a bit too much to drink, so we walked back here. I—" My voice falters as his hand sneaks up my briefs. I feel self-conscious because I know I must be sweating, but Travis doesn't seem to care as he caresses my balls lightly. "You gave me a blow job," I say, squeezing my eyes shut until I see stars. A wounded noise comes out of my mouth. He's pressing his dry thumb against my hole and I tense up, my butt cheeks tightening on his dick.

"Oh yeah," he whispers, rubbing me. "Tell me more."

I gulp for air because I'm beginning to feel lightheaded. "You... you fucked me. On the bed."

"Face to face?" he asks, breath hot against my ear again. He licks the shell, sucks the lobe, and blood rushes to my groin. Unconsciously, I press against the couch and then up against his thumb, opening a little so the tip of it pushes inside.

"No," I manage, because there is no way I am doing this with him looking down at me. "On all fours."

"Oh God." His voice trembles, and the weight of him disappears along with his thumb. I feel grateful and robbed all at once, but I don't lift my head; I'm

afraid of what he'll see. I hear him rummaging around, and then a soft, "What the hell?"

Feeling a little more composed I look up. "What is it?"

"My bottle of lube is unopened." His eyes widen. "I didn't hurt you yesterday, did I?"

"No," I quickly tell him, feeling my face heat, so I hide again in the crook of my arm. "No, I had some."

"And a condom?"

"Yeah, that too." *Fuck*, am I really going to do this? I have to, I can't back out now. With a deep breath, I try and turn off the churning cogs in my brain.

"Okay." He hesitates, then I hear the ripping of foil and the click of a cap. If he checks the trash, it would be empty from room service anyway. I'm starting to tense up again because I don't know where he is, or what he is going to do next. I can't help the shout of surprise when a wet finger rubs my asshole.

"Sorry," Travis says, not sounding very sorry at all. "Cold?"

"It's okay."

"Yeah it is."

His thumb pushes inside, careless of any resistance, and I gulp because it doesn't take him two seconds to unerringly nail my prostate. "Oh," I moan. "Non ti fermare." He just rubs it and rubs it and I can't remember it ever feeling like this.

"Oh you want it, don't you," he whispers. He kisses the middle of my back, so he must be kneeling beside the couch. He presses hard, and I rock against the couch until he yanks down my underwear. "On your knees."

I'm scared, but I obey. I don't think he'll be rough to the point that he'll hurt me. Two fingers push inside me and I let my head hang between my arms. My cock throbs between my legs, my balls already heavy as they swing every time he pushes into me, hard. It feels like I could come from just this, which is insane. How did I get here? Half an hour ago I was thinking about sanding chairs.

"You're tight," Travis says. "Was I careful with you? Tell me about it; I want to know."

“You were,” I tell him, squeezing my eyes shut again. I don’t want to watch how my cock’s leaking already. “You were so careful it drove me crazy.”

“Yeah?” I jump because his voice is right beside my ear again. It seems to be his thing. “I think you like being driven a bit crazy. Look at you.” He nails my prostate again, hard, over and over, my entire body bracing for the impact. My mouth is open and going dry, and I hope he doesn’t want me to talk anymore because I don’t think I can. Just when I think this is it, I’m going to lose it, he pulls his fingers out. “Let’s move to the bed.”

The last thing I want to do is to move, with my T-shirt still on, naked underneath. I lift my head to see Travis standing there, waiting, and smiling cheekily. His clothes didn’t do him justice. He is ripped in that carefully sculpted way from doing exactly the right amount of weightlifting, cardio, whatever his personal trainer tells him, no doubt. It’s attractive, sure, but it makes me feel self-conscious about the rope-thick muscles of my thighs, the roughness of my hands.

I stand up quickly, realizing the position I’m in isn’t exactly dignified either, but before I can climb onto the bed Travis drops to his knees and takes my cock in his mouth. The unexpected heat makes me curl up and I grab his head, holding it in place, sliding back and forth in that sweet mouth. Oh my God, it feels so good. I barely even notice when he nudges my knees apart and slides a finger into me, until he nudges my prostate again and I feel like I’m about to shoot.

He pulls off. “Don’t come,” he says, looking up at me, lips wet. He already has the condom on, and for some reason it looks obscene. “I want to feel you squeeze my dick when you do.”

I stumble back but Travis catches me, pulling me close. For a second it looks like he might kiss me, but he puts his mouth on my neck instead, sucking lightly. I don’t want to wait anymore, so I push him toward the bed and crawl on, getting on my hands and knees. That dark thrill is back, and while it isn’t fear this time, like hell am I going to acknowledge I want this. I’m about to steal more of this guy’s stuff, the least I can do is let him fuck me as repayment.

Chapter 3

Travis

There is a flash of uncertainty in Mal's eyes before he turns away and gets on the bed. It's a shame he doesn't kiss; he has a lovely mouth, but I also think it would put him at ease. I don't feel the nerves I usually get when I hook up sober with a stranger, but maybe that's because my body knows his already, even if my mind doesn't. I move to the end of the bed and watch him get into position. He's gorgeous, tougher built than I'd expected, and he doesn't strike me as a bottom at all. Every time I touch him he jumps like we're plugged into the same electrical current.

"You ready?" I ask, pouring more lube over my palm, slicking my aching cock and rubbing the rest over his hole. He nods but doesn't say anything, and I feel him tremble when I put my dry hand on his hip for balance. He's still hard though, and his balls look tight underneath the downy hairs, so I stroke him once to give that little zing of pleasure before I begin to push inside. At first Mal resists me, and I wonder if this is his game, if that's how he plays, but the whimper that comes out of his mouth when the fattest part of my dick breaches him isn't fake. He spasms and contracts around me like a virgin, and I hold very still while I gently rub his ass, his flank, his thighs. After a minute that feels like forever, he drops to his elbows and relaxes.

"Go," Mal says, just as I'm wondering what's going through his mind. This is just a fuck, and yet there's an intensity about him that makes me feel incredibly powerful. I push into him with half-thrusts to let him get used to me again, because it's taking him a while. Maybe we were drunker last night than he's letting on. I pour some more lube on my dick, feeling the coolness of it through the condom, and Mal gasps, tensing up again.

"Okay, this is no good." I put my weight on him until he gives in and lies flat. Then I roll him onto his right side without sliding out. I lift his left leg and begin to fuck him like that. I won't hit him as deep, but his prostate is incredibly responsive and he'll enjoy it more this way. "Touch yourself," I tell him, because I can't reach him like this, and he has gone soft now.

He makes that same pained noise again he did earlier when I hit his prostate for the first time, and begins to tug at his dick. I can see his face now, and his eyes are squeezed shut like he's hurting, but I don't think that's it. I deepen the

thrusts a little, going a bit slower, and Mal gasps, mouth open against the comforter underneath him as I push into him, his cheek rasping against the fabric.

When I pick up speed, so does his breathing, and his cock is once again thick and flushed in his hand. I don't think he realizes what noises he's making: punched out grunts of tortured satisfaction. His hand speeds up and so do I.

For some reason I've lost all track of my own building orgasm at the sight of him, but the storm of it begins to gain force when he closes his mouth on the comforter, biting it, pulling at it with his teeth as his eyes open and he stares unseeing into nothing. I angle my hips and punch his prostate relentlessly, and Mal makes a keening sound that doesn't seem to stop. He's biting the comforter so hard his teeth must ache.

I lift his leg, go faster and faster until his hand is a blur on his cock and he shuts his eyes again, turning his face into the mattress so all I hear is a muffled scream. He jets thick and white over the bed, over his stomach, over his fist, and he milks me so hard all I can do is push my hips against his ass and shoot into the condom.

My own awareness overwhelms me, and suddenly my breathing is loud in my own ears, I am wet with sweat, and weak with the tremors of the orgasm that blindsided me like it never had before.

"Holy shit," I say, holding the condom in place as I pull out. Mal doesn't move, apart from shifting away from the wet spot, and I collapse beside him. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he says. I want to ask him more, lift up and look at him, but I am unduly tired for some reason.

Yawning, I sling an arm over his stomach. "I'll grab a towel for you in a second. I just—"

When I wake up, I feel horrible and sluggish, my limbs the sort of dead weight that comes from sleeping far too long. I notice Malachi is gone, but that's not my first concern. There's a shard of pain reminding me of the collision with the scooter and everything that came before it. The cops, cousin Gino, the music box... and fucking Malachi grabbing it and running off. I'm so angry, tears well up in my eyes. I can't believe that bastard is a filthy, common thief.

With a lurch of nausea I scramble off the bed, but my wallet is exactly where I left it. The money is gone, of course, but my credit cards aren't. My passport is still there, but my two watches are gone too. The Cartier timepiece alone is worth thirty thousand dollars. It was my father's, and Mal will pawn it for four, maybe five thousand euros, and that makes me angrier than even Gino finding his final resting place on a grimy old shelf.

He let me fuck him. That piece of shit let me fuck him. It takes a bit of staggering from the bed to the window to work out I slept for nearly twenty-four hours, and I'm guessing my headache has a lot to do with that.

A quick shower helps me feel better, and I grab my wallet, dash out of the door, and try to remember where this fucker's street is.

In the end it takes me a while to find it, and it's the convenience store that rings a bell first. My first instinct is to barge into the furniture shop, but instead I linger, much like I had done that morning when the world was a frightening, unknown place.

Falegnameria Avellino, it says above the slightly dirty window. There is an ornately carved dresser in one window and a dining table made of different kinds of wood in the other. Skillfully done, no doubt, but not my taste. Why would someone who works at a place like this take cousin Gino, then let me fuck him so he could steal my watches? It doesn't make any sense, but it does make my blood boil again, and I'm about to cross the street when two guys step out of the door between the two windows.

They don't look like the type who'd like to order a custom, handmade rocking chair. Something begins to dawn on me, but I'm too angry, I feel too used, to let it take shape. When the brutes have rounded the corner I cross the street and silently open the door. No bell rings out a warning, and the shop floor is empty, so I make my way through the center aisle.

The further back I go, the more I begin to like the furniture. The wood is paler here, the lines sleeker; everything looks more modern and like something I'd have in my house. But I can't be distracted now. I listen for sounds and hear something coming from the back. There is a doorway with the door missing leading to what looks like a warehouse. It smells of scorched wood, and there are metal tables with strange looking tools everywhere.

At first I don't see anyone, but then I spot him with his back to me, hands planted on a desk, head hanging low. I rush over and he hears me; he

straightens up fast, but not fast enough. I punch him once, clocking him straight on the jaw, and Mal goes down like a rag doll. For a second I just stare at him, but he doesn't move. I've hit him where it hurts, but not hard enough to knock him out.

Wary, I go around and crouch by his head, far enough away to jump if he's faking. His eyes are closed, his breathing shallow but even. His T-shirt is ripped at the collar, like someone might've grabbed hold of him. There's no better way to learn how to fight than as an American gay boy in a British all-boy school, but I made sure I didn't hit him too hard, so he shouldn't be out cold like this.

"Mal?" I say, worry beginning to churn in my gut. "Mal? Can you hear me?"

He doesn't respond at all, and I gently ease him onto his back. He doesn't wake, but his pulse is strong, so I gingerly lift up his shirt, keeping one eye on his face to make sure he's not waking up. The entire left side of his ribcage is an angry red, and in one spot I see an unmistakable boot print.

Oh *fuck*.

On the other side of the warehouse there's a small half-bathroom with off-white but clean towels rolled up neatly in one of the drawers. I don't see a kitchen or a fridge anywhere, so I just let the water run as cold as it will go and wet one of the towels. Mal regains consciousness when I press the towel to his jaw where I punched him. He blinks his inky eyes at me, and I bite back the apology that churns around my stomach. Yes, I punched him, but he stole from me, had sex with me, and used me while I was so vulnerable I hardly knew my own name.

"I'm not staying," I tell him. "I just want to make sure you're not dying."

"Okay," he croaks and tries to sit, but he winces when his torso curls up, and falls back.

"Did those two guys beat you?"

"Two guys?"

"I saw them leaving."

Resigned, Mal closes his eyes again. His pain is etched on his face like Michelangelo carved it there. "Yes."

"You owe them money?"

"That's the short of it."

"So my watches are gone."

He has the decency to turn his face away, a blotchy redness staining his cheeks. Good, at least he's ashamed. "Yes."

"Cousin Gino?"

Mal looks at me. "Who?"

"The silver box."

"At a pawnshop downtown. You can probably buy it back. I have the receipt in my wallet."

"Right." I stare down at him. "You know, the funny thing is, if you'd have been honest with me from the start I would've helped you out."

How much do you owe them, I want to ask, and why? Are they Mafia? Will they kill you? Or just hurt you more? I bite it all back; it's none of my business, and I don't give a flying fuck no matter how pretty his face is, how good his skin felt against mine. It tugs at me though, the way he just lies there with his hands covering his face. Defeated.

I walk away, receipt in hand.

When I pass the furniture on the showroom floor, I see the understated beauty in the pieces there. The faintly carved flowers on one table leg, the same pattern returning in the seat of a matching chair. You have to look closely to see the details, the hard work and the love with which these pieces have been created. I don't want to see it, so I keep my eyes on my goal, when it opens.

Through the door steps a little boy, the mirror image of Mal, only fifteen years or so younger. He looks tired, too tired for a kid that age to look, even after a day of school. He wears a uniform with a tie hanging slightly askew, the cuffs of his coat worn and faded. He eyes me up and down once, decides I am harmless, and plasters on a smile.

"*Buongiorno*," he says, and rattles something else off in Italian. I think of Mal—brother? father?—lying on that workshop floor with a freshly blooming bruise on his face and my heart twists.

"Hey," I say to the kid, crouching down. "Do you speak English? My Italian is terrible."

"Yes," he says in a heavy accent. "But not very well. You speak slowly, okay? I help you."

"Okay." I laugh under my breath. "Tell me about this table." I point at the one with the leaves. "You make it?"

"No," the kid laughs. "My... brother make it. Malachi. He should be here." He looks around, eyes clouding with worry.

"Oh yes," I quickly tell him. "He's busy in the back. He said he'd be right with me."

"Okay." The kid's shoulders sag, and I see unshed tears shining in his eyes. Oh God, how bad is it? What are they involved in?

"What's your name?"

"Enrico," he says, eyeing me warily, and I repeat it in the worst American accent I can manage. The boy laughs. "Call me, Rico, yes? You Americano?"

"I am. Have you ever been to the United States?"

"No!" Rico bounces on his heels. "You from New York? I go to New York. See the Statue of Liberation."

"Of Liberty, yes. Maybe someday you will, kid." I nudge his shoulder and he grins until the cloud descends over his face again.

"I don't think it." His eyes drift toward the workshop behind me and I follow his gaze. Mal is leaning against the doorway trying to look casual instead of ready to drop, but I don't know if he's fooling Rico. He says something in Italian and Rico makes a face that spells *I don't want to do homework* in any language.

"Ciao, New York," he says to me, and trudges toward the workshop, burdened with much more than the books on his back.

"Ciao Rico," I tell him. I wonder how old he is, if he knows the kind of trouble his brother is in. If the haunted look in his eyes is anything to go by, I'd say yes, he knows.

My gaze snags on Mal's, but I don't want to be swayed. I want to get out of here and go home. Cousin Gino might go on an adventure around Rome, or he might gather dust in a pawnshop. I don't know, and I don't care. I am tired and jet lagged, and I am going home.

When I turn to the door I catch my own reflection in the glass, but I see someone else in the shape of my face. My mother's hazel eyes, my father's light eyebrows. What would my little brother look like if he hadn't drowned alongside my parents on their yacht ten years ago? I hardly knew him. He was two when I left for Eton. He was seven when I returned at eighteen, and he never grew much older.

I don't know Rico, and this is none of my business. Malachi is an asshole who deserves what he gets.

Then why am I turning around and heading back into the workshop?

Chapter 4

Malachi

I hear Rico's voice. Everything down to taking a single breath hurts like my ribcage is on fire, but I make a pathetic attempt to hurry into the shop. When I get to the doorway, Travis is crouched in front of him, saying his name in the worst accent I've ever heard. I think it's a trick to make him laugh. It works.

"Go do your homework," I say when they see me, and Rico grumbles but does what he's told. I'd take this pain and ten times worse if it meant I could give this kid a normal childhood. Like the one he had when Papa was alive.

Travis looks at me once, weighing me and finding me wanting, no doubt, because he turns around without a word and walks away. I should really finish those chairs so they can be picked up and paid for later. The watches made a nice dent in what I owe the Caivano brothers, which means my fingers are probably safe for now, but every time I pay them something they just up the interest on whatever is left. I will never be free of them.

I'm so deep in my own head, thinking of the gun under my bed, I don't notice Travis has turned back until he pushes past me—not as hard as he could've—to step into the workshop.

He sees Rico at my desk chewing on a pencil and says, "Anywhere we can talk?"

I jerk my head in the direction of the chairs I should be sanding and, trying not to limp, follow Travis to the other end of the warehouse.

"If you want money," I start, so exhausted I can't even breathe right, but Travis shakes his head.

"Tell me how deep the shit you're in is."

"Why would I do that?" I ask, perplexed, but Travis doesn't take it that way. His face darkens with anger.

"You think I'm some fucking stupid, rich American, fine. I don't care. But I'm giving you two options here. You tell me what the hell you're dragging that kid into"—he jabs his finger at Rico—"or I go to the police and report you for theft. I have the proof right here." He holds up the pawnshop receipt. "It's up to you."

"I... but why? What do you care?"

"About you? I don't."

He doesn't elaborate, but I notice how he keeps glancing at Rico. "What was in the silver box?" I ask.

He shifts his gaze to stare at me, face blank but eyes blazing, and I am reminded for no reason at all of how he'd talked me so easily into kneeling on his couch, on his bed, how he'd breached my body and made it feel good like I had no idea anyone could.

Before I can give in to the heat on my face and look away, he says, "My cousin Gino."

I bark out a startled laugh that hurts my ribs. "What?"

Travis cracks a reluctant smile. "It's a music box I had made, but if you press the lever, instead of music you get a compartment that opens to reveal his ashes."

"Oh my God," I whisper, hiding my bruised face in my hands. "I stole a dead body." I can hear Travis laugh softly but when I look at him, the mirth is gone.

"Why?" he asks. He is still angry, but I think it is more out of betrayal than that he feels robbed.

"I need to know why you are asking me this," I tell him. "And I need to sit down before I fall down."

Without missing a beat Travis rolls a worn leather chair closer, the one I use for work if I need to bend down for a long time, and he sinks into an old recliner that used to belong to Papa. It has a broken spring that sticks up uncomfortably, as he'll find out soon enough.

"I was going to leave you to rot in your problems," Travis whispers, glancing at Rico. "Until I saw your brother. That's all I'm telling you."

"Okay." I nod at my hands and take a deep breath. "This shop has been in my family for generations. When the economy failed, Papa's health began to fail too. I didn't know he'd borrowed money from the worst loan sharks in Rome until after he died. I've been able to keep up some payments until recently. Then things got... desperate."

"How desperate?"

I don't look at him. I don't want to tell him anything else, but for as little as I know about him, I can tell he isn't going to let sleeping dogs lie.

"Tell me," he insists. I take a deep breath and look at him, but his eyes catch where my own body betrays me. I've been rubbing at the numb spot on my left forearm without realizing and Travis grabs my wrist, straightening my arm. "What the hell." He checks to make sure Rico is still doing his homework, then scoots closer. "What is this from?"

His thumb traces the round little scar about three inches above my wrist, then he turns over my hand and finds a matching scar on the other side. It feels weird when he touches it. Numb, but not.

"Mal," he whispers. "They did this?"

I nod once. "With one of my tools. A very thin and sharp chisel. Apparently you can shove a sharp object all the way through your forearm without doing permanent damage, who knew?" I try to joke, but Travis doesn't laugh. There's something in his eyes I don't want to see, because it looks far too close to pity. He doesn't let go of my hand and I wonder if he knows he is caressing my calluses.

"How much do you owe them?"

"It's not so much, but every time I manage to pay them, they increase the interest."

"How much?"

"75,000 euros."

His eyebrows climb up. "That's it?"

Annoyed, I snatch my hand back. "We're not all privileged American rich boys, all right?"

"Clearly," he says, with an eye roll. "I can give you that money without losing any sleep over it."

"Why the hell would you do that? And how can I accept?"

"You'll accept because you won't risk Rico being in danger for a second longer than you need to. You know they won't hurt the kid as long as you can keep some payments coming, but how many more rich Americans will cross your path with dead relatives in a box? How much longer before they start to threaten the boy?"

"You didn't answer my first question," I snap, irritated because he's right. I'll take the money in a heartbeat, pride be damned.

Travis leans closer, eyes shining, something wicked in their fathomless depths. "You don't usually bottom, do you?" he says, voice so low I have to lean in to hear him, even though it hurts my ribs.

"No," I grit out. I don't like where this is going.

"That's what I thought. Then why did you let me?"

"It seemed wrong for me to... do it the other way around, considering—"

"You were lying through your teeth? Taking advantage of my amnesia?"

"Yes."

"How long had it been?"

It takes effort to keep my eyes open, and the memory at bay—of being held down, choking on a stinking pillow. "Years."

"All right." Travis drums his fingers on my knee. "Here's the deal. You're mine to fuck any way I please for the rest of the day and night, and I will pay you one hundred thousand euros, money wired over this afternoon."

Chapter 5

Travis

Revenge doesn't taste as sweet as everyone would like you to believe. I feel the powerful adrenaline surge melt into nothing with Mal's quiet, "Okay."

I expected a fight for his pride, anger over what in the end amounts to charity, because what is a fuck? He enjoyed it enough earlier, he knows we're compatible, that it will be good. But he takes the offer without a struggle and that robs me of the perverted pleasure I thought revenge would give me. I look at Rico and feel like I'm the scum of the earth, but how did the Romans put it? *Alea iacta est.*

"It will take a few days for the money to be wired over internationally," I tell Mal. My voice doesn't tremble, but it wants to. "And I need your account information so I can start the transfer."

"I want that done before I go with you," he says, and there it is. Not anger, but a spark of hatred. It doesn't make me feel any better.

"Then get to it." I stand and turn away from him, fishing my phone out of my pocket. "George," I say when my groundskeeper answers. "I need you to set up a wire transfer. I will email you the details shortly."

"Certainly, sir," George says, and I hang up. Nothing ever ruffles that man's feathers.

I turn to face Mal again, who is watching me with a hostile look on his face. "Who will watch Rico?"

"I'll be your whore for the night," Mal snarls under his breath. "Mind your own business about everything else."

"Considering what I'm about to do for you, it wouldn't hurt if you tried to show a little gratitude."

"I'll be grateful on my knees later." Mal turns away and goes to talk to Rico. I don't know where he'll go, but I hope it's somewhere safe. Maybe he's used to being alone, since it seems to be only the two of them. I run a tired hand over my hair. My neck hurts, my eyes sting, and I honest to God don't know why I'm doing this. The underlying conviction that Mal wouldn't just accept the money without some sort of repayment from his side is irrelevant.

Mal is now talking to someone on the phone, pacing back and forth. The Italian is too fast to keep up with, but I do catch the name Caivano. His tormenters, I'm guessing.

I need to try and bring us to neutral ground again, or the rest of the day will turn out really unpleasant. "These guys don't fuck around," I say when he returns to where I'm standing. "How much do they want?"

Mal grimaces. "Eighty thousand."

"Interesting accounting system they have."

"Penalty for paying it off on one go," Mal says, laughing under his breath as he pens his account information on a piece of paper. "Fucking assholes."

"Hey." I want to reach out and touch him when he hands it over, but I know better. "At least tomorrow morning, you can get on with your life, right?"

He's silent for a few seconds as he gazes blankly at the scar on his forearm. "Right," he softly says. "Let's get this over with."

I try to keep the mood from plummeting on the way to the hotel, but it's no good. By the time we begin to climb the slight hill, hostility is coming off him in waves. Maybe I should just give him the money and walk away. It's probably the best idea I've had all day, but a part of me—the injured pride part—won't let me. *And, I think, if it were me, I'd have an easier time accepting this money if I felt I'd paid my dues.*

Mal hasn't said another word by the time we reach the hotel. I force myself to relax and climb the stairs at leisure. Mal is one step behind me and when I glance back, he has his head ducked down, hands in his pockets, looking relaxed if it weren't for the fists bunching the fabric of his jeans.

This time, I find my room without any trouble. Housekeeping has stopped by. The bed is made, two chocolates in golden wrappers resting on the pillows. The closet is closed, my papers are straightened, the windows have been left slightly ajar so the curtains billow slightly in the breeze. When I cross the hallway to close them, I notice fresh towels hanging from their racks in the bathroom. It gives me an idea, but first—

"What are you doing?"

Mal is hopping on one foot, taking off his socks. His shoes have already been kicked carelessly aside.

“Getting this over with, like I said.” He begins to shrug out of his clothes and I walk up to him, crowding him until he’s pressed against the wall by the bathroom. I’m slighter than him, but I think I impressed him with my right hook, and he doesn’t underestimate my strength anymore. His eyes are wide, but the anger returns when it dawns on him what I’m doing. “No kissing,” he snaps, turning his face aside.

“For a fucking hundred grand, I think I get to kiss you.”

“Key word being *fucking*,” Mal says, but he gasps when I take him by surprise, knocking his knees apart so he slides down the wall about a foot. I take hold of his neck, fingertips digging in, and kiss him hard, pushing my tongue in his mouth. Mal makes a noise that doesn’t sound entirely like a protest, but he shoves me away anyway.

He’s strong, so I stumble, and he picks up the first thing he can reach, which is the hotel policy binder, and he throws it in my direction. Flyers printed with Rome’s attractions go flying in every direction, and the binder hits me square in the chest, before it thuds to the ground. I’m on him before he can blink, fisting his shirt as I push him against the wall.

“Get off me before I fucking hurt you,” he grits out and I laugh, all of this striking me as irrationally funny somehow.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, smoothing down the wrinkles over his chest, but he knocks my hands aside.

“Forget it. Keep your money.” Mal shoves away from the wall, grabs his shoes and aims for the door, and I stare after him in disbelief.

“Seriously? You’re going to walk out because of a kiss after I’ve already had my dick up your ass?” He doesn’t listen, yanks at the door handle, and I tell him instead, “Fine. Go, if you have to, but I’m not stopping the transaction. The money is yours.”

Mal falters, the heavy door slipping through his fingers as it whispers closed again.

“Why?” he asks after a quiet moment.

Because I don’t want you to die, because I can’t walk away and forever wonder if a kid got hurt because of it, because I don’t think I can stand by and do nothing. I say none of this.

“Because I don’t think you can walk out of here with that debt hanging over your head.”

Mal laughs, a soft, derisive noise. “Yeah?” he asks under his breath. “Watch me.” His hand tightens on the door handle, knuckles turning white. He doesn’t move.

“I’m watching,” I tell him, taunting him despite knowing what a bad idea this is. Mal’s hand clamps around the handle so hard it must hurt. He lets go, punches the door and spins around.

“Okay, you got me.” He drops his shoes and raises his hands, palms up. “What do you want from me, huh? I’m your hooker. Do you want me on the bed?” He walks past me, ungently nudging my shoulder. “Legs in the air? Or ass? It’s up to you. Call me any name you want, use me any way you want.” He brings his face very close to mine, and his breath is hot and smells like mint when he says, sneering, “Show me what a *man* you are.”

“I believe,” I softly say, standing my ground, “you said something about being grateful on your knees?”

Mal’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second, and I’m glad I caught him off guard. He thinks he’s in control now and I need to throw him off balance if I want to make this in any way enjoyable. He gathers himself fast, I’ll give him that.

Taking a step back, he inclines his head, conceding, and says, “As you wish.” Slowly, he sinks to his knees and reaches for my pants.

“Hands behind your back.”

He freezes, eyes fixed on my crotch for a long second before he slowly lifts his gaze. For a second I think he’ll fight me again, but he doesn’t.

“May I take off my shirt?” he asks. “I don’t have a change of clothes.”

“No.” I wait until he accepts this too, and then he folds his hands behind his back. His eyes are blazing and for a second I hesitate. Do I really want to put my dick in someone’s mouth who is this mad at me? But despite everything, I know he wouldn’t hurt me. Not like that, anyway. “Very good,” I coo at him when he remains silent, waiting. I stroke his head, the back of his neck, and his jaw, before I push my thumb into his mouth. He tries not to react, but I can tell his breaths are coming in short bursts through his nose almost immediately. Fascinating. “Suck.”

He does. And the thing is, I hadn't expected him to. I expected him to fight me further, to maybe pull away, but he sucks my thumb and when the air leaves my lungs in a puff of surprise, he sucks harder. I watch, mesmerized, as his eyes flutter closed, against his will almost.

With my free hand I undo my pants and pull my cock out, hard already. Mal's eyes open again and there's a flash of something calculated, but it's gone almost immediately. He lets go of my thumb and opens his mouth wider. I want to say something snarky but it wouldn't help either of us, and truth be told, all I want is to push into the pink heat he offers so beautifully.

Mal makes another noise when a drop of pre-come hits his tongue before my cock does and then I slide home. I give him no time to adjust to it and cup the back of his head, making him take me deep. He closes his mouth around me easily, even though I can feel him wanting to fight it.

Before he gets used to it I pull out again, and push in, keeping an uneven rhythm, until he's had it and he begins to suck, hard, struggling against my movements to set his own pace. He goes all out, no inhibitions, eyes firmly closed, a streak of spit beginning to leak down his chin, and suddenly I get it. I get what he's doing, and I laugh, knees almost buckling when I let the orgasm he so desperately wants to draw out of me come, because if he thinks that means our evening is done, he has no idea. No idea at all.

Before I can tell him he can go and spit in the sink if he wants, Mal has swallowed and is climbing to his feet.

"Now," I say, "you can take off your shirt. And the rest of your clothes, and get on the bed." His face falls, and I do my best not to grin, I really do, but going by the angry glint in his eye I don't succeed. "Don't worry. You'll like this part."

Without a word, Mal strips and gets on the bed, on his hands and knees. I appreciate the line of his back and ass with my eyes as well as my hands, and I feel him tense, his muscles coiling. When I say, "Turn over," he doesn't. Not immediately. The hesitation seems significant, but I don't understand why, and eventually Mal rolls onto his back. He looks like he's waiting for punishment rather than orgasms.

I'm two fingers in, knuckle-deep, before he makes the first noise, a mournful sound, like he's giving up on something, letting it go. His jaw unclenches, and he gasps for breath like a free diver breaching the ocean

surface after minutes of being oxygen starved. His knees fall open and his hands scramble for the sheets beneath him. Something in him gives way, and I feel it do the same to me. Suddenly, just like that, with that one sound, the rules have changed.

Up until now I had something to prove. I wanted to break his resistance, and I wanted to make him feel good despite whatever hang-ups were holding him back. But now I soothe him, rubbing his knee with my free hand as he tosses his head from side to side, a single tear tracking from his right eyelid.

“Do you want me to stop?” I quietly ask. Mal doesn’t answer me, but he presses on my fingers when they curl over his prostate. His throat stretches beautifully as he arches his back, soundlessly telling me what I need to know. He’s so hard a gossamer thread connects the tip of his cock with his belly, every once in a while a thicker tear drips down the spiderweb-thin thread of pre-come. It’s one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen, despite having seen it before.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” I tell Mal, because the need for it curls around my balls like a vice, an urgency as inevitable as an oncoming storm. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t tense up either, and I can’t resist; I bend down, lift his balls out of the way and lick at his hole. It tastes of good quality lube but I don’t care because Mal shouts out, the loudest he’s been so far, curling in on himself like he’s doing a sit-up.

His eyes are open when I meet them, bewildered, and I want to explore this. I desperately hope in that moment when we are nothing more than two men who really need to get their fucking rocks off, that one day I will have the time to do this to him, slowly, until I drive him wild.

I put on the condom, nudge him back onto the mattress and hold his legs wide as I push for the home run.

Mal’s head is turned, and his mouth is open against the sheets. It reminds me of last time, of how he’d bitten the sheets, and I don’t *want* him to bite anything back. I want him to admit it feels good. To himself, if not to me. I fuck him tenderly and I wonder when it turned into this.

After a while I have to drop to one elbow because my arms are starting to shake so hard they can’t carry my weight anymore. My hand lands near Mal’s face, and he immediately turns into it, nuzzling my palm, putting his mouth on the base of my thumb. His eyes are half open, but I don’t think he can see

anything, he's so out of it. He moans brokenly every time I push into him and I bare my teeth, grinding them hard against the regret that wants to spill out of my mouth.

This could've been something so amazing, him and me, something I will never find again in this lifetime, yet now one hundred thousand and one reasons are standing between us.

I pick up my pace when Mal starts making these mindless noises as he sucks unabashedly on the base of my thumb. His mouth is hot and wet and it makes me want him to feel that, it makes me want to suck his cock until he comes in my mouth. I stop holding back, stop trying to aim for his prostate, and just hammer my way to an orgasm until it spills over me like the inevitable. I pull out, take off and tie the condom, shove two fingers in his ass and take his cock to the root.

It's been a while since I've deep throated anyone, so I have to fight back the gag reflex, but I know how good it feels to have a throat close around the head of your dick.

Mal thrashes against the sheets for a few seconds. He might be oversensitive by now, and I wait for the hitch in his breath to die down before I begin to move. When he's settled in to it, I curl my fingers and listen for the noises he can't hold back whenever I push that prize button. I want to put my mouth on his hole, I want to lick around it, in it, I want to drive him wild, but I've never done that to anyone before, although I always thought I'd do it to someone I really loved. I push the urge aside and suck his cock until he comes, spasming on my fingers, the strength of him grinding them together.

Chapter 6

Malachi

I shift in my seat. My ass is fucking sore and I want to be thinking about a hundred different things, but all the whirling thoughts in my brain keep coming back to the same eye of the storm: I liked it. And Travis knew I did, which is why I acted like a complete asshole when I left the hotel early this morning.

“What is it, Mal?” Rico asks me as I sit there chewing my lip. “Are you worried?”

“I am, but not about us. You... you remember that guy that was here yesterday?”

Rico’s face lights up. “New York? Yeah, I liked him. Is he coming back?” His eyes widen. “Is he... your *boyfriend*?”

I huff a laugh. “No. No, he’s not, but he helped us out. He... arranged it so we won’t have to pay the Caivanos anymore.”

“No way!” Rico jumps up and hugs me hard, his head knocking into my chin. It hurts when he squeezes my ribs, but I don’t complain, and I pretend not to hear or feel the little hiccups he’s trying to control. “That’s great,” he says when he straightens. “But then why are you worried?”

“I think I saw someone outside of Travis’s hotel. One of the Caivanos’ men.”

“Malachi.” Rico grabs my wrist. At first I think it’s a coincidence, but it’s not. His thumb finds the scar and he rubs it. “You have to warn him.”

I tug my hand free and press my palm against my eye until I see fireworks. “I don’t have his number.” My voice is an ugly, tired croak. “I don’t know where he is. The hotel says he checked out not long after I left. I don’t... I don’t know where he is.”

I fucked up. Why didn’t I go back inside? Why didn’t I warn him? Was I really so afraid of how good it felt, being screwed by him? It had nothing to do with that first guy years ago. None of that was Travis’s fault. He pretty much saved my life, and Rico’s, gave me good sex when he had carte blanche to do as he pleased. And I left, knowing what these guys are capable of. “Shit, Rico. I made a mistake.”

"Then you have to make it right." Rico's mouth is trembling and he doesn't even try to stop his tears. It's what Papa always told us. *Everyone makes mistakes, mio figlio. It's a good man who makes it right.*

"I know, Rico." I rub his arms up and down, thinking hard. He resembles Mama so much it hurts to look at him sometimes. At least I've never had to realize I've forgotten her face. "Listen. Go upstairs, pack whatever you can't leave behind, but no more than one bag. Don't open up for anyone while I'm gone. Keep your phone on, and call the police the moment you notice something weird, okay? Wait until it's rush hour, stick to the main streets, and take a train to Firenze. You remember Aunt Silvia, don't you?"

"Yeah, Mama's sister." The woman Rico knows better than he'd ever known his own mother.

"Yes. You call her, you tell her you're on your way and you ask her to meet you at the station."

"You'll follow, won't you? With New York? I don't want to live here anymore."

"I don't know about Travis," I tell him quietly. "But yeah, I'll follow as soon as I can. I'll call you when it's over."

"Okay." Rico hugs me hard, rubbing his wet face on my shoulder. I give him all the money I have in my wallet, and the bills I've kept stashed in the desk, too.

"Don't talk to anyone. Don't open the door for anyone. Lock yourself in."

"I will."

"Get what you need, and don't keep your money all in one place. Stuff some in your shoes, some in your backpack, and some in your coat."

"I will. Be careful, okay?"

"You too."

Rico doesn't say anything else; he just looks at me hard and then turns away.

I don't know anything about tracking cell phones, so I don't have a clue where to start. I could go to the police, I suppose, but they won't do anything for another twenty-four hours at least. In the early days, when I thought I could find a way out of the Caivano brothers' clutches, I'd followed them to a bar once. It's the only clue I have, so that's where I start.

It's actually one of the better clubs in Rome, which is scary in and of itself. Of course this early in the day it's closed, and as I stand there watching the place from across the street, I wish I smoked so I'd look less conspicuous. There is a little bakery behind me, gelato arranged in the window to attract tourists. I wish I hadn't given all my money to Rico now, but the hundred thousand euros coming in from Travis gives me some leeway in my bank balance. Hooker money. May as well spend it on something like this. I go inside and order two boxes of whatever pastries and other treats they have on display.

Heart hammering, I cross the road and ring the doorbell beside the heavy glass door before I can change my mind. A huge guy with a dishtowel slung over his shoulder opens up. It takes forever before all the chains and bolts are removed.

"Delivery," I say, "for..." And then I pretend to search my pockets, hoping he won't notice how hard my hands are shaking. He rolls his eyes and steps aside.

"In the back down the stairs, but you've got to leave through the back door because I'm not unlocking this again." He mutters something about new guys and starts sliding the bolts back in place. I let my eyes adjust to the dim lighting in the empty club until I spot a sign at the back pointing to stairs and bathrooms.

I cross the floor but slow my stride the minute I'm out of sight. Maybe he'll call down to say I'm on my way, in which case I'm screwed. If he doesn't, I could at least check if Travis is here, and if he's not, I might still escape through the back door. I smell bathrooms and bleach before I'm all the way down the marble steps; they are down a corridor that also leads to the back door, but I hear voices down another flight of stairs. Slowly I creep closer, clutching the boxes with pastries to my chest. I've only seen the brothers once, and I've got the scar to prove it. They always sent their thugs over for the money. Maybe they won't recognize me if I'm spotted.

There are three guys in what looks like a storage room with a desk. Neither of them are the brothers, and one of them is Travis, sitting in a chair like he's waiting for the complimentary breakfast at his expensive hotel despite the gun being trained on his head.

"Stop being funny," the guy holding the gun says in terrible English. He's the one I had seen outside the hotel, and I also recognize him now as the one

who had held me in place while I was being stabbed with the chisel. I don't recognize the other guy, but he looks on edge, wary. The only person facing me is Travis, and he sees me almost immediately but doesn't so much as twitch.

"I'm just tired of waiting," he says. "You said Messrs. Caivano and Caivano would be here any minute."

"They will be," the wary guy says, and I understand Travis is warning me. We don't have much time. I shift the boxes to my left hand, reach into my jacket with my right, and plaster on a smile.

"Delivery," I call out brightly, and the guy with the gun rounds on me while the other one startles but goes entirely still.

"I didn't order—" The guy doesn't even have time to lift the gun in my direction. Travis is on his feet, and he smashes a half-empty bottle of something on the gunman's head. He crumples with a muffled noise, and I turn to the other one, dropping the pastries and whacking the side of his head with my Maglite. The batteries go flying when the lamp part breaks off. Goddammit, and here I thought this would make a great weapon. I drop the flashlight and raise my fist, blind with rage, with grief, finally overwhelmed with being so afraid for so long, and I take it out on this wide-eyed guy who holds up his hands in self-defense.

Chapter 7

Travis

Malachi lands three punches in a row before I can even open my mouth to speak. “Stop,” I manage when my heart starts beating again. “Don’t, he’s a cop.” Mal’s fist hovers, shaking and bloody, his eyes so dark in a rage he looks alien. He blinks at the groaning guy on the ground and then at me.

“Carabinieri?”

“Yeah. Undercover, I guess. Come on, we need to get the fuck out of here.”

“How did you know?” the cop asks in crisp, clear English. “No, never mind. You’re right. You do need to get out of here. I can give you two minutes of pretending to be unconscious.”

“Find me,” I tell him and the cop nods. “Come on.” I drag Mal away toward the back door, trying to run through the pain in my left leg. When we’ve run so long I can’t breathe anymore, I have to tell Mal to stop. He does immediately, and comes to stand in front of me. I lean against the wall, trying to catch my breath.

“Now what?” he asks. “What did they want from you?”

I snort. “Money. They figured you had someone coughing up for you, goddammit. They must have a mole at the hotel. I think they wanted to add a bit of kidnapping to their CV, but since there’s no one left to pay my ransom, it wouldn’t have worked out so well.”

“You need to get out of here.” Mal’s eyes search mine with an understated worry.

I can’t believe he came for me. Rubbing a hand over my hair, I close my eyes for a second. I wish he hadn’t snuck out this morning. I wish I could’ve given him something other than a paid-for fuck.

“So do you. If you stay and they find out I got away, they’ll come find you. Rome isn’t safe for you anymore, Mal. Not for a while, at least.”

“I know, and I plan to leave.” Mal holds up his phone. “Rico is already on his way out of town, and I’m going to follow him right now.”

“What about the store?”

He shrugs. "It'll still be there in a few months. I'll probably sell it anyway. Start new."

"Good. Sounds... good." My leg hurts in that numbing way blooming bruises always do. Fucking steel-tipped boots.

"What will you do?" Mal asks me quietly.

"Go to the American Embassy. Those idiots have my passport and my wallet." I wriggle my fingers. "But the embassy has my fingerprints, so it shouldn't be a big deal. I'll call from there to cancel my credit cards and arrange my flights, since I can't go back to the hotel now."

Mal fidgets for a second, looking down. "The embassy is close to the hotel."

"I know," I say and I smile at him softly. "I'll be careful." This is it. There's nothing else to say, really. And still I can't find it in me to go just yet. "Thanks for... for coming to find me."

"It was nothing. Are you going to be okay?"

I smile at him. We both know we're hiding bruises. "Yeah. You? Your hands..."

"I'm fine." Mal nods at me once, quickly glancing away.

I don't know why I do it. Gratitude, maybe. Relief that, against all odds, we're still alive. I mean to aim for his cheek but the kiss lands somewhere on the left corner of his mouth. I back off immediately, embarrassed as he blinks at me, looking as dumbstruck as I feel. We don't do this. We're not like this, so I turn away, hoping he just writes it off as a spur-of-the-moment thing.

His hand curls in my sleeve and he spins me around. I don't know what I see in his eyes, I don't recognize that desperate glint, but his mouth is warm when it lands on mine, his tongue slick and hot, and it makes my insides twist viciously. Forget butterflies, this is a roaring tiger trying to get out.

Mal's hand bunches up the fabric of my shirt, and he touches the skin of my lower back, setting my entire body on fire. He pulls away and opens his mouth to say something, but I don't let him. If we talk about this it will be ruined and I don't want it to be. I don't know what I want from him—I can't trust him after what he's done, and I know he'll never trust me either—but I do know I don't want to stop. I grab him harder, pull him closer, but he wrestles free. His hand tightens on my bicep, and then he lets go.

"Take care," Malachi says, and with that, he's gone.

I let myself feel it, the sweet agony of 'what if.' Just for a moment, so I can move on after this, because I have my work cut out for me.

If things had been different...

Straightening, I shake the melancholy off and head for the tall gates of the American Embassy.

"There is a policeman here to see you," a young woman says, bringing a bunch of files into the sterile room where I've been told to wait.

"I thought there might be," I say to her, accepting the pen and the papers.

"Are you sure you're all right, Mr. Jones?" She points at the bruise on my temple. I'd completely forgotten about that. It seems so long ago now. Poor cousin Gino...

"I'm fine, really."

"Okay. I'll send in the officer."

"Thank you."

The same man who helped us leave the Caivanos' bar earlier sidles through the door. "I don't have long."

"No." I grin at him. "I bet you don't." He looks different here in the harsh overhead lighting: taller, prouder, like he's shed his other persona and I'm staring at the real guy now. "Who are you?"

"The less you know, the better." He takes a chair opposite mine, elbows on the table. "How did you know I was a cop?"

I laugh. It must bug him that I figured it out, since he's in danger every second of the day. "At the risk of becoming a weepy cliché, I've been beaten up plenty of times for being who I am, and I know when someone is pulling his punches." I pat my thigh. "You could've done a lot more damage, but you didn't. Whenever you thought the Godfather's monkey was going to go too far, you reeled him back in. You were subtle, but I was"—*scared shitless*—"let's say, hyper vigilant. So I noticed things I wouldn't have otherwise. I think you're safe, though."

"Good. Well, call me John for now. Why did you want to see me?"

“John.” I plaster a wide grin on my face, even though my empty stomach twists with fatigue and pain. “What if I told you I have this friend...”

Chapter 8

Malachi

Rico rushes past what would be the dining room with an elated squeal, sliding over four or five feet of shining wooden floor on his socks before he comes to a stop. He looks happy, eyes shining when he hurries back to the doorway and beams at me. The peace and quiet of Toscana does him good, and I feel it too. The sun seems warmer here, the air cleaner, lighter.

"I love this place," he says. "Is it very expensive?"

Aunt Silvia glances at the real estate agent, and then at me. "No," she says, "which is strange."

"When I saw this on the real estate website last week, it was over twice the price he's telling us," I say to Silvia, keeping my voice low. The guy hears me anyway.

"The owner needs to sell fast," he says, smiling brightly. There's a twinkle in his eye I don't like. "Unforeseen circumstances."

"There's something weird about this," I tell Silvia, and she nods.

"I have a friend who's a contractor; I'll have him take a look at this place before you sign anything. But the contract..." She fans the thick document she'd been reading. "This is a standard real estate purchase agreement, nothing unusual at all. And the owner is an old guy who has lived here for the past forty years. He's moving into a smaller place because his wife died, I think..." She checks her phone and nods at the agent. "I need to go. I have a divorce to settle at two. Will you guys be okay?"

"I can give you a ride back to town, if you like," the realtor says.

"Thanks."

The house is gorgeous, the location perfect, with a very good school less than five miles away. Open windows bring the scent of spring inside, actual sheer voile curtains billowing lightly on the breeze. The sunlight spills in like watered-down orange juice, and it looks like the scene of an overly romantic movie. The floors shine, a fan spins lazily above my head, birds chirp in trees bracketing a garden with a small, kidney-shaped pond. Somewhere, ducks quack, responding to the peeping of what I imagine are the fuzziest yellow ducklings in existence.

I've never seen anything yell *too good to be true* more than this place. It might be the biggest mistake I've ever made when I say, "I will take the ride, but I'll have to get back to you about the house."

"Don't wait too long. It will be gone in a flash."

"I'd be suspicious if it wasn't."

The guy's face sours a bit, but he's cheerful enough as he leads the way to his car. I can tell Rico is sulking in the backseat. He doesn't love sharing a house with Silvia and her husband any more than I do, even though they've been amazing, putting up with us for this long. The real estate guy drops us off with a cheerful wave, and I send Rico up to go do his homework.

Maybe I'm too jaded, and I can't even tell good luck when it slaps me in the face. I let it slip through my fingers once, after all, though I don't know if I'd call Travis good luck. Good fuck, more like. I snort at myself and turn on Silvia's laptop.

When I check the listing, it's gone already. Of course it is. I click through to the job ads instead. I don't mind working at the big furniture chain, but the work isn't exactly a challenge.

Every once in a while I try a surreptitious search for the Caivano brothers, but nothing ever shows up. I've been meaning to go back to the shop to collect some of my personal things, at least check if the place hasn't been ransacked, but I keep putting it off. Maybe I should go this weekend.

Silvia corners me after dinner as I send Rico to go do the dishes.

"My contractor was in the neighborhood of that house, earlier," she says. "He says he remembers that place being built when he was a kid. It was solid then, and from what he could see on the outside, it's still as solid now. There's nothing structurally wrong with it, and he says if you buy it and run into trouble, he'll help you out cheap. But he says if you let it go to somebody else for that price, you're an idiot."

"It's too late," I tell her. "It's already gone."

"Really?" She cocks her head to the side and gives me a sharply raised eyebrow. It makes her look like Mama so much I could cry. "Then why was it still available five minutes ago when I called the agent to say you'd take it?"

"What? But—" Why would they take the listing down hours before?

“He’s staying late at his office so you can sign the contract. Now go; you can take my car. No offense, but I want my privacy back, and so does Daniel.”

Silvia and Daniel are both career people who never had kids, so I understand we’re starting to get underfoot after living with them for months. I nod, but I’m still not convinced.

“Go,” she says, more gently now. “If there’s something wrong with the house, I will sue them until they’re cowering under their desks. Don’t worry. Everyone deserves a break every now and again. Your time is now.”

“Okay.” I grab my wallet and head for the door. “Make sure Rico finishes his homework.”

“I got it,” she says, steering me out the door before I can protest any further.

Maybe I do deserve some good luck. Maybe it *is* my turn. I almost laugh when I walk up to the real estate office and I see he has a sign up in his window that says *Sr. Carpenter wanted*, with an address barely two miles from the new house. *Yes*, I think as I push his door open, a bell softly tinkling over my head. *My time is now.*

“Malachi!” Rico shouts from the living room. “Come check out the news!”

“You’re supposed to be unpacking!” I yell back from the kitchen. “Not watching TV.”

There are boxes everywhere, and even they can’t dampen the soft golden light that spills through the windows—our windows.

“I’m not kidding, get over here!”

There’s a high note of something close to panic in his voice, so I rush into the hallway, sliding on the wooden floors like he’d done when we came to see this place for the first time. I catch myself on the doorway leading into the living room and step inside.

“What is it?” I ask, but he shushes me, and I tune in. A clip is being shown, a repeat by the looks of it, of two handcuffed men being guided up to a courthouse, through a throng of reporters and onlookers. A reporter talks over the muted sounds of the crowd.

“...accelerated trial of the Caivano brothers begins today. The police have been very careful to keep everything quiet up until now. The entire city of Rome

is shocked and surprised to hear about the arrest, which was allegedly made possible through a set-up in which an American man played a big role. No one knows who he is, but it is said he is currently fighting for his life. While long-time suspects of racketeering, coercion and extortion, there was never enough evidence to convict the Caivano brothers, until now. An inside source claims there is no doubt the brothers—

Rico mutes the sound. "It's New York," he says, his eyes wide. "It has to be. Unknown American?"

"Rico, that could be anyone—"

"It's not!" He stamps his foot, angry tears welling in his eyes. "This isn't a coincidence. None of it is! Don't you understand?" He gestures at the room around us. "And he's fighting for his life. You have to find him. You told me he was safe. You have to *find him*."

"Okay," I tell him, kneeling down so I can hold him close. I don't understand why Rico is so invested in Travis; they barely spoke for more than a second. "Why do you care so much about him?"

"He saved us," Rico hiccuped. "He's a hero. And now he's dying."

"He's fighting," I whisper. "If it's him, he'll fight hard."

"Please," Rico whispers in the small voice of a boy in desperate need of a hero. "Please find him."

"I will."

Chapter 9

Travis

At the embassy they advise me to take the first plane back to the US and I plan to, but for some reason I just... don't. My hotel room has clearly been searched by the time I go back, but the spare credit card and stash of money is still safely hidden between my socks.

I find a smaller hotel in a less expensive neighborhood, and while no one comes for me, I find I can't just leave and forget about all this.

Four days after I've said goodbye to Mal I pick up George from the airport, and I wonder if it's pathetic that I feel so much warmth from seeing my groundskeeper again.

"Morning, sir."

"Morning, George." We have a small, dignified grapple over his bags for a second, but he lets me take them, and I lead him toward the car I bought. No BMW this time, for obvious reasons.

"Did you find what we need?" I ask George as he settles back in his seat. I pull out into traffic, ignoring the beeping horn behind me.

"I did, sir. You have a distant cousin who is a carpenter. She has a husband and two children in Verona, but she's willing to work for you if she can go home every weekend and you pay extra for childcare."

"Of course."

"What else do you think we'll need, sir?"

"I think you'll have to call me Travis for the time being, and we have to get someone to fix the bathroom. I don't mind slumming it for a while, but I draw the line at lukewarm showers every day."

"I see why I couldn't convince you to come home, sir," George says wryly, and I laugh.

"We have things to take care of here, George."

"Very well, sir," George says, smiling a little when he adds, "Travis." His usually impeccable white hair is a little messed up from the flight, but apart from that he looks the same as always. Maybe it's me who's different.

It takes one week to add all the updates to Mal's store, the apartment above it, and the workshop. Fixing the bathroom—and by fixing I mean replacing the whole thing—takes a lot longer. Christine, the distant cousin twice removed or whatever it is, arrives in the meantime. She's down to earth and doesn't put up with any of my idiocies, and she's scarily beautiful like only Italian women can be. If I wasn't gay, and we weren't related, I would be a little in love. The first time she walks into the shop, she looks around, face unreadable.

"This friend of yours," she says after she has toured the warehouse. "He's talented." She refuses to speak English to me, and it takes me forever to get what she means.

"Yes," I eventually say when she points at one of his chairs and gives me a thumbs-up. "He is."

"Will you be able to work here?" I ask her.

"Si."

"And George explained what will happen?"

"Si." She opens up her handbag and pulls out a gun.

"Good," I tell her, my eyes going wide. "Great. I'll uh, leave you to settle in down here, and then I can show you where you'll be sleeping."

"Can I get you anything to drink, Miss Genovese?" George asks.

"I'd love some coffee," she says in perfect English, and George grins at me while I grumble on my way out of the room.

The thugs show up every week after the store opens again, even though the sign above the front door now just says *Genovese*, but a whole month passes before they turn up the heat. I always stay out of sight, but I'm nearby when Christine has to deal with them, though I don't doubt she could take them on with one hand tied behind her back.

"What did they want this time?" I ask when they leave. My Italian is getting better, but that exchange had gone far too fast for me to keep up.

"Protection money," she says grimly. George steps out from the warehouse, tucking his gun into the waist of his pants. I'm always surprised when I see him carry a weapon. It's so easy to forget after all these years, that George wasn't always the groundskeeper for our family. "It won't be long now."

"You refused to pay up?"

"Like you told me to. Now get out of my way, I have a coffee table to finish."

I step aside and glance at George. "You got all that?"

"I did, s—Travis. Would you like me to email it to John?"

"Please do. Although it won't be enough."

George nods and turns toward the stairs, but hesitates with one hand on the railing. "Has the snooping on Malachi been fruitful?"

I roll my eyes, but I know when I'm caught red-handed. "He still lives with his aunt Silvia, though it looks like he's trying to find work. Not easy for carpenters, apparently."

"A store of his own?"

I shake my head. "He doesn't have the start-up capital." Even with the 'dirty money' left over in his account. As far as I can tell, the Caivanos are leaving him alone, so they must've been happy with what he paid them.

"Would you like me to make inquiries?"

Laughing softly, I look away, but George doesn't move. He just waits patiently until I have the lurching of my heart back under control. "Discreetly."

"Always, sir."

It's three in the morning that same night when an almighty crash has me jumping out of bed before I'm even half awake. I rush down the stairs, George on my heels, to find Christine in the shop window.

"Stop," she orders, and I freeze on the last step, my bare toes curling over the edge. "There's glass everywhere. They shot through one of the windows."

"And I'm guessing they'll be back tomorrow to offer their *protection*."

"Maybe not that fast, but soon." She squints at the ceiling. "That camera is broken. And you'll have to have the microphones checked too."

"Travis?" George quietly says behind me. I nod, and he goes back upstairs. To Christina I add, "I'll have someone come in to replace the window tomorrow."

"No," she says. "We'll board it up for now. This isn't a wealthy neighborhood, and it will look suspicious if you fix a window like it doesn't cost you a thing."

"Okay. Go get some sleep. I'll put some shoes on and clean up. The party is about to get started."

"Fine." Christina pushes past me, but I stop her with a hand on her arm.

"You okay?"

She raises an eyebrow at me. "Of course I am. I'm Italian."

Laughing, I follow her upstairs and get dressed.

One of Caivanos' bullies comes by three days later, suggesting we better pay for that sorely needed protection because this area of the city really is going to shit.

As Christine refuses, I whisper to George, "This is no good. And things are going to get ugly soon. I don't feel comfortable keeping Christine here for much longer."

"She can take care of herself." He grins. "And so can I."

He's right, I know he is, but I sleep less and less as the days pass and we get murder threats, another broken window, and a dead cat pinned to our door. And yet all we ever see are low-level thugs, so I decide to take matters into my own hands.

"I don't like this," George tells me as he reads John's email over my shoulder.

"Neither do I," Christine says, though no doubt for an entirely different reason.

"It's the only way."

We set it up.

When one of the bull-necked idiots turns up about three months after we set the whole game in motion, I'm waiting. He gives his usual threats to Christine. I walk up behind him, make sure he gets a good look at my face, and then

whack him over the head with a pipe. We then strip him to his underwear and dump him in an alley, naked in the lukewarm May rain.

I'm ready when they come for me, and I can only hope John is ready too, because I find out I don't like being bound to a chair and having the barrel of a gun shoved down my throat.

"American boy," the man holding the gun says, and this is one of them. One of the Caivano brothers. I hope the other one isn't far away. I can't help how my heart hammers, my nostrils flaring as I breathe like a frightened racehorse, the metal tasting like terror in my mouth. Caivano tosses my wallet to the side. "We almost met before, didn't we? I wondered where you disappeared to last time."

He rubs a hand through my hair, yanking my head back so my neck strains, and I almost gag on the gun. There are three other men in the room, but I don't dare to take my eyes off this one, so I don't know if John is here. Either way, this is going to be over soon. "You won't get away this time, but I realized you probably need a little extra incentive to cooperate, so I have a few of my men with your pretty little cousin right now."

He drags the gun over my tongue, in and out of my mouth in an obscene move, and I buck against the chair, trying to wrench my head away. That fucking bastard. I will skin him alive if he hurts Christine.

Caivano laughs, yanking my hair to keep me in place. "You feel like paying up, pretty boy? I might take a finger or two anyway. It's not like rich boys do anything useful with their hands, do they?" The others in the room laugh, and now I don't want John here; I want him with the others, keeping them safe, because it's been a long time since George was a bodyguard. Caivano pulls the gun from between my lips and begins to wipe it on my shirt.

"You motherf—" A hand clamps over my mouth from behind.

"You don't want to insult Mr. Caivano's mother," a soft voice says in my ear. And fuck, *fuck*, it's John. Which means there is no one with Christine and George. I try to keep calm, but panic starts to twist around my insides and doubt begins to cloud my reasoning. What if John is in on this? What if he's a dirty cop? Then the past months will all have been for nothing, and Christine, George, Mal and Rico, they'll all die.

"I'll pay," I gasp, and I'm not even faking it. "Whatever you want."

“Oh, you’re going to do much more than that,” Caivano says. I watch as he puts on latex gloves. He pushes a towel aside that had been covering a tray with what looks like small, white, plastic-wrapped balls.

“No,” I whisper and I begin to tremble. “No, please.”

“Strip him,” he says to John, lifting a syringe off the tray, a bead of liquid leaking from the tip. “And hold his arm.”

Chapter 10

Malachi

The sound of the monitor beeping is so familiar now, I hear it in my dreams. The old man with the white hair straightens when he sees me, smiling gently.

“Ah, Mal. I’m glad you’re here. I need some coffee.”

“You need some rest,” I tell George. “Go home and sleep. I’ll stay.”

George nods. “There’s been no change. I don’t know—”

“He’ll pull through,” I say. “He will.”

“Yes,” George says, but his eyes are sad. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Sleep in if you can. I have nowhere to be.” I settle in the chair George left, a comfortable recliner, unless you’re trying to sleep in it for days on end. “Hey Travis,” I whisper, stroking the hair from his forehead. “How are you? Rico sends his love. He says you should wake up soon. He wants to show you the new house. He thinks you paid for most of it, and I think he’s right, you little shit. Wake up so I can yell at you, huh? What do you think?”

They don’t know what will happen when, if, Travis wakes up. The heroin they’d injected had been enough to mess with his system, but when one of the cocaine balls burst in his intestines... I can’t think about it too much.

When John told me what had happened, I couldn’t believe how brave they had all been, much braver than I ever was. Gathering evidence, videotaping and recording the extortions, handing it all over to John... It makes me feel humble and proud. Rico was right: Travis is a hero. I just don’t understand why he’d go through all this trouble. I take a deep breath and get my voice under control.

“I like what you did to the bathroom above the store, by the way. Those improvements will help me sell it for a nice little sum. And then I can pay you back for the house when you wake up. No, don’t argue. I have a good job lined up. They said they’d wait for me. I’m sure you have something to do with that too. But anyway, I am paying you back. I don’t care what you say. I don’t want to live in Rome anymore. Toscana is gorgeous, and we’re close to Firenze. I love it. You’ll have to come visit. I mean... if you want.” My voice gives out and I take his hand, resting my forehead against our entwined fingers. “Please.”

Wake up, Travis. Please wake up. Come on, wake up, I think before I fall asleep.

I open my eyes when my back begins to hurt so much I can't pretend to be asleep any longer. It's almost dawn, the light graying through the blinds I forgot to close, and I blink to focus my eyesight on the room around me. When I look back down, Travis's eyes are fixed on me. I sit up so fast I nearly fall off the chair, and his hand falls from mine. He looks down at it, flexing his fingers.

"Travis," I whisper. "*O Madre de Dio*, Travis, you're awake."

"Hi," he says, voice hoarse, blinking slowly like he wants nothing more than to go back to sleep. "Who are you?"

I stare at him, dumbstruck, stupid tears burning behind my eyeballs. Lifting my eyes to the ceiling for a second, I try to hold them back. "I'll go get your nurse," I say, but when I look down I find him giving me the wickedest grin. It still takes me a second to work it out, and then I do.

"You asshole," I croak, not caring when tears start to stream down my cheeks. "You fucking asshole." He lifts his arms weakly and I fall into them, holding him as gently as I can despite wanting to squeeze him so hard he'll feel it forever. I lie there hiccuping in his arms for ages, until he pats me on the back.

"I'm so tired," he whispers. "I have so many questions, but I'm so tired. Which is ridiculous because I feel like I've slept for a long time."

"You have, but I think it's okay if you sleep some more. As long..."

Travis lifts his eyebrows. He looks pale, and his eyes look sunken, and he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen. "As long?"

"As long as you think you'll wake up again."

He closes his eyes and breathes, like he's testing. "Yeah," he whispers, "I'll wake up again." He mumbles something else that sounds like, *now that I know you're here*. I reach for his hand, and by the time I've squeezed it, he's asleep again.

I watch him for five minutes, my heart feeling like it grew wings, and then I gently let him go to tell the night nurse he had woken up.

Epilogue

Travis

The airport is a busy, frantic bustle of business people pushing through harried families trying to keep their children in line. It looks a lot like herding cats to me.

Malachi is staring and I don't know what to make of it. Beside him Rico is giving me the stink-eye, but about that I can do something at least.

"You should come visit," I tell him, crouching down to his level. "I'll show you New York." I beam at him even though I don't feel the happiness I'm trying to pass along. Maybe that's why it doesn't work. His bottom lip juts out and he looks down without saying a word.

"Sir," George says beside me. "We should make our way through security."

"Yes," I say. "I'll be right there." George nods and takes our hand luggage. He doesn't move far—I think it will be a while before he'll leave my side—but we have the illusion of privacy at least.

"So this is it," Mal says. I can't read him. He's like a closed book and the blurb on the back is blurry.

"Seems like it. It's been... uh. Interesting." Do I shake his hand? Do I kiss him one last time? My emotions are all over the place, so the best thing to do is to keep them in check, really. "Take care, Mal." I pull him into a quick hug, or I figure it will be quick, but he holds on when I try to let go.

"Why?" he whispers. "Why did you go through all that trouble?"

I smile and gently pry his arms from around my shoulders. If he doesn't know by now, it's too late to explain, isn't it? "What else is a spoiled rich boy to do with his time and money?" I offer lightly. Mal doesn't smile, and it makes me sad. I would've liked to see him smile one last time. "Look after your brother, okay?" I tell Rico, and he nods, solemn, like only a child can do. "Bye Mal."

Malachi takes a deep breath, but all he says is, "Bye, Travis. And thank you, for everything."

"It's been entirely my pleasure."

I turn and walk away, ignoring George's silent but brief surprise. The flight home will be grueling with all my bruises, but what's a little physical pain compared to the rest of it.

There is snow on the ground in Martha's Vineyard. "Snow in May, George," I complain from the recliner. "What have we done to deserve this?"

"Built landfills, sir," George says drily. He's watering the plants in the conservatory where I'm lounging around, bored. "And I believe cow farts are another cause."

"What did I used to do with my time? It seems I've forgotten." There's only so much resting I can do before I turn into a whining child, apparently.

"I believe you use to say sleeping late was an art. And you used to attend parties." George sends me a droll look when I glance at him over my shoulder. "That's about it. Oh, a package arrived for you earlier."

"Oh, how thrilling." I roll my eyes. We've been back from Rome for ten days, and this is the most exciting thing to happen since. Not to say I haven't had enough excitement over the past weeks. "Where is it?"

"I left it in the big kitchen, sir. I'll go fetch it for you."

"I can do that, you carry on being useful." Jumping to my feet, I hurry to what used to be the staff kitchen when the manor was still full of people. Since it's just me and George now, we generally use the small kitchen on the south side of the house.

The package sits on the gleaming counter, and I eye the slightly battered box curiously. My heart pretty much jumps out of my throat when I see it came from Italy. Grabbing a pair of scissors, I cut through the hermetically sealed package, but the thick duct tape puts up a heroic fight. When I finally yank the box open, green foam peanuts fly everywhere, and in between them nestles a very familiar, silver music box.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God, Cousin Gino." I laugh, the sound shuddering hesitantly on its way out. My belly aches with longing, and I lift the small note from the box. I have to resist the urge to press it to my face, and ease the lip from the envelope.

A thick, cream-colored card has elegant loopy handwriting on it and I have to blink a few times to make out the words.

Cousin Gino got bored on the top shelf of Pedro's Pawn Shop.

That's all it says, no name, nothing else. The disappointment I feel is irrationally huge and stings my eyeballs. Well, Gino didn't get his final resting place, but at least he traveled to Rome one last time. I take the music box, already wondering which mantelpiece would be best, when another piece of paper catches my eye. I stick my shaking hand in the peanuts and draw out the note, only it's not a note.

It's a plane ticket. One way to Rome. And it leaves tomorrow.

I stare at it, open mouthed, eyes wide, and after a frozen second of stunned silence, I bellow, "George!"

Right behind me, he says, "Off you go, sir. Can't deny a dead man's wishes, after all, can we?"

I turn around, my hand pressed to my mouth. When I have my voice under control, I say, "But what about—" I indicate the house around me.

"I'll hold down the fort, sir."

"Oh, George." For the first and the last time in my life I hug my bodyguard hard.

"Just be careful, sir. Don't linger around Rome. Go straight to Tuscany if you can." He lowers his voice. "Gino won't know the difference between one piece of Italian soil and the next."

"You're the best," I whisper.

"My Christmas bonus confirms it, sir," George says, and I laugh, already turning toward the stairs. I have packing to do. A lot of it, since I don't know when I'll be back. By the end of the week, maybe. Or never.

I'm anxious and rumpled after the flight, and twelve hours' worth of scenarios on how this can all go bad flashes through my brain as I wait for my luggage.

How can I be sure the package came from Mal? What if the brothers already bribed their way out of jail and I'll be walking straight into a bullet? What if I completely missed the cues and the plane ticket really is just to dump Gino on the ancient Forum. Some sort of repayment for my help.

But then he would've sent a return ticket too, wouldn't he? Unless he couldn't afford it...

I'm secretly hoping Mal will be waiting for me, but he's not. Instead there is a taxi driver with my name on a sign and I walk over.

"I take you to *Forum Romanum*, si?" he says, tipping his cap.

I sigh. "*Si*." At least I can buy a first class ticket home, then.

The drive into the city leaves me nauseated, but I can mostly ignore it. I have to admit, I'm thrilled to be back here. Despite the danger I am very possibly in just by showing my face in this city, I feel alive, here in Italy. Like a real human being rather than a caricature of the spoiled American rich boy.

To my surprise, my driver parks his cab and gets out of the car too.

"I stay close," he tells me when I eye him curiously. "I make sure no one see you. And he say I take bullet for you if I have to." The driver laughs heartily, like it's a joke.

"He?" I ask, rummaging through my luggage until I find Cousin Gino.

"He who hire me." The driver shrugs, like that explains it all. I suppose it does.

Together we walk to the same tree I'd spotted last time. There are no cops in sight. No one around but tourists, really, and a lot more of them than last time. Maybe that's why I blend into anonymity a lot more than before. When the moment comes it's strangely anticlimactic.

"Rest in peace," I say, because I feel like I have to say something, and then I tip the music box into the small hole I dug in the soft earth with a credit card. The driver adds something in Italian, his head bowed, and then we walk away. When I aim for a garbage can, he stops me, face horrified.

"Give it to me," he says, holding out his hand. "I hide it on cemetery for you."

"Oh. Yes, that would be great. Thank you." I climb into the cab—the front, not the back, because I don't actually want to throw up from carsickness—and close my eyes. "Back to the airport?" I ask when I hear his car door slam shut. There is silence, and a strange feeling crawls over my skin. I don't know how I know it, but I know this isn't my driver who is sitting next to me. I jerk upright, eyes flying open, hand ready on the door handle in case I need to escape.

Everything goes cold and hot at once, because there he is, staring at me, with the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.

"Malachi..."

"Is the airport where you want to go?" he asks in that beautiful melodic voice of his. I swear all the blood in my upper body rushes south just at the sound of it. "Because I have a bubble bath waiting, and a bottle of champagne. Especially imported for spoiled American rich boys."

"Bath," I say stupidly. "Definitely bubble bath, not airport."

He laughs a little bashfully, and I stare at him for a moment longer until I can't take it anymore and throw my arms around his neck, kissing him with all I've got. We both startle when someone raps on the window.

"Can I have car back now?" the taxi driver asks, and Mal grins at me, then lets me go to roll down the window.

"Actually," he says in English, for my benefit no doubt. "Can you drop us off at the train station?"

The bath is hot and the champagne travels to my head faster than it has any right to.

"Are you trying to get me drunk so you can have your wicked way with me?" I ask when Mal tops up my glass. I can barely keep my eyes off his beautiful body.

He laughs, throwing his head back in delight. I've never seen him this carefree and I love it. I love it so much, I never, ever want to leave. The house he lives in is amazing, and I'll have to call George to say he made an excellent choice. I don't want to think irrational romantic thoughts but they are true none the less. If Malachi would have me, I could live here for the rest of my life.

"Aunt Silvia is watching Rico," he says. "Which won't happen a lot so we have to make the most of it." The smile slips from his face and the look he gives me hurts my insides. "I never had the chance to say I was sorry," Mal whispers. "I can't take that I hurt you like that. That I used you. I'm so... sorry. I'm..." His face twists, lips parting in a grimace, and he turns away, then buries his hands in his hair.

I can't stand it. It tears at me that he beats himself up like this. "I did worse," I whisper, and I'm less stoic than he is, or maybe fatigue is catching up

with me because tears are already streaming down my face. "I treated you like a—"

"Don't say it." Mal yanks at his hair and I have to grab his wrists, I can't sit here and watch him torment himself. "Don't say it," he repeats, lifting his eyes to mine. When he sees me, he draws in a deep, wet breath. "Oh God. Don't. Don't, let's just... we can get past this. We can. Start over. Right here, if you want that. I don't want to lose—"

I kiss him. I shut him up with my mouth on his, and it tastes like pain, like grief and salt and hurt, and I drink it all in.

"We can," I say, dragging my mouth away, across his jaw, his cheekbone. It hurts, his stubble catches on my kissed-raw lips but I don't care. We both have penance to do and we have a lifetime to do it in.

The End

Author Bio

In 2008 Indra Vaughn packed up everything but the kitchen sink... no, that's a lie. She left everything behind apart from her books and moved from Belgium to Michigan.

She now lives in the suburbs of Detroit with her dog who thinks he's a toddler. Indra's professional background is in Nursing and Chinese Medicine, but she prefers to spend time making up stories about mysterious men and their unrequited love.

Contact & Media Info

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

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THIS TOO

By Isla James

Photo Description

Two young men, lying side by side with their heads on pillows. The first man is a brunet wearing a red T-shirt. The other has lighter brown hair, a five o'clock shadow, and is wearing a grey T-shirt. Both men look slightly rumped. The man with the grey shirt has reached over and turned the other man's face towards him planting a kiss on his lips. The man with the red shirt appears surprised. They both have their eyes open looking at the other's response.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been best friends since the day we met in kindergarten. I've been in love with him forever, but he's straight—as evidenced by the scads of girls he's dated. I finally worked up the nerve to not only come out to him our senior year of high school but also tell him how I felt for him. As I expected, he told me that he'd be my best friend no matter what but that he was straight and didn't feel the same way. I was heartbroken but knew that I had to suck it up if I wanted us to remain friends. I stayed single for the rest of high school while he dated every girl around. Now we are rooming together in college and I'm doing my best to get over him and move on. Unfortunately, every time I meet someone or date someone new, he thwarts my plans. I don't even want to talk about the time he walked in on me and my new guy about to get down and dirty—let's just say he was NOT happy. I don't understand! If I didn't know better, I'd say he was jealous. But he's straight... isn't he?

Please no threesomes, cheating, paranormal, or BDSM. Also Author, please give me some sweet lovemaking and an HEA ending!

Sincerely,

Mick2012

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: angst, college students, coming out, families, friends to lovers, religion, sports

Word Count: 11,208

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Acknowledgements

To Tara, Raevyn and Jaymi: Thank you for all the help and understanding. The last few months have been hard, but your support and willingness to help me get my story completed and perfected is greatly appreciated.

THIS TOO

By Isla James

The movie played in the background, the sounds of yet another car chase racing across the screen. Thank God it was like every other movie I had seen recently. It wouldn't matter if I recalled everything in detail; I could fake it if asked. Jake's leg was up against mine, its warmth seeping into me. How many times had we lain like this in the past? Piled like puppies while watching a movie. More than I could count. In the last six months, it had become both my greatest desire, and my most vicious torture. Jake had been my best friend since kindergarten. We'd met that first day, both wanting to play at the cooking center, and when the girls said we weren't allowed because we were boys, well, we did what little boys do best and started throwing punches. We were never asked to leave the cooking center again, and it soon became obvious that wherever Jake went, I followed.

"What's up with you, Ryan? I don't think you've watched five minutes of this movie. You're spaced out again..." Jake watched me closely, trying to discern what my big issue was. Over the last few months, it felt like we had begun to drift apart, and I was at a loss as to how to stop it without revealing my feelings. Jake had asked repeatedly if something was wrong, and every time I brushed him off with a glare and a short, "Don't be an ass."

"I'm starting to really worry, Ry," Jake said, the tension drawing out that little crease in the middle of his forehead—the one that only appeared when he was truly concerned.

"No worries. It's my eighteenth birthday, and in a few hours we'll be at the party to end all parties, as all mine seem to be," I said with a wink and a smile, hoping that Jake would ignore the false bravado. "Honestly, I'm just excited, that's all."

"How did you know about the party? It was supposed to be a surprise." Frowning, Jake rolled onto his back, obviously disappointed I knew. He had wanted to surprise me for my big eighteenth, and thought a party at the dam would be a kick. Nothing like alcohol and sex to lift a bad mood, and God knew I had been one moody ass lately. Unfortunately, he forgot to tell everyone it was supposed to be a surprise.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s the thought that counts.” I turned and looked at Jake lying on his side, his beautiful, brown hair tousled from running his fingers through it. That sexy scruff that had bloomed over the past year, shadowing his jaw. How many more days would we have like this, just the two of us? It was slowly eating me up inside that not only was I in love with my best friend, but it wouldn’t be long before we would be at college and our time together would change.

It killed me a little each time I watched Jake with a new girl, and college would have nothing but an endless supply of coeds to catch Jake’s eye. I wanted to tell him how I felt. Sometimes, I even thought Jake might return my feelings. After all, how many other guys did I know who felt comfortable lying side by side while watching a movie? But every time I had a chance, I just couldn’t bring myself to say the words. Because what if Jake told me to fuck off and stay away? I would rather live this tortured existence than live without Jake at all.

Every time something went wrong in life, Jake’s dad would tell us, “This too shall pass.” I always believed him, yet no matter how badly I currently hurt, I wasn’t sure that I wanted my feelings for Jake to pass. The overwhelming anxiety and tension? Yeah, that could pass any time.

“Ry, you’re breathing weird, and you’ve spaced out again. What the hell is going on?” Jake was grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me. I clambered to a sitting position, leaning my back against the couch and taking slow deep breaths. I had to get myself under control. I hated feeling like I was constantly splintering apart. If loving Jake in silence was the alternative to losing him forever, well, I would gladly suffer the pain. Losing him just wasn’t something I thought I could endure.

“Panic attack. I’ve been having them again,” I wheezed out between breaths. The attacks had begun after my mom died when I was thirteen, but I hadn’t had one in ages. Not until six months ago, when I realized that not only was I gay but also in love with my straight best friend. Yep, that had brought them on with a bang. “Doc says it’s the stress of finals, so don’t worry.” I reached out for Jake’s hand, which was firmly clamped onto my shoulder. “I’m okay, I promise.” I squeezed his hand and then let go, not wanting to prolong the torture touching him provided. Slowly, I ran my hand over my face. Jake’s sweet, woodsy scent lingered on my skin, and I felt it flow through me like a balm, steadying everything inside me.

I turned to Jake and smiled. I could fake this. I could pretend for one more day that I was the high school's biggest hockey stud. I could fake some cock-a-tude, flirt with the girls, and drink with the guys, and no one, not even Jake, would know how I was breaking apart on the inside. I could live the lie everyone believed, because I would not lose Jake. Ever.

"So, tell me what you've planned for my party. I'm presuming it's epic?"

Jake looked me over and once more bought the lie, launching immediately into the evening's plans. It was as I imagined: friends, girls, and booze. At least I'd be able to drown my misery with booze.

Following my party, the final months of high school were hard. Watching Jake work his way through every girl in the twelfth grade had just about killed me. Jake had left a trail of broken hearts, and he still had no idea that with every hookup, he broke more of mine. Maybe the trials of college would change things—settle Jake down somewhat. A boy could hope anyway.

Before I left for school, my dad and sister sat me down for the "big conversation". Beth started in her usual big sister way, making sure I knew I was loved, then told me straight out that she knew I was gay. I didn't know if I should laugh or run. My dad chimed in by saying he and my mom had both known since I was little, but thought I should figure it out on my own. I quickly hugged them both and told them their acceptance and love meant a lot to me. They asked if I had told Jake yet, and when I said no, they were quite adamant I should tell him immediately. I explained that I was just waiting for the right moment, but they were both worried about me delaying that conversation since we would soon be roommates.

Unfortunately, university started much the same way as high school ended. I was scouted for the Bears hockey team. The scholarship wouldn't cover all my costs, but it helped. Jake and I lucked out getting a nice two-bedroom walk-up on the edge of campus from housing. There wasn't anything fancy about it, but it was relatively cheap, and came with the freedom to be ourselves. We had been roommates for several months now, and nothing had changed. Jake still chased every skirt that caught his eye, and I tried to cope with the pain of watching him with his conquests. I felt it festering inside me, yet I couldn't find the words to tell him how I felt.

"Hey, where are you?" Jake yelled as he came through the door.

"In the living room." I had a pillow propped under my head as I lounged on the floor. I had been watching TV but had started checking my messages on my phone instead. My sister had sent me a picture of her and her new man, and I had been staring at the photo for a while now.

"What are you looking at?" Jake fell on the floor beside me, my body instantly aware of his.

I glanced to the side. God, he was wearing the red T-shirt I loved so much on him. It hugged his chest and tempted me to run my hands over the hard muscles. "Mm, just a pic of Beth and her new guy." I responded, my eyes still on his chest. Jake, placing his hand over mine, swung the phone towards him.

"She looks happy. Now we just need to find someone for you." Jake rolled onto his side, and gave me the softest look. Suddenly, all the barriers that had prevented me from telling him how I felt vanished. I reached up and caressed his cheek, then curled my fingers around his jaw, and brought my lips to his. I couldn't bring myself to close my eyes. I needed to know his reaction—to look into his eyes and see his every thought and emotion. At first, shock crossed his features, and for a second or two I thought he would pull away. Then he reached up and slid his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me closer. His tongue gently brushed my lips, seeking entrance, and I opened, letting him take the kiss wherever he wanted. He slowly explored my mouth, getting acquainted with every nook and cranny. The kiss was carnal, just as I knew a kiss from Jake would be. But it was so much more than that. It felt like home, warm and comfortable. It was perfect.

I should have known that it wouldn't last, and maybe it was better that I just stayed in the moment, taking whatever Jake was willing to give me. Because when the end came, I felt like my soul had been ripped out.

Jake abruptly pulled away from me. "Ryan, what the hell? You kissed me." Jake's voice was hoarse, barely more than a whisper, and although he may have separated our lips, our bodies were still pressed together. I wanted to point out that technically I may have started the kiss, but he had certainly continued it. Yet that felt wrong, as if I was being petty and trying to start a fight. No, it was time to tell Jake how I felt, and after that kiss, I needed to be honest.

"I did." I took a big breath, letting it out on a sigh, "in for a penny, in for a pound," as Mom used to say. "And I need to tell you, I'm in love with you, Jake." I watched him sitting there speechless, and I knew the moment of truth had come. "I've known I was in love with you for several months but I didn't

know what to do. You're my best friend, and I don't want to lose you, but keeping this secret is tearing me apart."

He stared at me for what felt like hours, and for the first time in ages, I didn't know how he was going to respond. Slowly, he separated our bodies and sat up, leaning against the sofa with his head tipped back over the cushion. "You're gay." It wasn't a question, but I knew Jake would expect an answer.

"Yes, definitely gay, and before you ask, no, I'm not bi."

Jake lifted his head and smiled at me. "I should have known. No straight man can turn down Tammy Spence and her double Ds, especially with how she was shoving them in your face."

I grimaced at the memory. She had been persistent throughout high school, showing up wherever we were, and always making sure her cleavage was directly in my line of sight. Slowly, the smile left Jake's face, and he ran his hand through his hair. "I love you, Ryan, I do, just not like that. I can't be gay."

I had been prepared for the "I'm straight" speech, but the words he chose needed clarifying. Straight I could accept, but denying what I felt in that kiss... that just hurt.

"Can't be gay, or aren't gay?" I could feel my anger rising. No straight man kisses another man the way he had kissed me, and I wasn't about to let him lie to me.

"Does it matter, Ry?" Jake asked quietly. When I nodded, he let out a sigh. I was afraid he wouldn't respond at first, but quietly he said, "I'm bi, Ryan but I prefer men. However with my dad being a reverend, I need to think about how my actions affect him. What would the congregation say if they knew? I love my family, and I don't want to lose them." Jake's eyes were imploring me to understand, but I only heard his rejection—of him choosing his family over me. "And what about your hockey scholarship, Ryan? You can't finish your degree without it. There's just too much at stake, too much for you to lose. I'm sorry."

I scrambled to my feet, intent on reaching my room before the tears building began to fall. "I guess you've got it all figured out. But what you don't understand is that I would give up everything just to be with you. To me, nothing else matters," I said, reaching my room just as the tears tumbled over.

Jake's hand closed around my arm, stopping me from closing my door. "Please, Ryan, I can't lose you. You're my best friend. I need you." Jake's

voice was tortured, and I wished I was strong enough to turn around and reach for him, giving him the comfort that had always been so easy between us, but all I could offer was platitudes.

“I’ll always be your friend, Jake. That will never change.”

I tried to smile reassuringly, but it just wasn’t in me right now. Reaching out, I shut the door on him. My knees gave out, and I crumpled to the floor as the sobs took me, wracking my body until I was too weak to do anything but crawl to my bed and climb in. I felt the need to hide from the world until I could figure out how to get my happy mask back in place, so I could continue to be the bestie Jake said he wanted.

Three Years Later

The pub was like so many other sports bars I had attended with the team over the last three years at university. The flat screens stationed around the room blared at different volumes, each with a different game playing. We had won tonight, and whenever the Bears beat the Dinos it was a big deal, bringing the puck bunnies out in droves. I’d had a few too many pairs of breasts rubbed up against me, along with way too many strategically placed bums shoved into my view, and I was done. *Maybe I should leave and head to Buddy’s.* It was the only gay bar in town, and it was always busy on weekends. Who knew, maybe I’d even get lucky. I sighed. One more beer, then I would go.

“I’m gonna get another,” I yelled, holding my bottle up for all to see. I gently told the young blonde, who obviously thought I was offering an invitation for her to come with me, that I would be back, and she should talk with Dave across the table until then. He had been eyeing her for most of the night, and she had a much better chance getting what she wanted from him than me. She gave me an accusing glare, but really, I couldn’t care less.

The bartender was busy at the other end, so I grabbed the nearest stool, relishing the short break from the craziness of our table. I had played hard, and was actually tired, but I was still too wound up to head home yet.

“You played great tonight. The goalie didn’t see the puck coming with your backhand in the second.” I turned around, wondering why Seth had followed me from the table. Last I had seen, our captain had a redhead on one knee, and a brunette on the other.

“Thanks. You had a solid game tonight, too. Coach was happy, that’s for sure. Nothing he likes more than beating the Dinos.”

Seth smiled and grabbed the stool next to me. Before long, we had each downed another couple of beers while reliving all the moments—good and bad—from the game. The thought crossed my mind that it was odd he hadn’t return to the table, but I was enjoying myself for the first time in a long while, and I wasn’t about to suggest he leave. We moved our conversation to movies and games, and before we knew it the bar was closing around us.

“You hungry? I’m starving.” Seth looked me up and down as he asked the question, and for a fleeting minute, I wondered exactly what he was hungry for. But there was no way a guy like Seth could be gay. Was there?

I admit my gaydar was pretty nonexistent. Our high school had been small, and I couldn’t think of one gay guy there other than me, obviously. At college, the flamers were easy to spot, but what about the guys like me? There had to be others, right? I didn’t have a clue what was happening in this situation, and not wanting to out myself, I went with the flow.

“Yeah, I could eat. You want to hit Urban Diner?”

“Sure.” Seth threw some cash down, and I added a couple of bills to pay my tab before we headed outside. “Want to come with me? My truck’s just over there.”

I snorted at the pun. Obviously, my mind was in the gutter, and I still wasn’t sure which way Seth rolled. He gestured to a black Dodge Ram at the back of the lot, and we headed in that direction. Seth hit the auto locks, and I was opening my door when I felt his breath on my neck.

He moaned slightly before his lips and nose buried under my ear. “God, Ryan, you smell good. It’s been torture watching you in the locker room and not touching you.” His lips continued a path down my neck, and I couldn’t help but groan. God, he felt amazing. It had been so long since someone had touched me like this. I slowly turned around and found myself wrapped in his arms as his lips met mine. The kiss was so different from the one I had shared with Jake. That one had been tender and loving, but this was just full-out lust.

All I wanted to do was rip off his clothes and fall to my knees. Unfortunately, Jake was the extent of my kissing experience, and Seth must have felt my nervousness. There had been a few quick hand jobs and a couple of blow jobs over the years, but those had all been about quick relief. This felt

like it could be more. For the first time, I was considering more with someone who wasn't Jake, and it scared me, but thrilled me a little too.

Slowly, he parted our lips. "You okay?" In response, I licked the taste of him from my upper lip, and he groaned and muttered, "Jesus, Ryan."

I smiled, pushed him back a step and hopped up into the truck. He was still standing a few feet away. "I'm great. Still interested in breakfast?"

Seth leaned into the cab and gave me a quick kiss. "Definitely."

I had some thinking to do, but Seth made me feel wanted, and that was a new and wonderful experience for me.

It was close to seven by the time I crept into our apartment, quietly closing the door behind me. Seth and I had spent the early morning hours laughing and talking. I was still amazed that this guy had sat next to me in the locker room for three years, and I hadn't once looked at him, or taken the time to get to know him.

"Where have you been? I've been texting for hours."

My gaze flew to Jake's. He was sitting on the chair facing the door, his back ramrod straight and his hands on his knees clasped tightly together. His voice was quiet, but I had known him long enough to recognize underlying anger when I heard it.

"Out with the team. We won tonight." I tried to smile and lighten the mood. "Sorry I missed your text. I was out with Seth."

He watched me carefully. "Seth, huh." Hurt flashed across his face before anger regained control. "Did you let him fuck you?"

Stunned didn't even begin to describe the shock I was in. In the three years since our kiss, Jake hadn't once mentioned it or made a move to share another. Not once. What he *had* done was bring girl after girl to his bed, allowing my heart to break just a little more with each gasp and moan that came from his room, and now he thought he could have a say in my love life? *I don't think so.*

"That's none of your business, Jake." I started towards my room. I was hurt by his outburst but confused too. I stopped halfway there and turned around to face him. "You turned me down, remember? Isn't it about time I found my own happiness? I will always be your friend, Jake. But you need to remember that's

all you want from me and start acting like it.” I turned back around and headed to my door before offering my final words with a smile. “I’m seeing him again tomorrow night, so don’t wait up.”

Over the next few days, I avoided Jake, and I think he was probably avoiding me too. I got up early, hit the gym, and then went to class. When I came home at night after practice, he stayed in his room or made sure he wasn’t even around. Whatever. Yet, I couldn’t deny I was a little hurt, maybe even a smidge angry over his hypocrisy. But I would never let him know that.

Seth and I spent more time together, often meeting at the gym, and then again after practice. We kept things distant in front of the team since I wasn’t ready to share our new arrangement with them, and I presumed Seth felt the same. I liked him, and I liked the hand jobs and blow jobs too. We hadn’t gone any further than that. Things were progressing, albeit slowly, and I was okay not rushing into a relationship when my heart had belonged to Jake for so long. Nearly a week had gone by when I came home after class and found Jake lying on the floor watching the original *The Fast and the Furious*. He knew it was my favorite—who doesn’t like Vin Diesel?—and I had to wonder if this was some sort of peace offering.

“Join me?” he asked quietly. He was subdued, lacking his usual confidence, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. “I’ve got pizza and beer,” Jake tried again, forcing a smile. Something was definitely up if Jake was bribing me with three of my favorite things.

I watched him for a moment, unsure if I wanted to accept this peace offering. I was still really mad at him, and wasn’t sure if I was ready to let my anger go.

“Please, Ry, come sit.” His voice trembled, and that was my undoing.

I had never heard Jake beg for anything. I walked over and grabbed a pillow off the couch, plopping down on the floor beside him. I made sure to keep my distance. It had been some time since I had felt comfortable enough to pile up next to him like we had for years.

Jake grabbed another pillow and pushed it next to mine, scooting over till we were side by side.

I could see that his head was turned, watching me instead of the movie. I ignored him for as long as possible, but finally I caved and turned to stare back.

I still wasn't sure what his game was, but I knew something was up. We both lay there watching the other, and I noticed things that in my anger and avoidance I had missed. Jake looked tired. Not just partied-too-hard-the-night-before tired, but bone weary. As if the weight of the world sat on his shoulders.

"You look like shit," I said, reaching out to touch his face and trace the dark circles under his eyes. He didn't respond, just reached up and took my hand in his, holding it to his face. We lay like that, facing each other, my hand on his face as the sounds of Vin and the boys racing played in the background. His eyes began to close, and I realized that I had been slowly moving my thumb across his jaw in soothing strokes. I continued caressing him, and it wasn't long before his breathing evened out, and he was asleep. We must have lain like that for an hour or more before a text buzzed my phone, snapping me out of the strange cocoon that Jake and I had created. I reached down and pulled it from my pocket, knowing already who it was from.

Can u stay @ my place 2nite after game?

We had been talking about me staying over for the last few nights, but every night I made an excuse and came home before things could go too far. It wasn't like I was a blushing virgin. But I wasn't sure if I was ready to go any farther than mutual hand jobs or blow jobs, and staying over meant we would definitely be going farther.

"Don't go."

My eyes snapped up from my screen to find Jake watching me. I didn't want to think about the emotions—the sadness and desolation—I could see in his eyes. It would only make me feel torn, and really, after the last few years, I couldn't take much more.

"We have a game tonight," I responded, untangling my body from his and releasing his hand. I hadn't even been aware that he was still holding it. However, the minute I pulled away I felt the loss.

"That's not what I mean, Ry. He wants you." The grimace of pain that crossed Jake's face stole my breath and made me angry at the same time.

"It's nice to be wanted for a change." The words were out before I realized just what they revealed about me. I didn't want Jake to know how deeply he was affecting me, and with those words my insecurity was laid bare at his feet.

Jake rolled onto his feet, running his hand through his hair. "I've always wanted you, Ryan. Always."

The step Jake took towards me pushed me into motion. I couldn't do this again. Let his lips touch mine and feel my soul settle. I was starting to heal. I had moved on. Maybe Seth's kiss didn't feel like home, but it was still good. Still full of attraction, lust, and friendship, just not love. I wasn't sure if I was capable of loving Seth—maybe in time—but right now I was under no illusion that my heart still belonged to the man in front of me. A heart Jake had already told me he didn't want.

"I can't do this again, Jake. I told you the other night you made the choice, not me. As your dad would say, 'This is living with the consequences.'" I walked to the door and picked up my gear. I had planned on showering and changing when I came home, but now I just needed to leave. I would shower at the arena, and if I decided to stay at Seth's, I'd grab my shower kit from the locker room. I closed the door behind me, yet my feet wouldn't move. I took deep breaths, willing away the start of the first panic attack in years. I stood there, my head resting against the door, trying to find my equilibrium, when the sound of sobs reached me through the door. It broke me a little more inside to hear the sounds of Jake's anguish, but I couldn't turn around and go back inside only to be rejected again. I had known Jake a long time, and when he made a decision, he stood by it. Stubborn took on a new meaning when describing Jake Dixon, so if he said he wouldn't act on his feelings for me, then he meant it. Going back inside would only cause more grief for both of us. I straightened my shoulders and stepped away from the door. It was time to move forward.

The game against the Huskies was going well. We were up 3-1 with two minutes left in the third. A perfect pass from Seth, and I was on a breakaway. I hadn't been at my best tonight, and finally, I had a chance to make up for it. The hit took me by complete surprise. I remember taking the shot, then this weightless feeling, then blackness.

When I came back around, the doctors treating me told me it had been an illegal hit. The Huskie player had come from behind and clearly left his feet. He had been given a game misconduct for the hit, but that did little for my concussion. I was kept in the hospital overnight against my wishes. Ever since my mom had died, I was terrified of them. The smell always made me feel ill, and it was the last place I wanted to be. I tried not to panic, but it was too much, and in the end, I was sedated. It was not the evening with Seth I had envisioned. Seth stopped by to make sure I was okay, but he didn't stay long. My head was thumping, and I was groggy, drifting off to sleep midconversation.

I woke again when I heard the arguing in the hall. Visiting hours were long over, and I just wanted them to shut up. After a few minutes, things quieted down, and my door opened.

“Mr. Taylor, your boyfriend is here. He is quite adamant he sees you. Is it all right if he comes in?” The young nurse was clearly frazzled. I knew they were busy, and I’m sure the last thing she wanted to deal with was a pushy visitor.

“It’s fine, thanks,” I mumbled. I couldn’t understand why Seth was back, and being so aggressive. When he had left earlier, he said he would call tomorrow and see how I was, but that was it.

A body pushed by the nurse, muttering a “thank you” as he passed. The light made my head thump harder, so I was trying to avoid looking in that direction; even opening my eyes was more than I could bear.

Soft lips touched my forehead.

“Hey, babe, I was so worried when you were hurt. Don’t open your eyes, I’m not going to leave. I’ll be here all night.” *Jake*? His fingers slowly slid through my hair, relaxing me. I never wanted him to stop, but my mouth wouldn’t work to form words. He continued whispering to me, reassuring me, telling me I would be okay, and that he wouldn’t leave me alone. “Ry, I know you hate hospitals, but I’ve got to talk to the doctor. Then I need to phone Beth. I called her on my way here to let her know you wouldn’t be alone.”

I reached for his hand, gripping it as tight as I could. I could feel the drugs dragging me down. The underlying feeling of panic had subsided since he had arrived, and I finally felt safe.

Lips gently pressed to mine, and as he pulled away, I heard him whisper, “Love you, Ry. Sleep now.”

My filter was gone, the medications and my muzzy head preventing anything but the truth from tumbling out. “Love you too, Jake.”

I was released from the hospital early the next morning. I was a lousy patient, and when I woke up to find Jake by my bed, I was confused and elated. I couldn’t pretend I didn’t remember our conversation from the night before, because even in my drugged-out state I remember exchanging I love yous. But I wasn’t sure who Jake had been when he said them, my best friend or the man

who owned my heart. His actions this morning were anything but telling. He varied between being a joking best friend—offering jabs about my hard head—leaving me convinced he wanted nothing from me but friendship, to looks of such longing they made my heart stutter.

“I’m going to go lie down,” I told him, walking to my room. I could still feel my heartbeat in my head, and it was making me nauseated. I hated vomiting, so if sleeping helped me avoid doing that, I was all for it.

“Good idea. You need anything?” Jake was suddenly by my side, fidgeting like crazy. Something was on his mind, but frankly, I felt too sick to care.

“I’m good. Maybe you should sleep too? I doubt you got much rest in that chair last night.”

He watched me for a minute. Then lowered his eyes to look at the floor. “Can I sleep with you?” At the sharp intake of my breath, his eyes flew back to mine.

“I guess, but why, Jake?” My whisper was one of shock. Yes, we had slept together side by side many times in our youth, sharing his double bed, or while camping together—even piled on the floor. But his words seemed different this time, and I knew the implication was different. Jake knew I loved him, and I didn’t believe he would toy with my emotions. He’d never been cruel that way. But right now, with my damaged brain, I wasn’t able to work out a logical reason.

“Please, Ry, I just need to be near you. I need to know you’re okay.” His voice was softly reverent. Then he reached for me and pulled me into his arms. “When I saw you take that hit last night, my heart stopped. I thought I’d lost you... you were so still...” He was trembling against me.

I wasn’t prepared for the depth of emotion coming from him. Confused and lost for words, I stepped away and walked to my bed. I stripped to my boxers and climbed under my covers. Still standing in the doorway, Jake watched me intently. He was obviously unsure if he was welcome, so I reached across my bed and flipped back the covers on the other side.

“Get in,” I mumbled, rolling to my side. I could hear the shuffling of clothes as he stripped, then moments later I felt the bed dip as he positioned himself beside me. The tension was palpable, both of us unsure, each resolutely on our own side. We lay like that for several minutes before I finally cracked, unable to take another minute. I reached behind me and tugged his arm. Jake didn’t

need much encouragement and rolled onto his side, pulling me into him. His arm tightened protectively across my chest as he snuggled against my back, bringing us flush.

“So much better. Get some sleep, Ry. I’ll be right here when you wake up.” His words offered me the security and protection I so desperately wanted, and quickly I drifted off to his warm, steady breath against my neck.

Pounding on the door dragged us both to a muddled consciousness.

“What the hell?” Jake muttered, untangling himself from around me. He threw back the covers and headed off to answer the door.

“Hey, Jake. I stopped by the hospital, but they said Ryan was released this morning.” Seth’s questioning voice reached me from the front door. Shit, this was so not good. How was I going to explain why I was in bed with Jake? Better yet, how do I keep Jake from throwing our night in Seth’s face?

I started to rise from bed, hesitating on the edge of the bed until my head settled, and the room quit spinning.

“Yeah, we were just having a nap after the long night in the hospital,” Jake responded, sounding smug. He really could be such an ass. I finally struggled to my feet and headed out to see Seth.

“Hey, Seth.” My voice was quiet, and I’m sure it made me look guilty. How do I explain to my boyfriend that Jake and I were no more than friends?

Seth studied me for a minute before stepping past Jake and into the apartment. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, still got the headache,” I replied. “Want a drink? I need one.” I turned and headed for the kitchen. I really didn’t want to have the upcoming conversation in front of Jake, who had planted himself conveniently on the sofa.

We entered the kitchen, and I felt Seth reach for me, pulling me into his arms. “You scared me last night when you didn’t get up, and they had to take you out on a stretcher. You weren’t moving...” Seth paused and swallowed. “At least you got the goal.” He offered up a smile. *So the shot went in. Good to know.* “I’m glad your boyfriend was able to stay with you last night,” Seth said without a hint of malice or anger. He sounded relieved more than anything. “I’m glad you weren’t alone, Ryan.”

Those words stopped me cold. *My boyfriend?* What was he? Were we hiding? I turned towards Seth and looked up into his eyes.

“My boyfriend? I thought you were filling that role?” The words came out harsher than I intended.

Seth’s look of confusion said it all. Obviously, we were not on the same page.

“I thought you and Jake had an open relationship. I mean, every time I see him he has some chick hanging off him.” He was watching me intently, trying to figure out what he missed.

“Jake has been my best friend since we were kids, but...” Understanding dawned, and anger bubbled up. “So, let me get this straight. I was nothing more than a friendly fuck to you? And I’m going to assume you never had any intention of telling the team you’re gay? Our little rendezvous are to stay firmly in the closet?”

I knew we couldn’t rainbow the locker room, but I also had no intention of denying who I was, or whom I was with. I didn’t like watching the guys pawing their girlfriends, and I presumed no one wanted to watch me paw my man. Therefore, I tended to keep PDAs to a minimum. Not because I was hiding, but because it was no one’s business.

Seth stepped back. “Come on, Ryan, you know we can’t be out. What would the team think?”

I turned my back on him, filling my glass. “I’m getting really tired of people using the team as an excuse. I really don’t care what they think.”

“So, you’re saying if we’re together we need to let the team know? ’Cause I’m not sure I can do that, Ryan.” Seth’s face was clouded over, frustration evident.

My head was thumping hard again, and I had had almost as much as I could take. “Well, I think I’m worth more than just being a fuck buddy. Too bad you don’t think so.” I knew my voice was sarcastic, but I really didn’t care.

“I don’t think of you that way. More like friends with benefits, because I do care about you.” Seth looked at me for a minute before shaking his head and starting towards the door. “I’m just not ready to risk everything I’ve worked for.” He paused to look at Jake still sitting on the couch, then to me, propped at the entry to the kitchen, before fixing his eyes back on Jake. “Maybe as his best

friend you could talk some sense into him. He's certainly not going to listen to me."

He left with a bang, literally, slamming the door behind him. My head wasn't the only thing thumping now. My heart hurt too. Had I just lost my boyfriend—or as he put it, my friend with benefits? Did I want to lose him? And if not, was I willing to go back in the closet for him?

"Thank God, he's gone. You haven't had near enough rest. Come on, I'll tuck you back in." Jake began leading me towards the bedroom before I was really aware of what was going on.

"Stop, Jake, stop!" I pulled my hand from his, refusing to take one more step. "Have you even told your dad that you're bi, or that you want me?" His look of mortification said it all. Apparently, I was only good for being kept in someone's closet. Neither Jake nor Seth intended to openly acknowledge me. And that was one helluva blow to an ego.

"You know I can't. I can't lose my dad and mom, Ry. I need my family."

Well wasn't that just a kick in the gut. Shaking my head, I turned and started walking towards the bedroom. The words were boiling inside me, and in a way I wanted to hurt him as badly as he had just hurt me.

"I am nobody's dirty secret. No one's! Not even yours!" I could feel the tears running down my cheeks, and for once I didn't care that Jake saw. Let him see just how badly he hurt me. "I can't do this anymore... I'm not a yo-yo you can yank back to you whenever someone takes an interest in me. I'm a person whose heart breaks just like everyone else's." The fight left me suddenly. This was as much my fault as his. I had been the one hiding my feelings to just be near him, hoping he'd throw me a few scraps of affection. I'd been an idiot, and obviously, I needed to grow up and put some distance between us.

"I'll find somewhere else to crash till the end of the semester." With those words, I shut the door to my room. Jake knocked, but I ignored him and crawled into my bed. Jake's scent still lingered on the pillow we had shared such a short while ago. As long as I stayed here, I knew I'd never stop loving him. I couldn't help wondering if I ever would. My tears continued to fall, until exhausted, I slowly drifted to sleep.

I phoned student housing first thing the next morning. The girl answering the phone said she would see what she could do, but it would be Monday before she would know what was available, and would contact me then. Not ideal, but a start.

I didn't want to leave my room, as I didn't feel up to facing Jake this morning. So I decided a half-eaten bag of chips and a flat pop would be a perfectly good breakfast. I was sitting in bed eating when my phone went off just before nine. It wasn't any of my preset ring tones, so I let it go to voicemail, really not in the mood to speak with anyone. Within minutes, it rang again. Again, I let it ring out, but when it rang a third time I was curious. Obviously, someone wanted to speak with me pretty badly.

"Hello?"

"Ryan, it's James Dixon. Do you want to tell me what's going on or do I need to drive up?" He seemed worried, and for the eternally calm Rev to be distressed in any way was never good. For him to leave before Sunday service was catastrophic.

"Sorry, I'm not sure I'm following you, Rev." I was sure Jake hadn't called to fess up about being gay or bi or whatever, so I wasn't sure what else was going on.

"Ryan, when was the last time you saw Jake?" His voice took on that quiet, controlled tone he used in emergencies, and quite frankly he was starting to freak me out.

"Last night." I stood and started towards the door. "Why?" I headed out to the main room. The lights were off, but daylight shone through the front window. The room was empty, with no sign of Jake having been there this morning. I started towards his room, dread pooling in my gut.

"Rev, what's going on?" I knew I sounded frantic, but I couldn't help it. I threw open Jake's bedroom door and breathed a sigh of relief. Jake was on his bed, his arms hugging his knees tightly against his chest while his head rested on his knees. He didn't acknowledge me when I entered the room. Every line of his body screamed abject misery.

"He's here. I've got him." I couldn't understand why the Rev had been concerned enough to call me. "Now please, tell me why you're so worried?" I walked to the bed and reached for Jake, needing to see his face, so I knew he was okay. As my fingers brushed his shoulder, he snagged me, wrapping his arms around my middle, and pulling me towards him until his face was pressed

against my stomach. I looked down, placing my free hand onto his head. His shoulders shook, and I knew he was crying.

There was a deep sigh of relief from the Rev. "He phoned here a bit ago and said good-bye. He told me he knew we wouldn't want him anymore. And that he loved us, but he loved you more, and he couldn't give you up. Then he hung up, and wouldn't answer his phone."

My stomach dropped. *Oh my God, what had he done?* "Sir, he didn't mean it. He needs you, please." I had never begged for anything in my life, but for Jake, I would beg. I knew the pain of losing a parent you loved, and I would do anything to keep Jake from living through that. "Please, don't leave him."

"Ryan, put your speakerphone on. I think you both need to hear this." Growing up as Jake's best friend, I had learned all his father's moods and tones, and the voice coming down the line was the authority figure we both knew not to cross. I glanced down at Jake. He hadn't moved since he'd grabbed me, but I could tell he was listening. I just hoped that whatever the Rev needed to say wouldn't finish destroying the man clinging so desperately to me.

"Go ahead, sir, we can both hear." I held my phone down so that Jake wouldn't miss what his dad had to say.

"Jake, your mother and I have known you boys belonged together for a few years now. I admit you threw me off with all the girls in high school, but after your first year at the U of A we were sure you and Ryan were finally together, and we've been waiting for you to come forward and tell us."

"Why, why did you think that?" I stuttered. What made the Rev think we were together?

"You were all he talked about, Ryan. How your grades were, what scouts were saying what, the funny things you said or did. It wasn't hard to see you're his world." He paused, allowing his words to settle. "Then when you two would come home for holidays, it was impossible to miss. You look at each other the same way I look at my Clare. We've been married almost twenty-five years, and in truth, I figured it wouldn't be long until we were planning a wedding."

Jake started to laugh. Not a funny laugh, more of a hysterical *I'm coming undone* laugh.

"Rev, we aren't an item. You're right. I do love Jake." I took a breath. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* "And I'd like to think he cares for me too, but, he has never acted on those feelings—too afraid you would disown him if you thought he was gay."

The Rev's voice lowered into his ultra-controlled angry voice. "You both listen, and listen good. I don't know where you came up with the idea that I'm some sort of homophobe who would disown his son." He paused and took a breath, his agitation palpable across the line. "It upsets me that you would think that of me. Have neither of you heard a word of my sermons?" He was building steam, and I wasn't brave enough to step in. "Love thy neighbor as you would love thyself, I say. God created love, I say, but neither of you heard me? Tell me, if I'm such a bigoted ass, why do I accept gay parishioners?"

Jake's gaze finally lifted to mine, confusion clearly on his face. "Who... Dad, who?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but Ms. Miles, and her partner Ms. Scott." He sighed then added, "Or did you think they were just elderly roommates?"

Jake and I stared at each other, stunned.

Our silence must have been answer enough, as he continued on. "They have been partners for fifty-three years. I married them in a private ceremony three years ago with only their close family present."

Jake and I both blurted at the same time, "But they both have kids."

"Are you boys seriously this small-minded? They each had a child when they met. They hold hands at church for goodness sake, and you've never noticed?"

I started to laugh. For the first time in weeks, maybe years, I was starting to feel hope again. "I thought they were just nice old ladies holding their friend's hand. I had no idea they were lovers." I was still laughing. To think of those nice old ladies, who always wore their best Sears suit to Sunday service, as trailblazing small-town lesbians struck me as funny.

The Rev's voice was serious. "Don't laugh, Ryan. They have quite the story, and for years they did hide, pretending to be best friends. The sixties might have been about freedom of expression, but small-town Alberta was very narrow-minded. Still is. Five years ago they came and saw me after another member came out. Said they were sorry they had lied about who they were, but that they would do it again in a heartbeat to be together. Those women jumped hurdles that the two of you will never have to." The Rev got quiet, and when he started to speak again the pain in his voice was obvious. "I'm sorry if I ever made the two of you feel like we wouldn't love you for who you are." His voice trembled, and the sincerity coming from the Rev was palpable. "We love

you, Jake. When your mom and I decided to be parents, we did so with no strings attached. Our love is unconditional. Always has been, and always will be. Nothing will ever change that. For you too, Ryan. Regardless of what you boys decide.”

I wasn't sure when the tears had started, but they flowed down both my and Jake's faces. I had cried more in the last twenty-four hours than I had in the last four years. It took a minute for Jake to compose himself enough to answer. His eyes never left mine, and for once his feelings were plainly written across his face for me to see.

“Thanks, Dad, I love you too.” He hiccupped a breath before continuing. “I'm sorry I didn't trust in your love for me. Tell Mom the same.” Jake paused. “Hey, Dad?” The look on his face left me wondering what was coming. “I'm gay, and I'm in love with Ryan.” The growing smile brightened his tear-stained cheeks. “And God willing, I'm going to stay that way for a long time.”

The Rev cleared his throat, his own emotions evident over the line. “About time.”

We ended the call, promising to attend next week's service and pay more attention to the actual sermon. We were still in the same position with Jake sitting on the bed, his arms around me. I was looking down into his beautiful brown eyes, and for the first time I saw my love openly reflected back at me with no hesitation or evasion.

“Guess we need to talk,” Jake said. I nodded, unsure where to start. Jake took my hand and pulled me down to sit beside him on the bed.

“I love you, Ryan. When you said you were going to leave, it became very clear that I love my family, but if I had to, I could live without them. I can't live without you. Not by choice.” He took a deep breath. “Don't leave, Ryan. I love you, and I'm willing to come out for you.”

I laughed. “I think you just did—to the people who matter anyway.” I turned so we were facing each other. “I don't need to shout it from the rooftops. With the team, I'm going to have to keep it on the down low, but I'm not going to hide. I refuse to hide you. I'm proud to call you mine.” I stopped then because, through everything, we really hadn't discussed how this was going to work. We had been here once before, and he shredded me, but life was about chances and choices, and I was willing to take this one.

“That is, if you want me to?” I waited.

Jake smiled and leaned forward, his lips meeting mine as answer. Our kiss was everything I remembered it to be, full of love and the sense of home. His lips started moving down my neck, each kiss a connection to my cock. I tipped my head to the side, giving him free rein. I had dreamt about this so many times, yet nothing could beat the reality.

“Ry, I want to make you mine.” He murmured against my skin, “Let me?” His hands were under my T-shirt, pushing it up towards my shoulders. He lifted his lips off my skin just far enough to push the shirt over my head before once again returning to the task of learning every inch of me.

“Mm ’kay.” I was too far under the spell of his touch to be articulate. His lips continued on their descent, eventually covering my nipple, the lick and gentle bite just about my undoing. His lips continued assaulting my flesh, pushing me closer and closer to oblivion. I was beginning to think I was going to come just from having my nipples played with when Jake gave them one last lick and pulled away. His eyes roamed my naked upper body, appreciation evident on his face. I wasn’t a gym rat, but hockey had given me long, lean muscles, and I was vain enough to know I was easy on the eyes.

“God, Ry, you’re amazing.” He leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on my abdomen. “I want to see all of you.”

I gave a quick nod and reached down to push my sweats off.

Jake gently grabbed my hands, stopping me. “Let me.”

It took him seconds to have me naked and stretched out before him. I hadn’t been in this position before. Seth and I had always been half clothed, never really needing the intimacy of being skin to skin. Jake’s gaze was hungry, and in return, I ran my gaze over his clothed body.

“I need to see you too, Jake.”

It took him seconds to have his shirt and shorts off. He was amazing, his golden skin and sandy-blond hair curling over his chest. I had seen him without a shirt many times, and admired the view, but this was so different. My gaze lowered to his cock jutting out from a nest of trimmed curls. He wasn’t long, but his cock was thick, and I wondered if I was going to be able to do this. I had several toys, and played with them often, but none were as wide as Jake.

“We’ll go slow.”

His words surprised me, and I realized I must have spoken out loud. A soft laugh left me. “I think we’re going to have to. I haven’t played in a while.”

Jake's whole demeanor changed, and I could feel him pull away. "I don't want to hear about Seth or anyone else. I can't stand the thought of them touching you."

I reached for his hand, and pulled him till his body was tucked against mine, lying side-by-side. I reached up and stroked his face, needing eye contact for this discussion.

"I'm not even going to start on how hypocritical that statement is. I had to lie in the room next door, listening to you with girl after girl, knowing they meant nothing to you. You can't begrudge me the affection I did find with Seth or anyone else." I took a breath, needing him to understand. "I'm not going to lie and say I've never played with other guys; I have." Jake's eyes dropped away from mine, and I could feel the anger start to build. "But I've never let anyone fuck me. It has always been hand jobs or blow jobs with others, and the occasional toy when I'm alone."

I was pinned to the bed so quickly by 180 pounds of man, that I didn't even have time to tense up. The heat in Jake's gaze was incredible, and knowing it was there because of me, well, that fired my fuse as well. Our lips met in a brutal, and somewhat punishing, kiss. Each of us trying to lay claim to the other, it didn't end until we were both breathless.

"Someday I'm going to watch you with those toys, but today it's going to be just me." His growl was possessive and only served to make me hotter. He reached over and opened the top drawer of his nightstand. Reaching inside, he came back with lube and condoms.

"I want to have you with nothing between us, Ry, but until I'm tested, we need to use rubbers." He looked disappointed, and as well as I knew Jake, I knew he felt he was letting me down.

"Jake, it's okay. I need to get checked too." Even though I'd never had intercourse, I had experienced sex in other ways, and I would never put him at risk.

He leaned down to kiss me once more, and I was so lost in our kiss, it caught me off guard when I felt lubed fingers trail across my shaft, down my sac, across my taint, and then around my hole. That single trip took me to the edge in seconds.

"Breathe, babe. You need to hold on till I get inside. Then we can both shoot like rockets." Jake's words were delivered against my lips, allowing me

to take advantage and devour his mouth once again. When we pulled apart breathless, I realized that his finger had never stopped exploring my pucker.

Slowly, he pushed inside. My breath caught, and the moan that escaped was one of such need that with anyone else, I would have been embarrassed. However, it didn't take me long to realize that with each vocalization, Jake leaked more and more precum against my thigh.

"More." I was writhing on the bed as he gently massaged me from inside. "Jake, give me more." He pulled out and slowly breached me with two fingers. He began scissoring his fingers, loosening the muscle to accept his thick cock. I was so hard it bordered on painful, and there was nothing I needed or wanted more than Jake inside me.

"One more finger, then I think you should be stretched enough." Jake glanced up, holding me with his gaze. "I want this to be good. I don't want to hurt you."

He shifted to his knees between my legs, quickly rolling on a condom before adding more lube to his hand and pushing three fingers inside me. It was a tight fit, but I was determined to relax and take him. He moved slowly in and out several times before speeding up and giving me a true finger fucking. I had become accustomed to the thrust of his hand when suddenly he crooked his fingers and ran them over my sweet spot. I responded with a tortured groan as the pleasure was intense, and it took everything I had to not shoot that instant.

"Oh, you liked that. Let's see how it feels with my cock." His fingers left my entrance, and he pushed my knees to my chest. I felt his hard crown at my hole, and I wanted nothing more than to thrust back onto him.

"Hold still, Ry. Let me go slow." He breached me slowly, the pressure intense, but he didn't stop until he was completely hilted. "Breathe, babe."

I let out my breath and stared into his eyes. God, it felt like I was split in two. I had always heard people say pleasure and pain walked a thin line, but I had never understood it until this second, when I was unsure if I wanted him to stop or start. He stayed still for several moments until my body adjusted and decided it most definitely needed him to move.

"I need you, Jake, please." That was all he needed to hear before pulling almost all the way out and thrusting back inside, setting up a pounding rhythm. When he said he wanted to make me his, neither of us truly understood the impact that making love would have on us. But with each stroke our love solidified, tying bonds between our hearts and souls.

“Harder, Jake, please.” I was begging, and with each thrust in and graze of my sweet spot, my moans intermingled with pleas, begging him to take me higher.

“Jake, I’m going to come.” The heat was traveling up my body from my balls in a blazing fire, and I knew I was seconds away from release. I leaned forward, clamped my teeth around Jake’s nipple and bit down as I began to come. I felt my hole spasm hard around his cock. I heard his cry of release seconds before I felt him release against the condom, wishing he were bare and truly leaving his mark on me.

As the spasms began to slow, Jake collapsed against my chest. Needing just a few more seconds of our intimate connection, I wrapped him in my arms, wanting him to feel as secure and safe as he made me feel.

“Love you, Jake,” I whispered against his ear. “Thank you for being willing to give up everything for me.” I was choked by emotions, still deeply touched that he was willing to choose me over his family.

He rested quietly against me for several more seconds before speaking. “You know how my dad always told us ‘this too shall pass’ whenever things didn’t go well, or we had a bad day?”

I nodded my head. “Yeah, it’s his favorite saying.”

Jake rose up on one arm so he could look me directly in the eyes. “Well, this is one of those things I never want to pass.” He took a deep breath, leaned down, and kissed my lips. “All the little trials in our life may pass, but my love for you is enduring, Ry. You’re my other half.”

I had no response to adequately describe how that comment made me feel. I had waited a long time for this moment, and so with a throat clogged with emotion, I reached up and pulled his head down to mine until our lips were once again joined.

Jake was right; life was made up of little moments that all passed, but it was who we passed them with that counted.

The End

Author Bio

This is the second DRITC event that Isla has participated in. She has written several stories but has not been brave enough to submit them to publishers. She is an advocate for LGBTQ rights and believes that people should be free to be themselves and love who they want, no matter where they live. Even small town Alberta.

Contact & Media Info

[Goodreads](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

A THOREAU AFFAIR

By Hunter Frost

Photo Description

Two men dressed in heavy coats and printed scarves stand together in a secluded forest with snow on the ground. One man, who faces the camera, has short, light brown hair, and wears thin-rimmed glasses. He has a dimple in his chin and he is smiling slightly. The other man, with darker hair, rests his head on the other man's shoulder. His eyes are closed and he wears an expression of contentment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I became a writer-hermit after I retired as a university professor. I prefer living alone in my small forest house and I feed my muse with my observations and thoughts. No one disturbed me here in almost two years and now I have an unexpected guest—one of my former students. He said it was a coincidence he found me, his car broke down and other reasons. But I feel it is not quite true. I'm sure he wants to tell me something and in fact I want to tell him something too...

**Please let it be HEA, no angst, GFY or sad themes, just love and peace, as it must be in life. :)*

Sincerely,

vessto

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: teaching, writers, age gap, friends to lovers, reunited

Word Count: 10,723

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Acknowledgements

To all of my wildly supportive, encouraging, and whip-cracking friends. I couldn't have done this without you.

A THOREAU AFFAIR

By Hunter Frost

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods*

Movement outside the kitchen window caught my eye.

I straightened, drying the dish in my hands as I gazed out into the wintry landscape. Snow blanketed the tall pine and fir trees down to the lowest brush and rock. The sun might have blinded me to any disturbance over such a sea of white, but today its rays were completely hidden by a dark, overcast sky; a sky which threatened to let loose a massive storm in the coming hours.

I dismissed the commotion outside as some mountain animal. There were any number of them here—birds, bears, squirrels, and deer, to name a few. The wildlife had been only one of the reasons I bought this cabin nearly two years ago. As a writer, I had wanted a home where I could self-reflect as well as harness my creativity. My muse thrives in nature—in quiet, peaceful surroundings that can calm my typically noisy mind. Without this environment, the artistic voices had a tendency to overwhelm me; at times to the point of paralysis.

I had already written two bestselling novels since moving here, outside Lake Tahoe, tucked away in the tree-laden slopes. The wildlife and a couple of remote ski lodges were my only real neighbors. I didn't get many visitors. Occasionally a wayward skier or the UPS delivery driver might come around, but I wasn't lonely. I preferred the solitude... mostly.

Returning the dish to the cupboard, I turned back around to see something move past a cluster of trees way down the path that led in from the road. It didn't move fast enough to be a car, but it pushed forward through the foliage at a solid pace. I leaned forward to get a better look. It didn't have the bulk to be a bear and it moved too steadily to be a deer. I knew I would see whatever it was when the trees thinned out on the lane.

I waited with patient curiosity as my visitor slowly came into view.

And my heartbeat swiftly set to pounding in my ears.

I recognized him immediately, his gait and lean limbs easily identifiable, even as he trudged through the heavy snow in his black knee-length coat. But it was his messy, untamed dark hair that truly gave him away.

Alex Hughes.

Alex had been my student for an American Poetry class when I taught English Literature at the University of San Francisco. He had been one of my best students, with the most talent and potential. And yet his innocent charm and artistic mind made him a verifiable force of nature—and absolutely irresistible. This had made him exceedingly dangerous to a simple professor like me, one who found himself smitten from the moment Alex spoke in class.

When the path led him behind another cluster of trees, I pinched the bridge of my nose, rubbing the spot where my glasses rested.

How did he find me? What was he doing here?

By the time I glanced up again, he was already rounding the driveway, and I suddenly felt guilty for neglecting to shovel the front walk or the path to the door.

Three knocks sounded on heavy oak. The same staccato pattern he used back when he'd come to my office to discuss the assignments for my class, and then later just to talk whenever he was on campus.

I briefly considered not answering; a fleeting thought that churned my stomach knowing I could conceive of it. How could I turn him away? No matter what my feelings, he was obviously alone. I couldn't leave him to slog back to wherever he came from with a considerable storm on the way. I wouldn't be able to do that to anyone, let alone Alex.

I folded the dishtowel on the counter and ran a quick hand through my hair as I walked over to the door. I opened it to find him facing the other direction.

"Alex?"

He turned around and a cell phone slipped from his grip, landing by his feet. He didn't bend to retrieve it. "Professor Stevens," he said, a smile barely reaching the corners of his mouth—a mouth I had tried not to focus on whenever he spoke. It was a challenge pretending not to notice the subtle swell of his lower lip after he had worried it with his teeth, as he had the habit of doing, or watching his lips curl so sweetly right before he broke into laughter.

“Professor?” he said again, this time as a question. “This is *your* house?” He shook his head and finally bent to get the cell phone from the stoop. “My car broke down off the main road and this was the first house I found!”

“Really? Where did your car break down?”

“Right off River Road, at the bridge.”

“You walked all the way here from Highway 89?”

He nodded, his cheeks pink, probably from exertion. “I know. It was a trek. But I counted on there being homes here.”

I had a hard time believing that of all the places to break down, Alex would be nearest to *my* home. Why was he even in Tahoe, anyway? Alone? Driving through some of the worst weather of the season? I had a slew of questions, but I could ask them once inside. The material of my flannel shirt wasn't enough to keep the cold from chilling my skin, and I could see our breath in the frigid air.

Alex swallowed and fidgeted as if he wanted to say something, but he only blinked at me with those familiar amber eyes.

“Come in, Alex. We can figure this out in the cabin, where it's warm.” I stepped back from the doorway and gestured for him to enter.

“Thank you, Professor.” He walked past me and smiled. He seemed nervous, unsure of what to do with himself as he stood there. It was unusual for Alex to be anything but confident and comfortable. I was always the one wound up tighter than an eight-day clock.

He began to shrug out of his coat, and I offered to take it. He thanked me and unwound the scarf from his neck, and I hung both on the rack near the door. He looked incredible in a pale blue cashmere sweater and low-slung jeans. He always looked incredible. That was part of the problem, *my* problem.

His eyes scanned the room, coming back to settle on me. “This place is stunning.”

“Thanks, I—” I had been about to tell him about the cabin and how I acquired it, but I had forgotten why I had moved out here in the first place. “Why don't you have a seat?” I led him over to the couch in the living area. “Can I get you something?”

He sat down and gazed up at me with those soft, golden-brown eyes that could bring me to my knees in moments. My cheeks burned and I cleared my throat. Alex had only been here five minutes, and I was already losing it.

"I'd love a hot cup of coffee. It's brutal out there." He smiled and rubbed his palms over his thighs.

"Of course." I had to tear my eyes away from the motions of his hands. Luckily, I had a freshly brewed pot. I had been writing for most of the day and had just taken a break to start dinner when Alex showed up. I poured him a cup and added a spoonful of raw sugar.

"You remembered," he said, once he tasted it.

"So I did." I didn't even have to think about how he took his coffee. I knew. "We sure had enough of the stuff during your office visits." I perched on the edge of the recliner across from him. Sitting too close wouldn't be wise. "So what's wrong with your car?" I asked, before we could dwell on my thorough knowledge of his coffee habits.

He wrapped his hands around the mug and stared into it. "Not sure. The check engine light came on and it coasted to a stop. I couldn't get it started again."

"Did you call someone?"

"I would have, but my phone's dead. That's why I set off on foot."

"You probably would've had better results had you stayed near your car and flagged down traffic."

"I'd agree if I hadn't found your house instead." He grinned.

I chuckled. His smile was contagious. "I still can't believe you're here."

He choked as he took another sip, and coughed.

"You okay?" I jumped up to grab some napkins. He nodded and coughed a few more times, taking the napkins from me.

"Wrong pipe," he croaked.

Something was amiss. Tension oozed off of him. In two years, Alex couldn't have become the bundle of nerves sitting before me now.

"You need a phone," I offered.

"One that isn't dead, preferably."

I smiled and got up to fetch my cell phone off the kitchen counter. How surreal it was to have Alex here in my cabin completely by accident. If I believed in kismet or any type of fate, I might have said this was it. However,

years of studying classic literature had made me a cynic, and I worried this was more likely some form of tragic irony.

I handed him my cell and went to get myself a cup of coffee while he made the call.

"I'm actually at a nearby home of... a friend," he said, glancing up at me as he spoke on the phone. "Well, I'm not—Yes, I understand but—Can you hold on for a moment? Thanks." He covered the phone with his palm. "Roadside service doesn't want to come out until tomorrow due to the storm."

Tomorrow? That would mean...

Alex's eyes fell. "I'm sorry to put you in this position."

I sighed. "Tell them that's fine."

"But—"

"Alex..." I said in my best professorly tone, peering at him over my glasses. It worked on my most unruly students. It didn't fail me this time, either.

He gulped and nodded.

"Okay, tomorrow," he said into the phone. "Yes, please call me to let me know. No, this number belongs to Dr. Lane Stevens. Let me give you my number. My cell should be charged by then." Alex gave his number and hung up.

I didn't know what to say. A myriad of thoughts filled my mind, even more than usual. Alex would be staying here—with me—overnight. I'd have to watch him as he bit his lip, hear him as he sighed, smell him as he came close, and listen to him as he spoke of how I had left without a word two years ago. Because I'm sure we'd come to that.

"You could drive me to one of the lodges. You know, if staying here is too much... of an inconvenience."

Did he read that on my face? In my body language? He had always been perceptive to my moods, and unfortunately, my thoughts. I both loved and hated that about him. "I don't want to press our luck getting stuck on the road out in that storm."

"Okay." His gaze went back into his coffee mug.

"You can stay here tonight, Alex. I have a guest room. But tell me how you ended up all the way over here in Tahoe? You still live in San Fran, right?"

He shifted in his seat. There were those nerves again. And they weren't mine for once.

"I do still live there. I was visiting friends in Tahoe City this week. I have a meeting with a couple musicians in Reno on Friday and was driving up a day early so I could enjoy the scenery."

Alex was a lyricist. An excellent one, to be honest. He had begun writing poetry prior to my class, but something held him back from really feeling the words, or so he told me. He wrote well, yet his words seemed stilted and forced. He said music had helped him compose stanzas more true to his style and voice. I encouraged him to follow his muse and listen to what it wanted him to do.

After he had found a few local bands that needed his help, he began writing lyrics for numerous musicians who admired his work. Word of mouth in the business made him somewhat of an overnight success. Thankfully, he had finished his college degree. I wished I could have seen him walk across that stage for his graduation, but I had already left UCSF, and I figured it was better to stay away. I had my contacts at the university tell me about his graduation and accolades. I continued to keep track of his work, and my sources proved he remained in high demand. It made me proud, and a little wistful.

Of course, this meant his explanation for why he had been driving up Highway 89 didn't sound unrealistic at all. He had a perfectly legitimate reason for being in the area. So why was there a nagging doubt in the corner of my mind?

"You have an overnight bag in your car?" I asked.

"Yes, but I stuffed all the important things in my coat. I didn't know what I'd run into on the road, and I didn't want to be weighed down by a bag. I have a change of underwear and socks, my toothbrush, and my wallet, phone, and keys. That's all I need."

"You travel light."

He smiled. "You know how I feel about dependency on material things."

"I know. You rarely had your books for class and you'd only submit your work digitally."

He laughed. "I'm eco-conscious! Besides, remembering to bring books and papers to class would have seriously ruined my workflow. I also thought it

would save you time.” He ruffled his hair, and I wondered if he still used the same jasmine-scented shampoo.

“I didn’t mind. Like I told you every time you asked.”

“I know.” He took another swig of his coffee, contemplating me over the rim of the mug. Damn, his amazing eyes had the strength to draw me in within seconds. I shook it off, realizing that I was staring.

“Let me make you dinner to repay you for your hospitality?” he asked.

“That’s very kind of you, Alex, but I’ve got that covered.”

“Please. It would make me feel better about all this.”

He gave me that look that had the potential to charm the pants off any respectable man. “How about you help me with dinner?”

He beamed. “I can do that.”

I got up and walked to the kitchen with Alex in tow. He washed his hands while I grabbed various vegetables from the refrigerator and pantry, and a saucepan for some soup.

“Why don’t you cut up some tomatoes, mushrooms, carrots, and onion for a salad, and I’ll heat up a can of soup and wash up the lettuce?”

“Sounds good to me. I can use the knives in this block?” He pointed to the knife block near the cutting board.

“You always were the smartest one in the class,” I said, turning back to the sink.

He laughed. “You’re biased.”

I nearly dropped the head of red-leaf lettuce in my grip. “How so?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

“Come on, Professor. I enjoyed your class and use much of what I learned every day. How many of your students can say that?”

I exhaled the breath I realized I was holding and tore lettuce leaves into the spinner. “Oh, right.”

I heard the repetitive knock of the knife against the wooden board behind me.

“How is business these days?” I asked, attempting small talk. I didn’t want to tell him I already knew how great it was, that I had made sure to keep up

with his career since I had left the university. Surely he would think me a stalker. And I don't think I could give him a satisfying explanation as to why I wasn't; except that I'd never planned to see him again, let alone be near enough to touch him.

"Business is booming. Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake in putting myself out there. I'm always working. Even this week visiting friends, I still needed to write. I hoped the mountains would serve as some inspiration."

"And?"

"I got a lot done. More than usual."

"That's great. I'm glad your muse feeds off them."

"Like yours does?"

I kept forgetting how much he knew about me. We had spent quite a bit of time together, and while never outside of school, we'd talk for hours about everything. Alex was different from other students—mature for his years, comfortable in asking controversial questions, effortlessly artistic, and the most attractive man I'd ever met. Soon I had a hard time remembering who we really were: a teacher and his student, nearly twenty years apart in age, one tame and uptight, the other wild and carefree. Those moments when I found myself overlooking such things were when I panicked the most.

"I'm not sure why the mountains, the trees, the air, and everything wild here affect me like they do. I have theories of course, but you know I could write them better in a thesis than tell you outright." I tossed the lettuce into a big bowl.

"Some things don't require words," he said, as I turned toward him to fetch the can-opener for the soup. He winked. "But we probably shouldn't spread that around, considering both of our careers depend on the pesky things."

I laughed. I had missed that light-hearted wit of his.

I set about opening the can of soup and pouring it into a saucepan. The gas clicked as I turned it on. "So tell me the truth, Alex—" I began, but a crash sounded behind me, followed by a curse. I spun around to see him holding his finger. "What happened?"

"Cut myself." He grimaced, studying his fingertip.

"Is it really deep?"

"I don't think so." He popped the finger in his mouth and I made the mistake of watching him as he sucked on it. Dark pink lips closed around the lone digit, sending tendrils of heat spiraling through me. I'd be perspiring soon. Glancing up, he caught me staring. I froze.

He didn't move or try to speak. He rarely did when he would catch me losing myself in him back when it happened at the university. Conversations in my office would turn into moments of silence, words completely failing me—a highly unusual phenomenon, considering words were my life. What most people didn't know was that words were a constant in my chaotic head. I knew nature calmed and harnessed the chattering muses, but Alex could shock them into silence. He would track me with his gemstone eyes, his lips parted enough to make me sweat. I craved to know what he was thinking when I lost control like this and yet, at the same time, I prayed he'd never tell me.

I inhaled slowly. Having him here was already proving to be a bad idea. I had to push myself to speak. "I'll get my first aid kit. You wash up."

When I returned, he was at the sink, and I opened the kit, placing it next to him. "There's anti-bacterial wash and Band-Aids in there."

Alex smiled as he dried his hands. He thanked me, but continued to eye me as if he wanted to say something. I knew that look well, because I'm sure I wore it nearly every moment around Alex. The man stirred my soul to the very core.

He turned back to the kit to attend to his wound.

"How about I finish up the vegetables?" I asked, checking the cutting board and knife for blood.

He pivoted to glare at me. "Don't coddle me."

The glare made me chuckle. "I just thought I'd offer." I stood next to him at the sink and cleaned the knife.

He finished with the bandage. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you."

I dried the knife and gave it to him. "I might have been coddling. I apologize."

He smiled, but his brow furrowed as he turned back to slicing mushrooms.

I finished drying the lettuce and stirred the soup. "What were we talking about again?" I asked, as I opened the cupboards to retrieve some bowls. I hoped to revive the momentum of our conversation.

"You were going to tell me how much you're enjoying living out here," he said, and chopped the carrots.

That didn't sound right, but I honestly couldn't recall what we had been talking about before he cut himself and I got lost in him. "I've written two books, and I'm almost finished with the third. This place has done wonders for my writing. I'm ecstatic."

"I read your books," he said, and my heart swelled. I didn't think Alex had the time to read them with his busy life.

"I'm flattered."

"Please. You know how much I love your writing. I was your biggest fan when all you had written was *Juxtaposed*. You keep getting better. I'd say this place has been good for you." He finished with the vegetables, and I began assembling our salad bowls, riding high on his compliments.

"Thank you, Alex. I believe it has been good for me." I smiled. Then the guilt set in.

I knew he had asked about me at the English department after I had left so abruptly. The department's head administrative assistant, Shannon, let me know. I left strict instructions that no one, except for her, should have my address. I changed my email and phone numbers as well. I wasn't trying to be cruel. I believed it in our best interests to part ways, especially after the last time we were in my office.

He had asked me to the opening of a new exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art with dinner afterward. I politely declined. He seemed disappointed and inquired if we could try it some other time. I told him I'd think about it. Three days later, I had packed up and left. I had been planning to come out to this place for a while, but when Alex took that step, I knew it was the right time. I knew it was harsh, but deep down I wanted him to forget me and move on with his life. The life I knew would be amazing.

I set the table and had Alex open a bottle of Chardonnay. We sat across from each other at the small dining table that had never been used by anyone other than myself. Alex poured us each a glass.

"To old... friends," he toasted.

I pressed my lips together and smiled hesitantly. "Cheers," I replied and clinked my glass to his.

We both studied each other as we drank, unspoken words piling up against some invisible barrier. He had to have questions and I had my own. But were we really prepared for the answers?

“In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood”

—Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

We chatted over our dinner, deftly avoiding difficult subjects. I asked him about his work, and I found he spoke about it with such reverence I could have burst with pride. It thrilled me knowing how much he loved composing and how successful he had become. He flattered me with more compliments and asked me about my books; deep and probing questions that only Alex could ask. I had missed our conversations, whether about academics, literature, current events, or anything else we could dream up. He had such an inquisitive and constantly questioning mind—he reminded me so much of myself when I was his age, it was uncanny. I wondered what he did to quiet the muses in his head. He mentioned they could get loud at times. I found nature, solitude, and simplicity—following in the footsteps of my mentor, Henry David Thoreau. But where did Alex find his calm?

When we finished our meal, he insisted on washing the dishes, despite my protests. We ended up working together, and it didn't escape me that we made a good team. We always had.

“I'm guessing you don't have a television,” Alex said, once we had finished.

I stared at him like he had gone mad, and he laughed, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket and tossing it on the coffee table.

“You want to charge that?” I asked, glancing at his phone. It lit up briefly before it went dark. It was then I saw something.

“Yes. Please.” He jumped up and went to his coat at the front door. He came back to the living room with his charger, and I showed him the outlet under my writing desk near the window.

I sat down on the couch. “I have my computer if I need to watch anything. I stream music and surf the net, too. I'm not completely ‘unplugged’.”

"I never implied that extreme. But even Thoreau left Walden Pond after a couple of years. He couldn't take living off the grid forever." He sank into the recliner.

I squinted. I thought about his phone. Then I remembered what I had said in the kitchen before he had cut himself. Something about telling me the truth. I had merely wanted to ask him about life after college. Had that simple statement distracted him enough to make him cut himself? Alex wasn't clumsy, usually. He had to be lying to me. The nervousness, the casual demeanor, it all made sense.

"Who told you where I lived?" I asked.

His eyes widened and he opened his mouth. I waited for him to deny it or say something in protest. Instead, he took a breath and averted his gaze, rubbing his palms over his knees. "Shannon." He bit his lip, and my heart thumped against my chest. "Don't get her in trouble. She only gave me the city, and I had to work on her for a while for that."

I scratched my chin. I knew it was too much of a coincidence.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Your phone flashed a ninety-five percent charge. It's obviously not dead." I leaned back and studied him as he toyed with the edge of his sweater. "You didn't have to lie to me, Alex."

"I didn't plan on it. But when I saw you, I panicked and lost my nerve."

"What do you mean?"

His eyes jerked up to meet mine. "Considering how you left things, I was afraid to say anything that might cause you to shut down and head for the hills. However, seeing as you've already done that—" He paused to gesture around the cabin. "I wanted to tell you the truth. It didn't go as planned. Then this storm mucked things up even more."

I swallowed, unable to stop myself from asking my next question. "What is the truth?"

He inhaled deeply and held my gaze. "I'm in love with you."

I didn't think my heart could beat any faster or harder than it was already, but I was wrong. Instinctively, my hand came up to clutch at my chest. I slid it up to massage my shoulder, hoping Alex wouldn't think he had given me a heart attack.

"I..." I began, but words left me. Again. I just stared at him, dumbstruck. I had thought Alex's feelings were that of a simple crush. But to know they had gone as deep as... love?

"Let me guess, you don't know what to say," he said, and the dejected expression on his face nearly did me in. "Fine, I'll talk then," he continued, his voice gaining strength. "I asked you out and within three days you packed up and left, without telling those who cared about and respected you where you had gone. It's like you vanished into thin air." He ran his hands through his hair, leaving it to stick up straight. "It was the *most* epic of rejections."

An ache throbbed in my head, and I forced myself to speak. "Moving here when I did wasn't all over you." At least that was what I had been telling myself, repeatedly, for the last two years. "I had mentioned leaving the university before. I didn't have any classes over the summer, and I figured it was time to go." That explanation sounded lame, even to me.

"Without a going away party, a forwarding address, or an email or phone number? I may be young, but give me some credit."

"Alex..."

"I'm not a child. You could have talked to me. I would have been disappointed, but if you didn't want anything more than friendship I'd have accepted that. Once you left, I wondered if we ever really were friends."

"We were friends. We *are* friends."

"Friends don't leave without saying goodbye." His soft voice wrapped around my heart and squeezed it like a vise.

I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping to quiet the screaming in my head. When I opened them he was staring at me, those amber eyes penetrating my very core. "I thought it would make it easier."

"Easier for whom?"

I had thought leaving the way I did would force Alex to forget me quickly. He'd be angry enough to think I wasn't worth his time. I assumed his self-confidence would stomp all over me. Could I have been wrong? Every moment next to him made me second-guess my motives. Hell, he made me second-guess everything.

Alex sighed. "I thought I might hear something from you one day, but here it is, nearly two years later, and nothing. Not even a word for my graduation."

He shook his head, folding his arms over his chest. "Yet, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to hate you. I wanted an explanation, and I wanted to hear it directly from your lips before I gave up. I refuse to believe you never had any feelings for me. For God's sake, you'd look at me like you could devour me in one bite. You still do! But if you tell me you want nothing to do with me from now on, I'll deal with it. As long as you promise you'll be honest with me... and yourself."

I took a breath. Alex wanted answers. And after what I did, and what he'd gone through, I owed him that much. This was the determined Alex I remembered. "I promise."

He leaned back in his chair. "Talk to me."

I rubbed my temples. I wouldn't prolong the inevitable. "I didn't want to get in your way."

His brow furrowed. "I'm not following."

"You're young and brilliant. You have a blossoming career and a life full of opportunities ahead. Having me in your life would hold you back. Eventually you'd end up resenting me. I would prefer you hate me for leaving before anything happened, rather than years later, when you realized how much time you had wasted."

"Why would you think that?"

"I'm too old for you, Alex. I thrive in the quiet, I enjoy simple living in the middle of the woods, and I'm not about to go traipsing around the world with a sexy young thing, no matter how much I care about him."

He began to reply, but stopped. "Sexy young thing?" He almost smiled.

I nodded. "And I care about you a great deal."

He hesitated, as if trying to remember what he was saying. "You make it sound like you're at death's door. You're like, what, forty-five?"

"Thirty-nine, and thank you for making my point," I deadpanned.

"I'm not making your point. If anything I'm showing you that the difference between forty-five and thirty-nine is inconsequential."

"It's the difference between twenty-two and thirty-nine that's the issue. Seventeen years! Our lives are at completely different stages. You're embarking on a new career, exploring new and uncharted paths, ready to see

the world with fresh eyes. And I... I retired from teaching to live here and write my books. I'm content to spend my days walking in the woods and tapping into the creative outlet in my head. That's what I want."

"And to do this you need to be alone?"

I hadn't thought about it since I'd arrived at the cabin, but then I hadn't given myself permission to dwell on it for long. "Yes, if that's where my path takes me."

"Sounds like a cop-out, if you ask me." His palms were back on his knees. "It's mighty convenient that you moved out here right when things got complicated."

"Life doesn't have to be difficult. Sometimes it works out the way it should."

"You ran away! How can you justify that as 'working out'?"

I didn't have a decent response to that. Was I running away? I guess I was. But it was for the best, right? Somehow, he had managed to turn my logic, and my best intentions, upside-down.

Alex sighed. "I know how you get stuck in that head of yours; I only wish you'd give your heart a listen once in a while. I bet you'd be surprised at what you hear."

"Sometimes what feels right isn't always the best choice for all those involved."

Alex's eyes flickered in the firelight. "No, but 'all those involved' never got a chance to weigh-in on the matter. How fair is that?"

How did this twenty-two-year-old get to be so wise? Emotionally, he could run circles around me. I heard the rampant wind outside, but it was nothing compared to the sound of the blood in my head. My own storm raged inside me. "It's not fair at all," I whispered, closing my eyes.

After a moment, he spoke, low and even. "Keep your eyes closed. And do your best to shut out the voices in your head. Focus on the one in your heart. I know it's there. You just have to listen."

Normally, I'd go outside to shut them up, the natural sounds of the earth and wind absorbing them like a sponge. But heading out wasn't an option with the storm in full affect. I focused on my heart, but it was no use. The noise in my head triumphed, and my heart sighed in defeat.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I can't." My eyes fluttered open.

His hands were back in his hair, his expression grim. "If you can't, I can't either." He got up from the recliner. "Which room is mine?"

I blinked and pinched the bridge of my nose. "On the right."

"You can relax now. I'm done," he said, and the words sliced deep into my gut. He turned away to take his phone and charger. "I'd leave, but I don't want to kill myself in this storm. I'll be gone in the morning. And you'll be alone again, just as you wish, Professor." He reached for his coat from the rack and strode into the guest room, closing the door soundly behind him.

I stared after him for what seemed like an eternity.

What was I doing? Alex had searched me out, coming all the way here to tell me he loved me, and I sat here like a fool, blaming anything and everything for turning him away—our age difference, his talent, my path, the sun, moon, and stars... Then there were the muses. How did I ever allow them to take complete control of my life?

As the fire crackled and popped next to me, I had a moment of complete clarity.

Somehow the muses had become something else.

Fear.

Fear of losing that control I thought I had over my simple life. Fear of chaos. Fear of the future. Fear of repressing Alex and losing his respect and love, when that's exactly what I was losing right now. I had sabotaged my happiness in order to protect myself from any possible conflict.

I was a coward. And I had hurt the one person who could give me everything I had ever wanted.

"The only remedy for love is to love more."

—Henry David Thoreau

My hands balled into fists, and I got up, marching to the door of the guest room. I barged in without knocking.

He stood at the side of the bed, his head hung low. He sniffed and raised his head up, wiping his eyes as I entered. He was crying. Alex was crying because of me. The sight ripped my heart in two. And I snapped... into action.

I closed the distance between us in a flash and took hold of his tear-streaked face, drawing him into the kiss I had been yearning to give him since the first day we met. There would be no holding back. Never again.

I thrust my tongue between his sweet lips, and he opened them to me with a surprised moan. At first he sagged against me, but within moments he clawed at my back, shoulders, and buttocks, whimpering into my mouth. I shook with need, my moans raw and hoarse, as he tugged at my shirt. I threaded my hands into his wild hair, trembling at how it felt, entwined with my fingers. I had wanted this for so long. I tightened my grip, aware I had surrendered everything to my desperate desire.

I tore my mouth away from his. "Forgive me. I tried to resist and convince myself otherwise, but I've never wanted someone more."

He pulled off my glasses and tossed them on the nightstand. "Prove it," he whispered, his mouth swollen and wet from our kisses.

I pushed him onto the bed, and he gasped at the shock of it. I was just as shocked at my own behavior, but Alex's grin spurred me on. As I crawled on top of him, I melded our bodies together, reconnecting our mouths, hungry to explore and taste. He was fresh and crisp, like mountain rain mixed with the tangy bite of the white wine he drank at dinner. I couldn't get enough.

My length already throbbed, hard and ready to burst with the slightest of friction. He wrapped his arms around me tight, hands fisting in my clothes. The kiss was that of a man starved, his frantic sucking and biting driving me wild. He thrust upward with his hips, locking his legs around my waist—and I felt the spark before the explosion.

"Oh god... Alex, I'm coming," I choked into his mouth as my orgasm blasted forth, my body jerking and pulsing against his.

"Hell," he croaked. "Me too." He gave a loud grunt and convulsed under me. I latched onto him for dear life.

Unintelligible words fell from our mouths as we rode out wave after wave of pleasure. I lay there on top of him, my body wet and spent, trying to catch my breath. I worried I might be crushing him. But worry turned to giddy exhaustion, and I chuckled at the absurdity of it all. I laughed harder, and it felt good.

Alex soon joined in, laughing along with me.

"We sure are a pair," I managed to say.

“That was...” Alex shook his head and grinned.

“Both mind-blowing and comical at once,” I said, placing a kiss under his ear.

He nodded and laughed. “I haven’t come that fast or that hard since... since high school.”

“Same here, but that was eons ago for me.” I pushed myself up to look at him. His face was shadowed, but I saw the flash of white teeth as he smiled up at me.

“Damn, if I had known you could kiss like that I would have made the trip out here much sooner.”

I smirked, but my cheeks burned.

His brow pinched. “You’re bleeding.” He ran his thumb over my bottom lip and it stung. “Did I do this? I’m sorry, Professor.”

“I’m more than willing to pay the price of passion with you in my arms.” I licked the pad of his thumb. “And you better call me Lane from now on.”

“Lane...” he whispered, and my length stirred.

I rose up onto my haunches. “Alex, I want to tell you.”

His breath hitched. “You don’t have to rush—”

“Hush. You told me to be honest. And I’m tired of denying it. I love you.”

Alex smiled, and it rivaled the most vibrant sunset. Thoreau might have attempted sonnets if he had seen it.

He went to the buttons on my flannel shirt, anxiously undoing them. He kept his eyes on mine as he did, his sexy, swollen lips parted. He was down to the last few when I stopped him.

“I have an idea,” I said.

He raised one eyebrow suggestively. “Do you now?”

I held his hands in mine and stood, hauling him up with me.

He pressed his amazing body against me, sliding his fingers into my hair. “Tell me.”

I groaned at the crush of his already massive hard-on. “Back to the living room,” I said, unable to resist grabbing his thigh behind. He let out a strangled

cry. Before I was drawn back into those tempting lips, I tugged him behind me and walked out of the guest room.

"Help me move the coffee table over," I said.

He smiled, and we moved the table aside quickly. I grabbed two thick blankets, flaring them out onto the rug before the fire, and I tossed a few couch pillows with them as well.

"I'm impressed," Alex said, and toed off his boots. "In front of the fire? This is pretty wild for you, isn't it?"

I slid out of my shoes. "Extremely."

He pulled his sweater over his head, throwing it on the couch, while I undid the remainder of my buttons. He reached for me, dragging me toward him by my opened shirt. "Let me do the rest. I fantasized about you during every class, hoping to get a glimpse of naked skin." He pushed my unbuttoned shirt off my shoulders and ran his palms over my T-shirt. "I nearly lost it the first time I saw you in short sleeves. All that exposed forearm and bicep."

I chuckled, but my breathing was ragged. His fingers found sensitized spots, even under a layer of cotton. "And yet, even with those distractions, you still managed to get an A in my class. How did you do it?"

His fingertips slid up my arms, caressing. He shrugged. "Multitasking?"

I laughed. "I may have to rethink your grade."

"I'll stay after class for extra credit." He grabbed the edge of my tee and jerked it up over my head, whipping it aside. His gaze fell to my chest. He licked his chops like an animal. "I'd do anything for you, Professor."

"You'll give me an ego," I rasped, the way he eyed me giving me chills.

"Impossible," he whispered against my lips, as his hands rolled over my shoulders, and then brushed over my chest, teasing my nipples. As his fingers traveled down my stomach, my gut clenched with excitement. He kissed me lightly, hovering there, watching my reactions as he touched me, a smile always a hint away.

He began undoing the fly on my jeans, the sound of the unfastening zipper forever etched on my brain. Soon the jeans were in a pool at my feet, and I stepped out of them, leaving me in my boxers. I was sticky and wet—the previous orgasm, my current pre-excitement, and the heat of our bodies—coming together in one hot mess. And I loved it.

Alex cupped me through my boxers, and I moaned near his mouth. He pressed up against me, his fingers slipping under the waistband of my shorts and grasping my behind. I breathed heavily into his mouth, and he kissed me deeply. In seconds, my boxers were off, and I was completely naked.

“Floor,” he broke the kiss to demand.

We both fell to our knees, and I went to pull his shirt up.

“No.” He stopped and pushed me down so I was on my back. “I need to taste you first.”

I could have come again in an instant from just those words and the hungry look on his face. I moaned as he nipped and kissed my jaw and neck, continuing over my chest to lap at my nipples. I gasped. His tongue dove into my navel, and I arched, my straining length jealous of the attention.

“Look at me, Lane,” he said.

I rose up onto my elbows in a sexual haze.

His eyes were dark and the firelight danced over his beautiful features as he curled his palm around me and kissed the glistening tip.

“Oh...” I watched as his tongue darted out to lick me and swirl around the head. My breath caught in my throat.

His eyes closed as his mouth took me inside, and a deep guttural moan resounded in my chest. My head fell back and verged on sensory overload.

He slid off momentarily to tell me how much he loved the taste of me, how he had dreamed of giving me every kind of pleasure since we had met. He made me shake with an unnamed emotion that spread from the tips of my toes up through the top of my head. My groin buzzed with every movement of his mouth, his tongue and lips driving me slowly insane.

Within moments, the building pressure had come to a crescendo.

“Stop. Alex. Not yet.”

He withdrew quickly, and I groaned dragging him up and on top of me. “I’ve told you before that brilliance is in your bones. Apparently, it seeped into your mouth and hands, too.”

He smiled and stroked the dimple in my chin. “I’m only as brilliant as the inspiration. You’ve always been my muse.”

“What?”

“You asked me once what drove me to write my lyrics. I didn’t want to scare you back then. You have Thoreau. I have you.”

I’m sure my eyes were wide.

“When you were gone, I summoned you in my head whenever I wrote. Every lyric I’ve composed has been with you in mind. You’ve always moved me.” He smiled, and I watched the light in his eyes grow. He went to wipe something from my cheek, and I realized it was a tear.

“I can’t...” I said, my voice shaky. My heart wept with happiness.

“Don’t try. I only wanted you to know.” He kissed where the tears fell.

I rolled him over so that he was under me and kissed him as if it were my last day on earth. When I finally came up for air, I gripped the hem of his shirt and shoved it up, dipping my head to kiss his stomach, his chest, and suck on his stiff nipples. I wanted my mouth on every part of his delicious body, and he spurred me on with words of pleasure as he writhed and moaned beneath me. I lifted him briefly to strip the shirt over his head, and I kissed him again, already addicted to his mouth. I licked his neck, under his hairline, behind his ear, down the thick column where his heart pulsed and across his Adam’s apple.

His head fell back and to the side as I pressed closer to him, our naked torsos colliding in sensual friction. He kneaded my muscles as I kissed up to his jaw, finding his mouth once more.

Now that I had Alex in my arms, his mouth nipping and sucking on mine, I didn’t want to let him out of my sight, let alone out of my life. Such strong feelings usually frightened me, but surrendering to them had me feeling like a caged bird set free.

I slid my palm across his youthful, beautiful chest, over the muscles of his flat stomach, relishing in how they contracted under my fingertips. His breathing came fast and ragged near my ear, and I nipped at his cheek. I undid his fly, ready to feel his length in my hand and in my mouth.

“Lane...” Alex whispered, as I squeezed him under the cotton of his boxer briefs. He growled. “More. Please.”

His urgency echoed my own, and I tugged at his underwear until I got it to his thighs. He pulled them off the rest of the way, and my hand wrapped around him. His moan was loud enough to startle me. I stroked him, sliding easily over his rigid length covered in the slick of his excitement.

When I couldn't wait any longer, I took him entirely in my mouth. He cried out, clutching my head.

He tasted like heaven. I savored every ridge and every contour, my tongue anxious to feel his throbbing pulse and velvet flesh. His hips rose to meet me with each stroke, and we moaned together. I lost track of whose breathing and moaning was whose. I reached under to caress him, and he shuddered, the sounds he made as I touched him there, encouraging me onward.

Soon, he was pushing at my cheek to stop me. "Hold up, Lane."

I pulled off him. "You okay?"

He chuckled as he caught his breath. "Are you kidding? You're *too* good at that. But I want you inside me before I come again."

"Oh, Alex..." I said, and he reached for me. I came back up to settle on top of him. "I don't have any protection."

He raised his eyebrows seductively. "I have some in my coat."

I shook my head. "A little presumptuous, Mr. Hughes, don't you think?"

He ran his hands sensually up my back. "I'm always prepared when it comes to you, Professor."

I pursed my lips. "I'll get it."

"Such a gentleman." He rolled up onto his elbow and rested his head on his palm, back to the fire. "Front left pocket."

I got to my feet, acutely aware of his eyes on my body as I walked out of the room. I found his coat and grabbed a roll of condoms, along with a small tube of lube. He wasn't joking about being prepared.

I came back to find him on his stomach, resting his chin on his folded hands, his perfect rear end before me. I groaned and lowered myself next to him. "You did this on purpose." I couldn't resist gripping his rounded cheeks, caressing and massaging.

"If this is what it gets me, I made the right choice." He sighed.

I leaned down and bit him on one pert buttock. He yelped, and I licked the reddening spot until he moaned. I gripped the bottle of lube and squirted it on my finger before sliding it into his crack and over his puckered entrance.

Alex's breathing quickened.

I circled around his opening and over it, making him arch into me. Next time, I'd taste him there, but for now, I slid my finger slowly inside.

"Lane..." he whispered, lifting up on his knees and elbows, taking my finger in deep. I added another, angling my strokes until I felt him tremble. "No... wait," he gasped, writhing.

I removed my fingers and snagged a condom, finding the wrapper impossible to open while lubed up. I used my teeth to tear it open.

Alex chuckled, and I found him watching me, a huge grin on his face. "You're adorable when you're excited."

I spit the wrapper out of my mouth and smirked as I rolled the condom over myself.

His eyes darkened and he bit his lip. "That's hot."

I knelt up close behind him and let myself rest between his incredible cheeks. "*This* is hot..." I breathed, before adding more lube and pressing my tip against his taut entrance.

"Yes. It. Is," Alex said, his breathing heavy. He pushed back, and I slid into him, inch by sweet inch. He was so tight, it made my hips ache. Every movement threatened to undo me. When I looked down, buried within him to the hilt, I wanted to cry out.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'm... wonderful," he said, staring back at me with those penetrating eyes, a kaleidoscope of oranges, browns, and reds highlighted by the fire.

I began to thrust, a slow, deep rhythm that had us both moaning.

"You feel amazing." Alex arched back into me, and I grabbed his flanks, driving into him steadily, hoping to hit that spot that would have him combust. He groaned, burying his head in the crook of his arm, biting at his flesh. It was the most beautiful sight to see him crazy with pleasure.

"*You* are amazing. All of you." I changed my angle, leaning over him and he seized me, threading his fingers with mine.

"Oh, Lane! I'm..." he managed to say, before screaming his release, his body squeezing and stroking me with its contractions.

I couldn't hold out after that. My climax blurred my vision, sending waves of pleasure to every nerve ending to the point of exhaustion. My hand still

connected with his, we came down from our orgasms, our bodies wet with perspiration and seed. I slid out of him and removed the condom. I crawled next to him, and we entwined our naked, fire-soaked bodies. He snuggled into my shoulder, and I kissed his sweaty forehead. It felt almost too perfect, lying there in each other's arms.

"That was awesome—in the most literal sense of the word," Alex said, trailing his fingers across my arm.

"You bring out the most passionate parts of me—mind, body, and soul."

He sighed. "How did you get wrapped up in Thoreau, when it's the romantic poets that bleed from your veins?"

"I never understood what they meant before."

"Liar."

I chuckled. "Okay, maybe I needed someone to inspire the romantic in me."

"I'll make it my duty to seduce that part of you as often as possible." He grasped my chin playfully.

"You have such a kind and giving spirit."

He grinned. "And here I thought you loved me for my intellect."

"I do. Don't you know I fell for you the moment you opened your mouth?"

"Professor Stevens!" Alex gasped, mocking me. "I can't believe you said that."

I pushed him onto his back. He gave me a mischievous smile as I ran my thumb over his top lip, then bottom. "Though your mouth is superb, it's what came out of it that impressed me."

"My tongue?"

I rolled my eyes. "That's it." I slung my leg over his thighs to pin him and tickled his ribs and belly.

"No!" he howled. "Stop! Lane!" He struggled under me, writhing in fits of laughter. He attempted to block me at first, but soon he was attacking my stomach, and I was laughing right along with him. When he finally bested me and turned me over, pinning my wrists out to the side, I realized there was nowhere I'd rather be. I smiled up at him, and he kissed me with one of those breath-stealing kisses that left me exhausted and yet completely satisfied.

"I want you," I said, when he finished.

"Again?"

"No. Always."

"You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island of opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land; there is no other life but this."

—Henry David Thoreau

I awoke to soft, steady puffs of air to the hollow of my armpit. I blinked, coming to the hazy realization that I was on my back in my living room, amid a pile of rugs and blankets. And next to me lay Alex, fast asleep under my outstretched arm. The fire had dwindled to glowing embers, but we had been warm for most of the night. When we weren't making love, we were cuddling, a mass of heated flesh and tangled limbs.

Recalling everything we had done last night made me stiff yet again. I had lost count of how many times we had succumbed to our desires, but the handful of empty condom wrappers had given me a ballpark. I was beyond satiated. Yet, even in my contentment, the cadence of Alex's breath almost hypnotizing, the muses began to wake. I needed to get up and take my morning walk. It had become a daily habit. My body itched to be outside, feeling the sharp, crisp air on my cheeks and the crunch of the fresh snow under my boots.

I carefully removed myself from the floor, unable to stop smiling at how beautiful Alex looked with his mouth agape and his hair a tousled mess. An angel.

Soon after putting on my clothes and fetching my glasses, I was making my way down the familiar path through the snow-covered trees, my lungs burning from the cold air. It stung, but it made me feel alive and soothed the loudness in my head.

It was so striking out here after the storm—the birds chirping and rustling bits of snow off the branches from which they took flight. The wind barely rushed by my ears, but it was like a familiar song. And now it sung about Alex. He consumed me in a way I never thought he could. I thought it would drive me mad, having him locked in my head with all the noise. But he seemed to

quell the incessant chatter with something pure and clear. I felt good. Peaceful. Renewed.

All because Alex came here looking for answers and hoping for miracles. When in fact, he was *my* miracle.

Slushing footsteps sounded as someone approached from the path. A bundled-up figure, scarf billowing around his neck, smiled back at me. Alex's dark hair stuck up and outward, announcing to the world that he had made love all night. I felt a surge of pride and possessiveness.

"How are you doing?" he asked as he came over to me. Just his musky scent mixed with the fresh, clean air made me want to devour him.

"I'm better than I thought I'd be." I was finished hiding things from Alex.

"That's good to know." He stood beside me and stared out in the direction of my gaze. "Absolutely stunning, Lane."

"I'm glad you like it." There was a pause as we both looked out into the snow-covered landscape.

I let the air fill my lungs and strengthen me. "Did you really think I was forty-five?"

Alex snorted and glanced sideways.

"You did!" I sighed, shaking my head.

"Maybe, but after last night, I'm thinking you might be younger than me." He smirked and nudged me with his elbow. "I like that you're mature. And that gray on your temples is mega-sexy."

I might have blushed at that, and avoided his eyes. He chuckled and surveyed the snow again.

I cleared my throat. "I wanted to go to your graduation, but I didn't have the courage. I had Shannon tell me all about it."

"I know," he said, smiling. "She told me."

I laughed. "If I wasn't so pleased with the results of her meddling, I'd be upset."

"I owe her a gift."

"*We* owe her a gift," I said, and reached into my coat pocket. "Speaking of gifts..." I removed a small box and handed it to Alex.

He arched one dark brow. "It's a little soon to be proposing marriage, don't you think?"

I pursed my lips. Surprisingly, the idea didn't fill me with dread. "It's your graduation present."

"Really?" He blinked.

I nodded. "Open it."

He popped open the box and inhaled. "Lane, these are gorgeous."

I had seen the cufflinks in a local artist's shop. One quill and one music note, both in silver. "They made me think of you." Honestly, there wasn't much that didn't make me think of Alex on a regular basis. But the cufflinks had haunted me. I told myself I would have sent them to him anonymously one day. I'm glad things turned out differently.

"Thank you, I'm..."

I searched out his hand with my own and held it between us. He seemed taken aback, looking at our hands then up to my face. "I'm kind of overwhelmed here. You said some pretty incredible things last night. I'm hoping I'm not still dreaming."

I smiled. "You're not dreaming."

Alex didn't have to ask. I heard the question in his breathing.

"I meant everything I said." I drew him against me.

He sighed as he rested his head on my shoulder. "What do we do now?" he asked, after a few moments.

"I want you here with me."

"What if I have to be elsewhere for a while?"

"We can handle that. And if we can't, I'll stay wherever you may be for the time being."

Alex wrapped his arms around my neck. "You said you wouldn't go traipsing all over the world with me."

"That was when I thought I'd be inhibiting you."

"You've only ever supported me, Lane. When you left, I scrambled to find anything else that could replace you. It was a lost cause."

"I won't ever leave you again," I said, staring into his shimmering eyes.

“I believe you.” He kissed me chastely. “Now, you’re welcome to stay out here as long as you like, but I’m going back inside. I made coffee, and I built the fire back up.”

The muses in my head were all in agreement. I should definitely keep this man.

“Let’s go in.” I held his hand tight as we walked along the path.

The End

Author Bio

Hunter lost a bet at a blackjack table and begrudgingly traded temperate Southern California for the sweltering heat of Las Vegas. There she resides with an extremely tolerant boyfriend and two cats, Latte and Java. When she's not dreaming of returning to coastal living, Hunter works on her MA thesis in British history and at her government day job. In order to appease her muse, she writes the kind of fiction that keeps her sane. She adores romance in all forms, but prefers her stories with two heroes that find their happily-ever-after with each other.

Contact & Media Info

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

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Want more?

If you enjoyed these stories and want more, be sure to look for the other sixteen volumes in the Love's Landscapes Anthology series, as well as the five special bonus volumes, available for free download at M/M Romance Group.com

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)