

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 15

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 15

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 15.

Words of Caution

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

Dedication

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

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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TIDEWATER

By Les Joseph

Photo Descriptions

Two photos of two men, one black and white and one color. The first picture shows a guy in makeup and a costume, looking at himself in a mirror. The second picture shows a man, shirtless, wearing tight jeans. He's standing with his hands in his pockets, showcasing his impressive physique.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See me, all beautiful in that first picture? People look at me and they think soft, even weak. They have no idea how bad-ass I truly am. I am tough; only let people see what I want them too and I don't trust easily. I am a top who cares about his partner.

See that big gorgeous guy? He's sort of in the same boat. People think he's rough and mean, a super top. He's a sweetie really, wants to top from the bottom! He rarely gets to because just like me, people judge on appearance. I want to change that for both of us. He's got some secrets, I think.

Are we enemies turning lovers? Are we best friends who had a falling out and must find our way back? Was it a misunderstanding? If so, be sure there is Groveling involved before that man gets back in my good graces. Bonus point for unique and creative Groveling! Light hearted is appreciated!

Please, no D/s, cheating or serious angst. HEA absolutely required!

Sincerely,

Lucy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: blue collar, established couple, paycheck-to-paycheck, photography, golf, hurt/comfort

Word Count: 19,521

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TIDEWATER

By Les Joseph

Chapter 1

Cord

Beeeeeeeeep

Beeeeeeeeep

Beeeeeeeeep

Blares the alarm clock beside the bed at the ungodly hour of five a.m. on a Saturday morning in late March. I groan. It's way too early to hear the worst sound ever. Without opening my eyes, I reach over and slam my hand against the button to make the infernal noise stop.

I roll back and rub the heels of my hands against my gritty eyes. Slowly, I open them and turn to my left. A familiar tangle of dark hair covers a head that's trying to burrow through the pillow. I was exhausted last night. I didn't even hear him come in, and my stomach sinks. It's been days since I've seen him. Last night we were supposed to watch a crappy movie on TV, eat junk food, and cuddle on the couch. I'd been looking forward to it all week, but when I got home from a long, brutal day, I was so tired I couldn't resist stripping out of my work clothes and climbing into bed. As each item of clothing landed in a pile, I told myself I'd only lie down for a minute.

Stretching, I yawn and rub a hand over my stomach. The few extra hours of sleep have done nothing to ease my fatigue. With a resigned sigh, I lean, kiss Brandon's naked shoulder, and get up to take a shower before work. I sort of trip into the hallway, hissing an aggravated "fuck" under my breath when my big toe catches an errant shoe. Craving orange juice, I hit the kitchen, using the fridge light to see by instead of the overhead. Half-asleep, I gulp straight from the carton, sputtering when my eyes catch the bags Brandon left on our tiny kitchen table.

"Son of a bitch," I groan disgustedly, banging my head against the cool door.

Suddenly, chugging half a carton of orange juice isn't the best idea with the sour taste filling my mouth. Only it has nothing to do with the juice and everything to do with me.

"I'm such a fucking asshole," I mutter. The words settle heavily around me, accusatory and bitter.

Squeezing my eyes closed—as if that will stop the disgust and remorse—I breathe deep to try to calm the ever-growing war raging in my stomach. After a quick glance at the clock on the ancient microwave that somehow manages to still work, I grit my teeth and stalk toward the cramped bathroom.

Standing beneath a shower that always takes way too long to warm up, I close my eyes and ponder, for like the millionth time, how the hell I wound up in Tidewater, South Carolina, population less than thirty thousand. Living in an apartment that's barely bigger than a shoebox, and working at a job that's about the last thing I ever would have envisioned for myself is so unbelievable that at times I'm sure it's all a dream. A glance at the shower curtain that's torn in all but four of the holes, and toward the mildew that stubbornly clings to the corner of the bathtub no matter how many hours Brandon has spent on his knees trying to scrub it away, lets me know in no uncertain terms I'm not dreaming. I'm living in my own version of Hell.

The water's finally warmer than tepid, and as I begin to wash, my mind flashes back to a little over a year and a half ago when I saw Brandon West for the first time. His shoulder-length dark hair and caramel-colored skin caught my attention first. Then it was the way his ass filled out a pair of jeans like no one's business. But, it was when our eyes connected that I felt my entire universe shift. From twenty feet away he could see every part of me—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and in a moment, decided I was worth something, everything. When he smiled, my heart raced, my palms started to sweat, and even though I was twenty-one at the time, I'd turned into a damn ten-year-old who just had the prettiest girl, or in my case the cutest boy, in school give me the cupcake with the most sprinkles on it at the class Valentine's Day party. The whole thing took, at most, a handful of seconds, but it was those few seconds that changed the rest of my life.

I think I fell in love with him before he even took his seat.

Somehow, we ended up in the same Contemporary Lit class at Florida Community College in Jacksonville, though it was a course neither of us needed. He always gets a dreamy, faraway smile when he tells me it was fate, while I scoff and say it was a computer glitch, just to see if I can get a rise out of him.

He hasn't talked about fate in a long time. He hasn't smiled that way either. I wonder, not for the first time if he, like me, has moments when he questions where our lives would have taken us if we had never met. It's not like I don't want him to be a part of my life, because Lord knows he makes every day better just by being in it; but it's hard not to think he might be better off without

me. He was supposed to set the world on fire with his photographs, and I was going to make something, *anything*, of myself. All I cared about was getting the hell out of Jacksonville so I could do something big, something important, even if I didn't have the first clue what that was supposed to be. It's funny how things turn out sometimes, and not funny in that *ha ha* kind of way. I'm too chickenshit to ask him if he ever thinks such things, so I pretend to go along with his idea chance decided the best place for us is Tidewater.

I have a hard time seeing it, but I try not to think too much about it.

Dwelling on what ifs is guaranteed to make a shitty day shittier, so I turn the water as hot as it will go and enjoy the two measly minutes I get before it cools off again. Luckily, I'm a pro at the wash, shave, and rinse routine, and I'm already reaching for the knob before the water turns from lukewarm to freezing.

Marginally more awake, I wrap a threadbare towel around my waist and tiptoe back into our room. Brandon, still sound asleep, has exchanged burrowing for sprawling. My dick stirs as I spy smooth chest, most of a naked leg, and a partially exposed cock peeking from the twisted sheets. He's raised his arm up over his eyes, and I know if I lift it, he'll look as tired as I feel. The thought is enough to make me soft. Immediately.

I have to hurry. I can't be late, especially now. I've already been late two times this pay period—once more and I'm getting docked an entire day's wages. I sure as shit can't afford that; we can barely keep our heads above water as it is. The bed dips as I sit and pull on my shoes, the weight of them mirroring the heaviness of my heart. This isn't the life I promised Brandon. This isn't the life I wanted for either of us, but at least we have each other.

"Hey," he says, voice still rough from sleep.

His hand slides up my back, and though I have a shirt on, his touch sets my skin on fire. I can't remember the last time he touched me.

Turning around, I push his hair over his shoulder as our eyes meet. Yep, just as I figured, his are heavy with exhaustion and something inside me cracks, even more than it already has.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep last night," I tell him, clearing my throat to try to rid it of the lump that's formed.

I want to pull him close, kiss him, and feel his soft lips. Do *something* to let him know I don't like what's going on between us anymore than he does, but I'm not sure he'll let me. The thought settles like an anvil in the middle of my

chest. He frowns, confirming my suspicion, and the sour taste from earlier fills my mouth again, so much so I might gag.

“Thanks for bringing me a Fun-Dip,” I say, keeping our gazes locked, and giving him a tentative smile.

The corners of his mouth lift in an attempt to smile back, and the weight on my chest lessens a tiny bit. Needing something to make the tension between us go away, I lean forward and kiss him softly on the cheek.

He sighs and whispers, “You’re welcome,” right before his arms wrap around me.

I barely notice the sheet has fallen away because the feel of his arms leaves me breathless and makes my knees weak. I wrack my brain to remember the last time we hugged, and close my eyes when I can’t.

How did things get so bad?

I want to kick my shoes off, climb back into bed with him and hold him for hours and hours, but one glance at the clock and I know I can’t.

Brushing my mouth across his for one last quick kiss, I gently say, “I love you, Brandon,” ignoring the fact that those words haven’t passed my lips in I don’t know how long.

Apparently, hearing them for the first time in longer than either of us can remember has the same effect on him, because his chin quivers and he sniffs, his brown eyes turning glassy. “I... I love you, too, Cord,” he murmurs, and the words shoot straight to my heart.

I stare at him. The weight of so much left unsaid hangs between us, but I have to go.

“I’ll wait up for you,” I promise him as I look back from the doorway.

He doesn’t say anything, just waits a beat, and then slowly nods his head. I know he’s wondering if I’ll break my promise, like I’ve broken so many others.

Chapter 2

Cord

“Cord, shake it, dude. We’re going to have carts stacked up in no time,” Jake hollers as soon as I get out of my beater of a pickup.

I reach across the seat, grab my hat, and pocket my keys after I close the door. Jogging across the parking lot while pulling my hat on, my sneakers slap against the asphalt. Even this early in the morning, just before sunrise, I can tell the day’s going to be a steamy one. Humidity makes the air thick, and my shirt sticks to my back by the time I reach the cart barn. Jake hands me a cup of coffee and hurries inside the building.

“Thanks. I sure as fuck need it this morning,” I tell him as I blow on the scalding hot liquid.

He smirks and waggles his eyebrows, saying, “I figured you could use a little pick me up after your long night with Shutterfly.”

Him using my nickname for Brandon makes me smile, but it’s short lived as I remember what happened last night. His words are like a lance through my heart, and my stomach immediately tries to force the coffee I’ve just swallowed back up my throat.

I don’t say anything and instead turn my head and stare at the bay door.

“Cord?” Jake questions, cautiously, offering sympathy I don’t deserve.

Unable to meet his eyes, I answer in a voice I hardly recognize as my own. “I fell asleep. I didn’t even hear him come home.”

“Aw, damn, man. I’m sorry. You guys don’t have a lot of time to spend with each other. I know how you must feel. That sucks,” he empathizes, and though he means to comfort, it doesn’t work.

I want to rail at him, ask him how he knows how I feel because I know for a fact he doesn’t. He and Amy live in a nice house, in a respectable neighborhood, with their perfect little daughter, while Brandon and I struggle to keep the electricity turned on. Jake was born and raised in Tidewater and has no desire to ever leave. He’s happy and comfortable. Content. Everything I’m not.

Things weren’t supposed to turn out like this for me and Brandon. We had big dreams, of even bigger fortunes, and stuck in this Podunk town in the

middle of BFE is not my idea of a happily ever after. Hell, I'd settle for even kind of happy, but we're not even in the same vicinity.

If anyone had asked me yesterday how Brandon and I were doing, I would have said fine, we're doing okay. But ask me today, and I don't have the first clue how to answer. Seeing the bags of goodies—ones we could ill afford but he bought just the same—this morning was like an unwelcome wake-up call.

We're being buried alive, and until this morning I didn't even know it. What's worse? I don't have any idea how to fix it.

It isn't like I woke up this morning and decided I don't love him anymore, because Lord knows I love him more than I thought possible, but he's not happy. I've known for a long time; I've just been too afraid to think what that means for us. We are completely alone, no family anywhere close. My Uncle Marcus and Brandon's barely present father, Archie, are back in Jacksonville. Besides the few friends we've made here—Jake, Amy, Bentley, and Brandon's friends from work—there's no one we can turn to except each other. When we left home, on our way to the bright lights of New York City, where we were sure fame and fortune were waiting with open arms, neither of us figured a blown transmission on a 1996 Buick Regal meant we'd still be in Tidewater a year later. As each day passes, the lights of NYC dim just a bit. I'm afraid we'll wake up one day and they'll be out completely—forever.

Jake doesn't say anything else as we start lining up the carts for the day, and for that I'm grateful.

I know I'm lucky to have a job working at the country club, even though it's entry level and pays minimum wage. When the car broke down, and that's a nice way of saying the piece-of-shit couldn't go any farther, we figured it would take a couple of days, max, to fix the damn thing and then we'd be on our merry way to the Big Apple. Unfortunately, that wasn't in the stars Brandon is so fond of wishing on. The car was toast and we didn't have enough money to buy a new one. Before we left Jacksonville, we'd managed to scrape together what we figured was enough money to live on for a month, after which we'd foolishly assumed we'd both have jobs, and cash wouldn't be an issue.

That's the problem, I've learned over the past few months, with living while looking through the lens of a camera or dreaming about making your mark on the world—reality has a way of kicking your ass. Since we've arrived in Tidewater, our asses have been kicked so much they are black and blue.

Blown transmission.

A slip of a wrench that required a trip to the emergency room and stitches before my meager health insurance kicked in.

Brandon catching the flu which not only resulted in him not working or getting paid for two weeks, but a trip to the well-clinic for an IV and a shot. One we had to pay for out-of-pocket because his health insurance is worse than mine, and his probationary period wasn't up yet.

Security and utility deposits for our shoebox apartment.

His work uniform, my work uniform.

Little things, big things, things that added up to being behind before we were ever ahead.

"You gonna be okay?" Jake asks me when we open the bay doors.

I shrug, dejected, hating not being able to answer him.

"We're having a barbeque next Sunday for Sadie's birthday. Amy wanted to make sure I mentioned it to you guys, so consider yourselves invited." He rubs his hands on his pants before putting on his hat.

I open my mouth to bow out, mostly for the simple fact we can't afford to buy Sadie a present, but then I realize what day it is and I can't help but smile. "Sorry, Jake. Tell Amy thanks for asking but we can't make it."

He starts to argue, I think because he knows why I said no, but when he sees me smile, he does, too. "Oh, it's Brandon's Sunday off, huh? You two are going to spend the day being all artsy-fartsy, taking pictures and writing and talking about deep things while the rest of us miscreants drink beer and eat hot dogs. I'm glad it's you and not me, man. That's all I've gotta say." He winks.

"Well, it's our thing, you know."

I don't expect him to understand how precious our one Sunday a month is, and I don't try to explain. It's the one thing Brandon and I have made a priority, even through all this mess. It started when we first began dating and it's a tradition we've kept up with, the one tangible reminder of the life we still hope to share. It's our way of connecting, of indulging the creative juices we still have, the ones that have to be nurtured and allowed to escape from time to time so they don't shrivel up and disappear. This place will never be considered the art hub of the East Coast, but it doesn't need to be. All we need is a memory stick for Brandon's prized camera, a notebook I can write in, and we're set.

The rest of the day passes the same as all the ones before it. It's long, tedious work. Pull out a golf cart, strap the bag on the back, and make sure the

coolers are loaded. Check the charge on the battery. Pick up the energy bar wrappers, empty water bottles, and crushed beer cans that never fail to get left behind, because God forbid the members walk the four steps to the trash can themselves—then bing, bang, boom, it's time for the next cart. Over and over again. For little old ladies who like to pretend they really don't need the cart to get around and old men who like to think they've still got the skill to keep up with the Tiger Woods wannabes. For guys with too much money, too much free time, and not enough game or the teenagers who think driving a golf cart around a few acres of green grass is the equivalent of racing at Daytona. It's never ending. It's a pain in the ass having to smile and ignore the gossip and the whining and the drunks who talk shit, but I have to do it. I need the job and the paycheck. The extra money Jake and I make helping out the grounds crew after hours helps, but it's not enough. It's never enough.

After a long day, I hop in my truck and head for home, passing Baker's Grocery Store. Try as I might, I can't help sighing. Thinking of Brandon standing at a cash register for eight hours causes my chest to feel that much heavier.

He doesn't belong there, with a smile plastered on his face hour after hour beneath fluorescent lights, swiping toilet paper and ketchup across a scanner. He belongs outside, his camera to his eye as he takes pictures of things only he can see. Our apartment might be only one step above a glorified hovel on the outside, but on the inside, our walls are covered with pictures that could hang in any art gallery in the country.

When I finally make it home, I can't help but take a few minutes and look at his pictures, stopping when I come to my favorite. It goes without saying I love the ones of us, but my favorite is of a beer bottle cap floating in a puddle of water. The water has a rainbow hue due to the motor oil that left a film on the asphalt. The colors are crisp and vivid and sunlight causes the bottle top to shimmer beneath the surface. It's totally incongruous if you think about all the components as separate entities, but in that one moment, when the sun hit the puddle just right, Brandon was there to capture it and create beauty in something anyone else would have passed without a second glance.

Something sparks deep in my chest as I remember how his face lit up with joy the first time I explained my love of that picture. Stripping, I ignore the hamper, and take my second shower, not even cursing the frigid water. As I scrub away the grime of the day, I go over my idea. My stomach twists a little with the fear he might not like it, but decide I don't have anything to lose.

I dress in a pair of faded jeans and a T-shirt from my old high school, and hurry to the kitchen. Honestly, it's little more than a counter, a four-burner stove, a refrigerator, and a sink. I pull out the makings for a simple omelet, and a quick glance at the clock tells me I'm still good on time. It's just a bit past nine. Jake and I put in a twelve-plus hour day, and by the time we closed everything up and I made it home, it was close to eight o'clock. Brandon's shift is from one until ten. Like always, he'll be hungry when he gets home because he normally takes his break from four to five so he can help with the rush of people shopping on their way home from work. I fumble for a second when I realize I can't remember the last time we sat down and ate together. It was last week sometime, though I can't say which day.

I volunteer for every available shift I can get, hoping to finally get our heads above water. I even work inside the clubhouse when they need additional help bussing tables because of some big event going on, which now that it's spring, happens often. It'd be fucking nice to be able to breathe for a change. Between extra shifts and the work Jake and I have drummed up on the side cutting grass, there are too many days over the past two months I've worked twelve, fourteen, sometimes even sixteen hours. Days Brandon and I never talk except when he mumbles good-bye after I give him a kiss before I leave.

We're ships passing in the night. It's no wonder it feels like forever since we've seen each other.

By the time I slide our late dinner onto two mismatched plates and pour us each a glass of orange juice, Brandon's key rattles in the front door and I smile as he tells our neighbor Nancy good-bye. Luckily for us she and Brandon work the same shift and she doesn't mind giving Brandon a ride. I shudder as I wonder what in the hell we'd do if either had their hours changed. The moment Brandon walks through the door, everything but him fades away.

"Cord!" The surprise in his voice makes my enthusiasm wane, but I try not to let it bother me too much.

After all, as much as I hate to admit it, I understand where he's coming from.

"Hey," I say, truly happy to see him.

It's obvious he's tired, and I have no doubt his feet are sore as hell. His back, too, more than likely. My aches and pains melt away as I concentrate on him. It's been way too long.

He sets his messenger bag down on the back of our garage sale couch and faces me. This time he gives me an honest-to-God smile. "What... you... cooked?"

I cringe, embarrassed at how making some eggs and toast can put a smile like that on his face. The fact we've been together a year and a half and he doesn't know I can manage to find my way around the kitchen leaves a sort of hollow thump in my chest.

It's hard not to question what other things we don't know about each other.

Instead of getting lost in my head, I step forward. Stopping when I'm close enough, I reach for his hands, lean against the back of the couch, and pull him between my legs. Thankfully, he comes willingly and that weight lessens a bit more. I run my hands up his arms, taking a moment to appreciate the way the bright red polo shirt with the Baker's emblem embroidered on the front molds to his body. The way his smooth, caramel skin complements the crimson cotton or maybe it's the fact that he's standing between my legs and I can't remember the last time we made love.

"I thought you might be hungry. It's been a long time since we had dinner together and I figured it might be nice to sit and eat, maybe talk a little, catch up. I'm really sorry about falling asleep last night. I know you were looking forward to movie time as much as I was."

He scoots closer and rubs where I want him most, but he's not doing it on purpose. It's a battle to keep from pulling him to me and carrying him to the bedroom, dinner be damned. But I know he's hungry. Needing something more, I rest my head against his chest, and let him run his fingers through my hair for a few minutes.

This, I realize with crystal clarity, is what I've missed. All the little things that have slipped away one after the other. I didn't even notice until they were gone. The connection, the way it feels just to touch him and have him touch me, to feel his body, the way he smells... the way he kisses me... all are reminders of how far apart we've drifted.

"I've missed you, Shutterfly," I whisper, tilting my head up and sliding my hand around his neck, pulling him to me.

Our mouths are hesitant, like we're learning each other again. In no time, we remember. His head tips one way, mine goes the other, and our mouths are in perfect sync. I palm his ass, and when his hard nipples rub against me, I rumble low and wanting, deep in my chest.

“I’ve missed you, too, babe.” He sighs when my lips find their favorite spot, the place where his neck slopes down to his shoulder.

I open my mouth to apologize for a plethora of things, but right as I’m about to speak, his stomach growls—loudly—followed by a self-conscious giggle. We need to talk but he’s hungry and exhausted, and now’s not the time. So, once again all that’s left unsaid gets pushed to the side for another day.

We eat together and it feels good.

We make love after and it feels even better.

We spend the next Sunday taking pictures, writing, reading—talking about everything except what we need to—and it’s the best day in a long time.

Two weeks later, reality comes back with a vengeance. A plain white envelope with nothing but the word “Tenant” scrawled across the front in black marker is taped to our front door. Inside is a notice stating we have two weeks to move out because the building’s been sold. Apparently Tidewater needs another office complex. I’m sure something suitably modern with lots of windows and sharp lines.

Fuck... I stand outside our front door feeling the entire world crashing down on me. *What are we going to do now?*

Chapter 3

Cord

As the golf club whooshes around me, and the loud ping of metal hitting hard plastic fills the air, I finally, fucking *finally*, feel like I can breathe again.

Ball after ball after ball.

Tighten my grip, flex my fingers. Feet placed shoulder width apart, a waggle, another, then—a swing, muscles coiled and working in perfect sync. Torque, explosion, a vibration that moves up my arms and slithers down my back. Finding a groove, the place where I can completely lose myself and let my body work from memory. Memories I've suppressed for a long time, but ones that have clawed their way back to the surface in the midst of the shitstorm that's become my life.

Familiar.

Safe.

Unchanging.

Swing after swing, a perfect, fluid arc. As easy as riding a bike, as breathing, as sex with Brandon used to be. Before this. Before our lives became something neither of us wanted. Time means nothing. Not when the talent, the skill resides inside me, no matter how long it has lain dormant.

Fuck it feels good, even if the clubs are pieces-of-shit I found in the cart barn hidden in the corner and covered in cobwebs.

Golf is golf.

"Dude, where in the hell did you learn to hit a golf ball like that? Every single one of those damned things must've gone at least 275 yards," Jake exclaims with wide eyes.

"More like 300 if the markers are right. I used to be able to do 325 but it's been awhile," I answer with a shrug and get ready to hit another ball. I watch it sail through the air, tracking it like I'm a hawk and it's my breakfast. I smile, sure and confident when it lands just shy of the 300-yard marker—again.

"All right man, spill. No one just picks up a driver and swings like that. I've known you for over a year and you've never once mentioned you could play. What gives?"

I look at Jake. His hat's on backward, arms crossed over his wide chest, biceps bulging beneath the same royal blue polo shirt I'm wearing, as he stares back, waiting. He'll keep waiting, too, until I answer. I don't want to though. I don't want to go back to that place, that time, when I believed anything I dreamed was possible if I wanted it badly enough or tried hard enough. Fuck that. All dreaming ever did was keep me from getting a good night's sleep.

Squaring my shoulders, I set up again and swing, this time scowling when it slices off to the right. *Motherfucker*. Not good. Not good at all.

A chuckle behind me. "Might wanna put the ball back a little more in your stance, Sport." I whip my head around to find the asshole who obviously doesn't know a putter from a sand wedge. *Ball back in my stance, my ass*.

I snort and blow him off. "Yeah, thanks, man. I'll try to remember that." I feel his eyes on me, calculating but intrigued. Concentrating, I grip the driver, squeezing harder than I should, and take a deep breath. Arms back, a twist of my hips, power through the downswing, and contact, right on the sweet spot. I watch, pretty fucking impressed with myself, when it flies straight to the flag and rolls past the 300-yard marker this time.

"Fuck yes, Cord. That's the shit right there," Jake praises with a shake of his head. He looks from me to where the ball landed, and then back again, as if he can't quite believe what he just saw.

He's not the only one.

"Do it again."

I turn. Asshole's now been joined by Dickwad and Jerkoff. Great.

"Why the fuck should I?" I'm getting pissed. Just like that, the breathing I was finally enjoying only a few minutes ago is gone. My chest's tight, my fingers twitch, and my jaw's so stiff my head throbs.

Son of a bitch.

All I wanted was a few goddamn minutes to clear my head, find some motherfucking peace, and go home to Brandon so we can figure out what in the hell we're going to do about finding a place to live.

"I'll bet you fifty bucks you can't hit five balls in a row that far, that straight," Asshole spouts off.

I glare at him, standing there in his too-tight, bleached-white polo shirt. Collar raised, that stupid horse logo embroidered on the left, all navy blue, like

a badge of honor bestowed only on the privileged few. Khaki cargo shorts, golf shoes that probably cost more than my truck—I know for damn sure his golf clubs do. Tan with perfect, gleaming white teeth, not a hair out of place, even after playing eighteen holes of golf, standing between clones that look just like him. Fake and so full of shit I'm surprised it's not oozing out of his ears.

I hate him.

I hate them.

Silently I add up the few tips I got today. It's not even close to the fifty bucks he's betting, but there's no way in Hell I'll ever let him know that. Instead, I smirk, casually lean on my borrowed golf club and challenge, "Make it a hundred and you're on."

He raises his eyebrow, a little stunned by my comeback, but I don't move, giving him nothing, until he scoffs and looks at his friends. "Whatever. Fifty more's not gonna kill me. I'm game if you are, Sport. It's only money, right?"

And he knows, the smug son of a bitch knows I won't back down, even though we all know I don't have the hundred dollars.

Jake tugs on my elbow, and I turn to look at him. "Cord, man, do you know who that is?" he hisses quietly, but there's no disguising the worry in voice.

"Of course I do. Everyone knows who Ian Kennedy is. I'm not a moron, Jake."

"Could have fooled me," he mumbles and gives me a hard look. "Brandon will kick your ass, you know that right?"

"Well, then, I guess I'm just going to have to make sure I don't lose, won't I?" I retort with a shit-ton more confidence than I'm feeling at the moment.

Ian Kennedy. Even his name reeks of pretension. But, contrary to my attempt to blow him off, I'll hand it to the guy—he can play. I've watched him plenty and there's no doubt he's got game. Mine's better. No question about that either, even if today is the first time I've picked up a golf club since Brandon and I left Jacksonville.

"Cord, this is a bad idea. Bad, bad idea. You don't want to get mixed up with Kennedy." Jake tries again to make me see reason but all I can see is the hundred bucks. That's a week's worth of groceries, or part of the security deposit we'll surely need for whatever craptastic place we wind up finding to live in. It's money, easy money, and I need it.

We need it.

“It’s no big deal, Jake. Now, back off, shut the fuck up, and let me do this so we can go home and I can surprise my guy with some Chinese and a six-pack of our favorite beer. Bottles tonight just because I can.”

He hears something in my voice, the desperation I try every day to hide, and simply nods and takes a step back. “Show that fucker what you can do.” He smirks, and I know even though he’s not a hundred percent thrilled with me right now, he has my back.

“So we gonna do this or what?” Ian sneers, looking way too confident for my liking.

“Five balls, 300 yards, straight at the flag coming right up,” I say easily, even though my heart feels like it’s going to beat right out of my chest.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Uncle Marcus’s voice fills my mind. I can hear him, as clear as if he were standing behind me, whispering in my ear like he used to. *Eye on the ball, Hawk. Take your time, picture where you want the ball to go, and just do it.*

I grip. I waggle. I swing and off the ball goes, exactly where it’s supposed to. One, then two, then three balls soar through the sky. Sweat drips down my back, and pools at the waist of my shorts. My arms are sore, my shoulders, too. I haven’t used some of these muscles in more than eighteen months. The sun’s set; it’s twilight. That time when daylight hangs on with white knuckles while nighttime peels away the fingers of day one by one, getting it to fall away with the sun. The air is moist; a hint of the salt from the ocean not more than fifteen minutes away floats on a gentle breeze. *Wfffft, wfffft, wfffft.* The sprinklers come on, spread throughout the golf course, the water keeping the grass lush and green. After all, the members of Tidewater Country Club pay a pretty penny to belong here. Everything has to look picture perfect. Can’t have any brown spots or God forbid the sand in the bunker off number three’s fairway isn’t raked in the right direction.

Resentment and bitterness churn in my stomach. A sour taste climbs up my throat, but I swallow it down, force it away. I’ll indulge later, much later, when I’m a hundred dollars richer. It might not taste so bad then.

“You’re not done yet, Sport. Two to go. Wanna go double or nothing?” Ian taunts and my blood boils.

No good, son of a bitch, cocksucking motherfucker.

Jake must see something on my face because before I can even open my mouth, he's turned toward Ian and his douchebag sidekicks. "Shut the fuck up and let him finish this shit up. The range closed thirty minutes ago." His voice hard, biting, and I know it's a warning to me every bit as much as a jab at Ian.

Kennedy waves him off, like he's nothing more than an annoying fly, and I square my shoulders. I hit the next two balls without even thinking about it and watch them land right beside the other three. *Hell yes.*

Whatever satisfaction I hoped to gain isn't anywhere to be found when I face Ian. He looks bored as he slaps the money in my hand. "Not bad, Sport."

"It's Cord, not Sport. Cord McKenzie," I snap through gritted teeth.

He stares, his eyes cool and shrewd. "Well, Cord McKenzie, I'll be seeing you around. You can count on it."

He spins and walks off with his friends and doesn't look back once. I glance down at my palm, the five, crisp twenty-dollar bills the best thing I've seen in a long fucking time.

"Let's get the hell out of here." I smile at Jake. "I've got cash in my pocket and a guy to spoil."

As I get in my truck and head for home, I can't help but think that was the easiest hundred dollars I've ever made in my life. And then I wonder, when can I do it again?

Chapter 4

Cord

After a quick search on my phone, I call Fortune Cookie—the only Chinese restaurant in Tidewater—and order dinner. Sweet and sour chicken, pork fried rice, beef and broccoli, and plenty of egg rolls with extra duck sauce because Brandon loves it. By the time I get there, I only have to wait a few minutes. I grin when I see the twenties fan out in my hand as I pull two out to pay for the food, knowing I'll use the change on the beer. It's so fucking nice to have cash in my pocket.

Feeling better than I have in far too long, I carry the food to the liquor store down the street to buy the beer. I stand in front of the case and silently debate between Blue Moon and Sam Adams Summer Ale, neither of which is my favorite. I like my beer darker, heartier, but tonight's about spoiling Brandon so Blue Moon it is. I even stop at the little mom and pop grocery store across the street and grab two oranges. At the last minute, a quart of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey gets tossed in the basket which will use up the tips I got today. My wallet's definitely lighter by the time I make it back to the truck, but I don't care.

He needs this.

We need this.

The drive is no more than fifteen minutes, but I take the opportunity to watch the scenery as I head toward the apartment. I pass the post office, the used car lot where I bought my piece-of-shit truck, and Tidewater's only movie theater on the corner of Washington and Beach. The town is small enough that there are still sidewalks lined with gas lampposts, but big enough to warrant a number of chain restaurants. There's even a Red Lobster. With Myrtle Beach so close and the country club the big draw, the town's an eclectic mix of privilege and those that scrape by. Multimillion dollar mansions line the golf course. Smaller, yet still expensive, houses dot the neighborhoods around it, while the rest of the residents live in modest, older houses just shy of rundown. There are a few areas, like where Amy and Jake live, where there are new subdivisions, but a good portion of the population is blue collar. They work at the club, at the hotels in Myrtle Beach, or at the hospital. Sure, there are lawyers, insurance agents and a host of other "respectable" occupations that make the town work,

but there are just as many like mine and Brandon's, ones that hardly pay enough to make ends meet.

Tidewater's not horrible; for the most part, the people are warm and friendly. It's a place where if you stay long enough, the cashiers at the grocery store will call you by name, and when you walk into Mom's Place, the diner across from the small courthouse, the waitresses know whether to bring you coffee or a soda without having to ask. At Christmastime, the square is decorated with lights and carols play until ten every night. The tree lighting ceremony is the highlight of the season, with the high school band playing, the choir singing, and of course a visit from Santa.

If I didn't want to get the hell out of here so desperately, it might not be a bad place to settle down. Amy and Jake sure seem happy. Myrtle Beach is close enough, and if you want excitement and plenty of things to do, you have your pick. Best of both worlds, at least that's what Jake always says. I can see it I suppose, but I still can't help but wish for the day Brandon and I can leave this place behind. I don't like to think about saying good-bye to Jake and Amy, but we can always Skype or call, and besides, NYC isn't really all that far away.

I can't wait for the day Tidewater's nothing but a speck in my rearview mirror.

Scowling at our front door, I shuffle the bags in my arms so I can put the key in the lock. "Damn bastards," I mutter, kicking the door closed behind me. I take a deep breath and shove all that shit to the back of my mind. One night. I promise myself tomorrow morning we'll start trying to figure things out, but tonight is about us and only us.

As I unload the food and set it on the chipped Formica counter, I ignore the nagging whisper in my ear. The one telling me the second Brandon walks through the front door, he's going to start asking questions. It's enough to make me queasy, but I tell the stupid voice to shut the fuck up and resolutely try to convince myself what he doesn't know won't hurt him. The fact I'm going to lie or, at the very least, obscure the truth, settles heavily in my gut.

It's nothing a few beers, some good food, and even better sex with Brandon won't cure.

Or so I want to believe.

I leave the containers on the counter, put the beer in the fridge, and the ice cream in the freezer before moving to the bedroom. The three twenties I have

left get put away in the old wooden box that sits on the corner of my dresser. Uncle Marcus gave it to me when I was eight years old so I had a place to keep my baseball cards. I've used it to store all my important things ever since. I spy the movie ticket from my first date with Brandon, the ball marker I used when I won the Florida Junior Amateur in high school, and the clipping from the newspaper with my parents' obituaries. Other items catch my eye, but I don't dwell, shutting the lid with a resounding snap that echoes in the room.

There's no time to take a trip down memory lane. The trip wouldn't be all that fun anyway. There sure aren't many good things to remember.

During a quick shower, I try not to think about the questions Brandon will surely ask, and instead focus on how good it will feel to spend some time together, both in and out of bed. My dick gets hard just thinking about Brandon's naked body. I give into the feeling, gripping and tugging on my cock until I come with a loud groan and my hand slaps the dingy tile wall. As I watch the jizz swirl down the drain, I relax bit by bit, feeling a whole hell of a lot better, mostly because I know Brandon will be buried in my ass before the night is through. Sex with Brandon is always hot. It doesn't matter that the rest of our life is a complete clusterfuck—enjoying our time between the sheets has never been an issue. We don't fuck anywhere near as often as we did while we were dating. We were like damned rabbits, going at it every chance we got. Nothing has ever felt as good as Brandon's cock filling my ass, his nails scoring my back, and his strong, bruising grip on my hips as he pounds into me repeatedly while I cry out his name until I'm hoarse.

Like I said, we may not have a pot to piss in, in two weeks we're going to be homeless unless we can come up with something. At least we have each other and the sex is still smoking hot, so it's not a total lost cause.

Yet.

In our room, I pull on a pair of loose basketball shorts, not bothering with boxers or a T-shirt. If I have my way, we'll be naked within an hour of him coming home, so what's the point? The thought I'm using sex as a way to keep him from wanting answers niggles in the back of my mind again, like a pebble in my shoe that's just irritating as fuck, but I steel myself against the guilt. We deserve a night damn it, just one night, to let loose and act like normal early-twenty-somethings who drink and fuck and think we've got the world at our feet.

It's not too much to ask.

By the time I have a blanket spread on the floor in the living room, and every pillow I can find thrown around, I hear the key in the door. I've turned off most of the lights, turned on the iPod, and lit the candles Brandon bought at the dollar store to make things a little more romantic. It's not much, but it's the best I can manage.

"What the," Brandon mutters as he walks in the darker than normal room and freezes when he sees all I've done. "Cord, what's going on? And is that," he sniffs, inhaling deeply, "Chinese food I smell?"

"It is. I picked up Fortune Cookie on the way home. Go change, and I'll get everything ready. I got some beer, too," I tell him, brushing a quick kiss over his lips, and ignore the stunned look on his face as I make a beeline toward the kitchen.

He's still standing in the same spot when I start spooning the food onto the plates. "Babe, just go change. The food'll get cold if we wait much longer, and I'm starving. I got you extra egg rolls and duck sauce," I say temptingly and add a waggle of my eyebrows.

For just a moment there's a battle in his head. I can tell he really wants to ask me to explain, but then the corners of his mouth lift. He squeaks, smiling big and bright, and I know that whatever residual guilt I'll feel in the morning, and I *will* feel it, is worth it to see that look on his face.

"Don't bother with underwear," I call out as he hurries into our room. "You won't be dressed long enough to need it."

I hear him giggle because, well, our place is smaller than a postage stamp. Christ is it ever gratifying to hear that sound. It feels even better, like maybe I haven't screwed everything up and there might be light at the end of the tunnel.

Chapter 5

Cord

“God, it smells so good in here,” Brandon moans appreciatively as he walks into the living room after a quick shower.

Hair still damp, face scrubbed and flushed, a tank top and a pair of my old shorts—sans underwear, just as I ordered, if the outline of his cock is any indication—and I give serious thought to chucking the whole dinner idea and taking his sexy ass to bed. I can’t wait for him to fuck me later. It’s been days and I need him.

“Come on. Get your fine self over here and let’s eat before the food gets cold. You want a beer with dinner or after?” I ask, motioning for him to sit before handing him a plate and dropping a kiss on top of his head.

He grins at me as he crosses his legs and balances the plate on his lap. I take the opportunity to look at him. Brandon’s body is perfect, small, and compact, with finely honed muscles and miles of unmarked skin. His ass is fantastic. Tight and round, the perfect size for my hands, and he has the most sensitive nipples I’ve ever come across. I swear there are times I can make him come just by biting and sucking on them.

“Eat up. I made sure to get extra duck sauce for your egg rolls. For the life of me I can’t figure out why you drown them in that shit.” I chuckle as I walk back to get my own food. “Babe, beer now or later?”

“Later. I need some food in my stomach, otherwise I’ll be drunk after only one. Just bring me water, please?”

Making sure to fill the glass to the top with ice first, I fix his water, grab a beer and my food, and somehow manage to carry it all to the living room without spilling or dropping anything. Once I’m situated beside him on the floor, I tip my bottle in his direction and clink it against the edge of his glass. “To us,” I toast.

In the muted glow of the room, with the reflection of the candlelight shining in his eyes, and the heat from his shower still making his cheeks enticingly pink, he’s so beautiful it’s hard to breathe. I’ve never thought a man could be beautiful, not until I saw Brandon for the first time, but there’s no other word to describe him. His size gives the impression of weak and delicate, but that

couldn't be further from the truth. Brandon is a warrior, fierce and strong, the strongest person I know—man or woman. I swallow, feeling like I need to say something, but the moment passes with the two of us just staring at each other.

"This is really great," Brandon compliments after we eat for a few minutes.

"I know, right? Chinese, beer, and you, it doesn't get any better than this." I shovel more rice in my mouth and wash it down with a swig of beer.

The food is perfect, the beer, not so bad, but spending time with him is exactly what I needed. I'm on top of the world, and for the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful maybe, just maybe, we're going to catch a break. I ask him about his day at the store, laughing when he tells me about a little girl who whipped off her diaper and ran around the produce section, saying it was shower time when the misters came on over the vegetables.

"You should have seen Bentley. Oh my God! I thought he was going to hyperventilate." I grin at the thought of Brandon's very gay friend fluttering around the grocery store trying to get the little girl to put her diaper back on. He laughs along with me, and it's the best thing I've heard in way too long. I vow right then and there we are going to have moments like this more often. We need them; and more than that, we deserve them. *He* deserves them.

We finish our dinner, talking about everything. Not about anything important, just silly, superficial things. He talked to Amy today so he mentions Sadie's latest adventure, and something flares deep in my chest. We've never talked about kids. I guess we've both just assumed we'd get to the point eventually where we'd need to think about it. I shake my head at the thought of the future. The here and now is plenty to worry about. I definitely don't need the added pressure of the unknown, sometime down the road, on top of it.

He clears his throat after he sets the mostly empty plate down on the floor. "Not to be a total downer because we haven't had a meal like that in a while, but, um... where did you get the money for all this? It's not payday until next week, and last I knew we don't have cash stuffed in our mattress or hidden in a coffee can." He waves around, pointing at the food and the beer in my hand.

Groaning, I pick at the label on the empty bottle. It's not like I didn't expect the question. I'm actually surprised he finished eating before beginning the inquisition. Knowing that thought is unfair doesn't stop me from defensively answering, "Jesus Christ, Brandon. I had a pretty good day today and wound up with extra money in my pocket. Excuse the fuck out of me for wanting to spoil you a little bit. I know sweet and sour chicken, Blue Moon, and Ben and Jerry's

isn't much of anything, but shit, I don't think a simple thank you is too much to ask."

I scramble and grab the dishes, stomping to the kitchen. Every single good thought from just moments before is gone, evaporated like a drop of water in the middle of a red-hot skillet. I angrily scrape the plates into the trash can, cringing at the sound of metal against ceramic. I shuffle to the sink, drop the dishes haphazardly into it, and then lean on the counter, pissed and frazzled and most of all hurt.

One night was all I wanted. *Motherfucker.*

A hand on my back, his warm body pressing close. "I'm sorry. You're right. So, so right. It was a wonderful surprise and I loved it, love it. Honestly. I promise. Thank you for wanting to do something nice for us." His voice is low and gritty, like he's holding back tears, which makes me feel like an asshole. He rests his forehead in the middle of my back. Softly, so softly I can barely make out the words, but there's no way to misunderstand when he says, "I'm scared, Cord."

My head falls forward. Unable to stem the onslaught of emotion those words stir in me, I take a few deep breaths. Raw and vulnerable, I rasp, "I am, too." And I hate that I am, but it helps I'm not alone in feeling this way.

We stand there, neither willing to break the silence. Words that should be said, aren't, and they weigh heavy in the air around us. We need to talk, to plan, and try to find a way out of this mess, but it's not going to happen tonight. I also know if I tell him what I did to get the money, it will open doors I swore I'd never open again, ever. Not that he would be unhappy about the golf part. God knows he'd be on the phone with Uncle Marcus in a damned heartbeat if I told him, but finding out about the asinine bet, even though I won, will do nothing but upset him.

Chapter 6

Brandon

Cord is hiding something.

It's so obvious it's not even worth mentioning, especially not with my dick pressed firmly along the crease of his ass and my hands splayed across his wide chest. I might be small and pretty but that doesn't mean I don't know how to take care of my man; and my man definitely needs me to take care of him tonight. The past few weeks have been hellacious. Constantly walking on eggshells and spending scant, stress-filled minutes together has led us to a place neither of us wants to be.

So for now, thoughts of what we're going to do and how we're going to do it get pushed to the wayside as my fingertips skate over his skin. Cord leans into me, and our anger and hurt and fear melts away with each caress and dip over his hips, his abs.

Cord moans and his head rests heavily against my shoulder. "It feels so good when you touch me, like every inch of my skin is electrified."

"I love touching you," I whisper as I tweak a nipple, then run my palm across the hard, pebbled flesh.

And God do I ever love touching him. Who wouldn't? Unlike me, his body is covered in fine, golden-brown hair. Thanks to being covered with a ball cap all day, the hair on his head is darker, more sand than gold, but the hair on his arms is almost white from all the time he spends out in the sun. He's not a bear, but his legs and arms aren't smooth like mine, and the trail of darker, silky hair from his navel down to his cock is my favorite place to play. Indulging, I drag my fingers through, pressing against his back when he tilts his hips silently begging for more.

"Mmmm, someone seems awfully anxious," I murmur as I kiss across his shoulders. Our height difference doesn't let me quite reach up his neck, but there's time enough for that later.

Now, *now* I'll enjoy all the places I *can* reach. I slip my fingers beneath the waistband of Cord's shorts, chuckling softly when he hisses as I graze his leaking cock with my index finger. Collecting the bead of pre-cum leaking from the tip, I use it to coat his cockhead, letting the edge of my fingernail scrape across his slit.

“Fuck, Bran,” Cord pants.

“That comes later, baby. I’m gonna fuck you so good, just wait,” I promise as I wrap my fingers around his stiff shaft and begin tortuously jacking him. Slowly. Letting the pleasure build. He fills my hand, and he pulses beneath my fingers as I grip him hard and slide up from base to crown.

He thrusts his hips in time with each stroke, the moisture dripping allows for the best kind of friction. Over and over again I move up and down, twisting my hand, flexing my fingers, squeezing tight then letting go, with no set rhythm. Just a constant build toward the orgasm I know he’s aching for.

I could be nice and let him come before I fuck him, but I won’t.

I’d rather have him in my mouth, so after a few more pumps of his leaking cock, I stop. Before he can voice the protest I know is on the tip of his tongue, I spin him around and drop to my knees. I shove the waistband of his shorts below his balls, his dick ready and waiting, and I waste no time wrapping my lips around him.

“Bran,” he pants. “That’s just... oh God.”

His moan sounds like it comes all the way from his toes as I swirl my tongue around his shaft. Bobbing my head, I savor the taste of him. Bitter and slightly sweet and salty, the mix makes my mouth water. I love giving head, and Cord has never once complained about my skill. Make no mistake, I love fucking him. Having that body with all its rippling muscles and strength at my mercy is a rush like no other, but kneeling before him with his dick down my throat is on an entirely different level. Knowing I can make him beg, that I can take him right to the brink of release then pull him back over and over until he’s a quivering mass of flesh, until it feels like he’ll explode if he doesn’t come, turns my key like nothing else.

My lips slide up his length until just the tip of his weeping cock is inside my mouth. I pull off completely, flicking at the pooling liquid with my tongue. Looking up, I keep my fingers busy as they stroke and pet. His pupils are huge, his chest heaves as he stares down at me. The lust in his eyes goes straight to my dick and it twitches, my balls heavy between my legs.

“Hmmm,” I hum lazily, nuzzling the crease of his groin. “Should I let you come now or come when I’m buried in your tight ass?” The question is, of course, rhetorical, and I don’t wait for an answer. After all, it’s not his choice, it’s mine. The moan that escapes between his panting breaths tells me he knows it is, too.

I'm sure when people see us together they automatically assume I'm the "girl" in our relationship. Not surprising considering how I look next to him, but Cord loves to be fucked. He's a total slutty bottom. He likes being pushed and manhandled and filled, with fingers, tongue, or dick—it doesn't matter, he loves it all. He craves it all. And all is what I give him. My dick isn't porn star huge, but it gets the job done, and with Cord, it's not about size anyway. It's about giving him what he needs, and I do that well. Very, very well.

"I'm thinking in my mouth first, then we'll move to the bedroom where I can pound you into the mattress."

"Fuck, that's... ahhh," Cord mumbles as I swallow around him once more.

It takes only moments. A hum, a hard suck, and a swirl of my tongue and he's coming, filling my mouth with his release. So much for not letting him come, but he felt too good to stop.

He gasps for breath and his fingers tangle in my hair when he softens and slides out of my mouth. I lick the remaining spend from his shaft and chuckle, somewhat evilly, when he grunts and jerks his hips back.

"Ass," he says with no heat whatsoever.

Grinning wickedly, I stand and grind my hips against his. "I'll be in your ass," I tell him smugly and kiss him, hard. He groans and opens his mouth. I slide my fingers into his damp hair, and devour his mouth until my head starts to swim.

His lips chase mine as he dives in for another kiss once we've caught our breath. This time, it's his tongue dominating mine and I let him. "Jesus, baby. You taste so good." His voice is low and deep, almost a growl, and I tilt my head so he can lick along my neck. When his teeth scrape over my skin and soft whimpers come in almost constant succession, I know it's time to move to the bedroom.

"Oh, the things I'm going to do to you," I purr and grab his hand, dragging him down the hall.

I smirk at him over my shoulder.

Things indeed.

Chapter 7

Brandon

A noise from the street below startles me awake, and a glance at the clock tells me we've been asleep only a few hours. I stretch and smile when muscles that haven't been used in much too long ache in the best possible way. My hand brushes against Cord's back, the skin warm and slightly damp, and I can't help but let my fingers linger. The scent of sweat and sex swirls around us, and though my cock stirs and takes notice, I let the thrum of want continue to build while my mind and fingers wander. I'll take him again, once he has slept longer, but for now, it's enough to lay beside him and listen to him breathe. Nights like this have been way too sparse lately; it's been weeks since we've been able to enjoy one. Questions over Cord's sudden windfall notwithstanding, the night was perfect. Seeing him with a smile on his face instead of the tight lines of worry that are usually present, eased, if only for a short time, the tight knot of worry that's steadily grown day after day. Things have been bad—stressful—but unlike Cord, I'm not worried. Well, not *that* worried. That's not to say there aren't moments I wonder what the hell we're going to do; but with him by my side I know we'll figure something out. There's no other option.

Leaving Jacksonville with him was the smartest, stupidest thing I've ever done. Sure I wanted the future he spoke about. Seeing his eyes sparkle as he went on about New York City, and all the options waiting for us, was addictive and never failed to get my heart pumping and my blood singing. The idea of being where the lights were shiny and the possibilities endless filled me with a fire I'd never had before Cord was in my life.

Growing up an only child—the only gay child—of an alcoholic, bitter father and dead mother was its own version of Hell on Earth. There wasn't abuse, verbal or otherwise. Instead, there was nothing, which was worse. It could be said, and I'm sure a therapist would have a field day with me if given the chance, the reason I'm the way I am—brash, bold, and in your face—is to get the attention I never got from my father. Maybe yes, maybe no, but I don't dwell on it. I live my life on my terms and damn anyone who has a problem with it. Cord never has. From the very beginning, he's been the only one who has ever noticed me, accepted me, just as I am.

Walking into that Contemporary Lit class and seeing him was like hitting a wall going sixty miles an hour. Just that fast my whole world changed. I knew who he was, of course I did; everyone who lived in Jacksonville and had an inkling of current events had heard the name Cord McKenzie. He was a superstar, headed for fame and fortune on the lush green grass of the PGA. Blond, blue-eyed with a smile meant to melt hearts, he was the golden boy. In a place where boys and girls alike had a golf club in their hand from the time they could walk, Cord was at the top of the heap. His talent was talked about everywhere, from the news to the coffee shop.

He hasn't picked up a golf club since we left home a year ago, and I know he misses it. He won't talk about why he won't play any longer, and I don't push. I probably should, but I know whatever the reason, it's painful, and his. Working at Tidewater Country Club has to be the last thing he wants to do. To be that close to something that was such a part of him for so long has to chip away at his soul, but he does it for me, for us. I catch him flexing his fingers, mimicking his grip when he holds the club, usually when he's preoccupied or worried, which has been way too often. The way things have been lately, the distance and the stress is as much my fault as his, though mostly it's just life trying to see if we can take what it dishes out. Life obviously hasn't gotten the message that I'm a badass motherfucker. I might be little and I might look delicate, but it will take a lot more than counting pennies and wondering where we're going to live in fourteen short days, to knock me down.

"Mmmmm," Cord groans as he bends his knees, curling up tight.

He relaxes once more, switching positions to sprawl, facing me, and pulls his pillow against his chest. His almost white eyelashes flutter against his cheeks before he settles back to sleep. A soft sigh escapes as he takes a deep breath, and he looks so peaceful, as if he doesn't have a care in the world. I only wish that were true.

I want to run my fingers through his hair so badly I can almost feel them twitch, so I let myself lift my hand and slip them between the soft strands. His hair is longer now, he's constantly pushing it off his forehead, and it curls behind his ears and just over the collar of his work shirt. I love it. Between the hair, the stubble on his jaw that's more present than not these days, and the way his arms have bulged with muscles he's developed from working outside, it's like he's a whole new Cord, or maybe the Cord he's been trying to find. I doubt he thought he'd find himself working in a cart barn instead of on the golf course where he was born to be, but I can't help but believe that all of this is part of his journey—our journey.

He makes a sound, something between a moan and a whimper as he nudges into my hand. It's enough to stop my thoughts, and the need I've ignored flares back to life. Without waking him, I gently push on his shoulder until he's flat on his back. Kneeling, I drink him in, taking time to appreciate the hard planes of his body, noting the jut of his hips and the outline of well-developed muscles in his thighs. His legs are covered in soft, curly golden hair, and I love the way it feels against my palms.

"Mmmm, Bran," Cord mumbles, still mostly asleep but conscious enough to feel the touch of my fingertips.

I trail them from knee to groin, watching in fascination as his muscles twitch. His breath catches when I stretch my index finger and rub along the inside of his thigh. He opens his legs wider, and it's all the invitation I need. Lowering my head, I kiss below his belly button and swirl my tongue in the silky hair.

Cord's hands find my shoulders then my hair. He drags them through repeatedly as I make my way up his body. Abs, each nipple, the sensitive skin toward his armpit, I lick and suck and bite it all. Our hips move against each other and our cocks, now hard and slick, rub as well.

"Up. Come here, you're too far away," Cord slurs sleepily.

Kissing a line across his shoulder and up his neck, I find his mouth warm and waiting. He opens, and I delve inside, our hips still moving slowly but steadily. We rock and kiss, and it's so hot and so good, I feel like I could melt right inside of him.

He arches and pulls me close so he can kiss me again. "Brandon, oh God. You feel so good," he sighs.

The air around us is charged, the intimacy of being with him like this palpable. Our breath comes in harsh pants, our fingers seek and press, and our hips grind as our cocks slide and pulse between us. The orgasms that follow are not explosions but gentle pushes over the edge. Warmth spills, coating each of our stomachs, and cools while we try to catch our breath.

"That was so hot," I whisper and kiss Cord, the intensity dimmed but not gone completely.

"Mmmm," he agrees and then crinkles his nose when I roll off to lay beside him. "And messy."

I chuckle and grab a handful of tissues from the nightstand. Once we're wiped off enough to not stick to each other, I cuddle against his side and sigh

deeply when his arm wraps around me. Falling asleep together is something I've missed terribly.

Suddenly overwhelmed, I shiver.

"What?" Cord murmurs, on the brink of falling asleep.

Snuggling closer, I relax and let the afterglow of the evening lull me to sleep. Right before nodding off, I hear him quietly say, "Everything will be okay, you'll see."

Smiling because I believe him, I close my eyes and let my dreams pull me under.

Chapter 8

Brandon

A few days after our night of Chinese food and sex, the reprieve from the stress of finding a new place to live is still going strong. I haven't seen much of Cord. He worked last night at the club helping with some kind of event in the dining room. He was gone before I left for work this morning, but the text message I woke up to was a nice surprise. Dirty of course, but nice just the same.

I spend a little time picking up the apartment. It won't be home for much longer but that doesn't mean we have to live like frat boys. Once the dishes are done and the bed is made, I grab my laptop and spend an hour organizing the photos I took last Sunday and run a few through Photoshop to edit. I got some good shots, two or three I'd like to frame and hang in our new place—wherever that winds up being. A tight knot forms at the thought, but I close my eyes and tell myself something will come up. We've made good friends here in Tidewater, and the town really isn't that bad. Sure it's not the thriving metropolis New York City is, but Cord and I can sit at the diner together and not worry about someone spitting in our food, or walk down the street together and not look over our shoulders. We don't flaunt our relationship, and neither of us is huge on PDA anyway, but for the most part, people smile as we pass by and go on about their business.

After a quick sandwich for lunch and a shower, I'm ready when Nancy knocks on the door so we can go to work. The day drags, the only bright spot being Bentley. He's older, probably early forties I'd guess since he refuses to answer when I ask, and so gay he should have glitter falling out of his ass with every step, and rainbows sprouting out of his mouth. He swishes when he walks, trills when he talks, and he's fabulous. He and his partner, Gerald, have been together for over twenty years and are two of the most important reasons why Tidewater isn't such a bad place.

"Doll. What a day, huh?" Bentley sighs dramatically as he drops into a chair beside me. It's our hour for dinner—we always eat together—and today we're the only two in the break room.

Bentley's hands flit as he spreads our food out. Gerald is a chef at one of the country clubs in Myrtle Beach and happily provides his Bentley, and by default,

me, a delicious gourmet dinner every night. I feel a little guilty as I watch Bentley unpack a heavenly smelling chicken and rice dish full of vegetables, a salad, and oh hell yes, chocolate raspberry cheesecake for dessert. Our shared nightly feast is the one indulgence I allow myself, mostly because it doesn't cost me a thing. I love sitting with Bentley and listening to him go on and on about the things Gerald sees in his club. For an hour, it's like an escape from the everyday goings on. I might be content with Cord and where we are, but it doesn't mean I don't want more out of life, for both of us. Hearing Bentley talk about Gerald and the shenanigans in Myrtle Beach is a reminder there is a whole other world out there, one Cord and I have plans to explore and experience.

"So then—" Bentley takes a breath from the story he's telling me to dab his mouth with a napkin. A linen napkin no less. "It's the middle of dinner service, right? There's soft music playing in the background, candles flickering in the hurricane vases, everyone is dressed in their finest, classy you know? Gerald is in the kitchen doing his Bobby Flay thing, when he hears this loud shriek. Think the most annoying sound you've ever heard. Gerald swears it was like cats in heat."

"Jesus." I shudder.

"Mmmhmm." Bentley nods. "Anyway, so the entire dining room goes silent, and the only thing you hear is this she-devil screaming, 'What do you mean you told your mom where I bought my vibrator?'"

I spit out the drink of water I just took. "Holy shit!"

Bentley snickers, and his eyes dance. "Gerald said the guy, who is assumed to be her husband, turned as red as a lobster and looked like he was either going to burst into flames or tears."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, Miss Thing realized she had everyone's attention and flicked her napkin in her lap, cool as can be, and took a drink of her wine and said, 'Well, if she wants pointers on which one is the best, tell her to give me a call. I've tried them all.'"

"Oh my God!"

My phone rings and I answer, still laughing and shaking my head at Bentley. I don't look at the caller ID, so when I hear Amy's unmistakable giggle, I don't have to try to pull it together. Good thing, since I still have tears streaming down my face.

"I am dying to hear what has you sounding like a hyena on nitrous oxide."

I snort. "Later. What's up, sweetcheeks?"

Bentley stands and waves me back into my chair when I move to help him clean up our dinner. He points toward his phone, letting me know he's going outside to call Gerald, and I give Amy my full attention.

"Nothing. It's just been a few days since we've touched base. I miss you."

She's an elementary school teacher so our schedules don't mesh as often as both of us would like, but we make it a point to call at least every few days and send a text or two daily. It would be hard if we didn't like each other, seeing as how Jake and Cord are joined at the hip, but from the moment we met, we just clicked.

We look ridiculous next to each other. The only thing we have in common is our height. I have long, straight, dark hair, and hers is fire red and so curly and floofy it looks like she stuck her finger in a light socket. My skin is a light caramel color thanks to my mother's Hispanic heritage, while Amy's is the color of milk and almost translucent. Where my skin is smooth and unblemished, hers is covered with a smattering of freckles. My eyes are dark brown with thick, dark eyelashes. Hers are the color of candy apple Jolly Ranchers and almost as clear; if she doesn't have mascara on, sometimes it's hard to tell she has eyelashes at all. I'm small boned, slight but muscular—her curves make you want to squish her like a teddy bear. Her sense of humor borders on goofy and off-the-wall. Mine is biting and sarcastic. She's the peanut butter to my chocolate, and I adore her like no other.

I slouch in my chair and tip my head back, smiling because her voice has that effect on me. "I've missed you, too. Tell me something good."

"The picture frames I ordered came in today so I need your sexy ass over here pronto to help me hang all your masterpieces on my walls."

Snickering, I tease, "You think my ass is sexy? Should Jake be worried?"

She snorts and it's like a horn honking, but totally her. "Hell yes he should, or he would if I ever saw him."

"Hmmpf," I mutter in agreement.

Cord might be working himself to exhaustion so we can afford a new car and a new place to live, but Jake spends almost as much time away from Amy and Sadie. There's a trip to Disney World in their future if he and Amy can

save enough money and before too much longer, another baby if Amy has her way. Need versus want, the two situations are completely different and most of the time it doesn't bother me. At least I try not to let it.

"Speaking of our men, how about yours, huh?" Amy questions, barrelling on before I can ask what she means. "That's some awesome stuff he did, kicking Ian Kennedy's ass on the driving range and making him a hundred dollars poorer. I know that's nothing to him, but still. That dude is a major twatwaffle. He deserves to be taken down a notch or twelve, and I can't think of anyone better to do it than Cord. Why didn't you tell me he was such an amazing golfer?"

"I um... what? Ian Kennedy?" I stammer while my mind races, trying to understand what Amy just said.

"Yeah, Jake couldn't stop talking about it the other night. I guess Ian saw Cord on the driving range hitting balls and bet Cord he couldn't keep hitting his drives as far as he was." She giggles, oblivious to the fact that my breath is coming in short bursts.

I squeeze my phone so tight my fingers turn white. I try to tell myself to give Cord the benefit of the doubt. Maybe Amy is exaggerating as she does sometimes, but the hollow, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach says she's telling the truth.

Cord was gambling. *Jesus.*

Forcing my voice to stay even, I clarify. It's imperative I understand her clearly. "Let me get this straight." I clear my throat before continuing. "Cord accepted a bet from Ian Kennedy and won a hundred dollars by hitting golf balls."

Amy laughs, not catching my icy tone. "Well, yeah. Jake said Cord was going to treat you to Chinese food. Didn't he do that? Oh wait, maybe he's saving it for a surprise. Don't tell him I said anything," she rushes on to say.

"Oh, don't worry. You're safe." *Him? Not so much.*

"Listen, Ames, I gotta go. I have to be back on shift in five minutes and I'm already on Mr. Baker's shit list."

I can't stay on the phone. My hands are shaking and my stomach is in knots.

"Sure thing, honey. Call me soon so we can make plans for you to come over, okay? Talk to you later," she chirps and is gone before I can even say good-bye.

My phone clatters onto the table when it slips from my hands. I close my eyes and clench my fingers into fists so tight, my nails almost break the skin on my palms. Holy shit.

What the hell am I gonna do now?

Chapter 9

Brandon

The rest of my shift passes in a blur. I catch Bentley looking at me with a frown on his face more than a few times but I ignore him, too caught up in my swirling thoughts to try to keep up a good front. I wouldn't be able to do it anyway.

Luckily, Nancy reads my mood and keeps conversation to a minimum on the short drive back to our apartment complex. I stare out the window, seeing nothing, as my mind continues to race a mile a minute. *Cord was gambling.* I understand the words, but I can't wrap my head around the thought. After knowing my history with my father, after listening to me explain the loneliness and fear of growing up with an addict, how he could do this simply baffles me. *How?* I know we need the money. I'm not an idiot, nor am I clueless. Things are dire; I get it. The lure of easy money? I get that, too. But holy fuck, how could he do this knowing what it would do to me when I found out? Just thinking about it turns my stomach and fills my mouth with bile. I knew he was hiding something. I know him too well to be fooled, but in my wildest imagination I never would have picked this. Never. He listened to me rant and cry as I poured my soul out to him, explaining my father and how his gambling addiction destroyed my family.

He promised me, swore as he looked me straight in the eyes, I would never have to worry with him, not about that. I'd heard his stories of bets on the putting green, wagers per hole, and card games in the back room of the club where cash was thrown around like Monopoly money. I knew the temptations were there, but I believed him when he gave me his word.

And he lied.

Nancy slows to stop at a red light, and she clears her throat. "Are you okay, sweetie? You've been quiet ever since your dinner break."

"I'm fine," I answer flatly. She'd have to be an idiot to fall for my pitiful lie.

"Sure you are. If you need to talk, you know where to find me."

She pats my knee, and then gives it a brief squeeze, saying nothing else until we arrive home. Once she turns off the car, neither of us move. The

clicking of the cooling engine is the only sound, and I stare up at the window of our bedroom, dreading having to face Cord. It's the first time a thought like that has ever entered my mind, and I almost lose it right then and there.

"Brandon?"

I grapple with the door handle and clutch the strap of my bag. "I'm fine. See you tomorrow." I bolt from the car and don't look back.

Normally Nancy and I walk up to our floor together, letting the night at work fade the closer we get to our homes. Tonight, each step feels like walking toward an execution. Dramatic, sure, but I'm hurt and angry and confused. I don't want to fight with Cord, but it's inevitable. This just can't be ignored.

Staring at our door, I take a deep breath before getting my key out and letting myself into the apartment.

"Hey, babe." He waves from the couch.

And it hits me like a punch in the gut looking at him—stretched out on the sofa, dressed in loose sweats and a band T-shirt, hair still damp from his shower as if it's just a normal night—that I'm pissed. So pissed.

My bag slips from my shoulder and hits the floor with a loud thump.

"Bran?"

"How could you?"

I don't wait. I don't hint around, instead I charge forward like a gladiator going into battle.

He stands and his eyebrows crawl to his hair at my sharp tone. He tilts his head, his mouth open but no words come out. A tense moment passes. I can tell he's put the pieces together when his jaw snaps shut and he swallows audibly. His shoulders slump, the look on his face is resigned and wary. Silently, I wait for him to speak. I'm so mad I know if I open my mouth, I'll say things I might regret tomorrow. I want to rail and rant and accuse, but still, I wait.

He licks his lips and questions quietly. "Amy?"

Snorting, I nod. "Of course Amy."

"It was only once."

"And that makes it okay? Jesus, Cord." I begin to pace, shaking my head as I try to calm down. "Why?" It's the question eating away at my insides.

The air in the room is thick with unease, and anxiety creeps up my spine. Blood pounds in my temples. My head hurts, my jaw hurts from clenching it so tightly, and most of all, my heart hurts. It hurts to watch Cord as he shifts from his left to his right, sort of like if he could, he'd make a break for it just to get out of having this discussion.

I ask again, "Why, Cord?" and I don't even try to temper the brittleness of my voice.

He wanders toward the window and faces the glass, back rigid and his voice strained as he speaks. "It was just... I wanted to feel good, you know, just for a few minutes. The money was part of it, but it was more showing him I was good enough. Holding that golf club and watching the ball sail through the air, it was like for just a moment, everything was okay. We weren't about to be homeless. You were happy, I was happy, and things were like they're supposed to be."

"I know none of this is what you want," I try to placate, but he shakes his head to stop me from saying anything else.

"It's not what you want either. I hate that we're stuck in this place, that I've broken promises to you. That you could do better, but I can't let you go. I'm a selfish asshole, Brandon—" and his voice breaks, "I don't deserve you, but I don't want you to leave me. Please don't leave me."

"Cord." His name is a sigh.

"I'm so sorry, Brandon."

From across the room, we stare at each other. The way his hands are clenched. The slight tremble of his lips and the way he can't quite take a deep breath show me how afraid he is. Not just of what's been going on, but of losing me. I'd laugh if I didn't want to break down and cry. This is so much larger than just the gambling, and in that instant, I see it.

God, the things he's given up for me, for us.

"Honey," I say softly, using an endearment that hardly ever graces my lips. I step closer, but stay far enough away so I don't fling myself into his arms and cling to him like a vine. "I understand." He scoffs and shakes his head, disagreeing with me. "But I do," I say more forcefully, because I do understand. "It's not okay, but I get it. Golf is the one thing you do better than anyone. It's a part of you that you've buried for way too long. Of course it's what you'd use to feel like yourself."

"It felt really good," he whispers as if saying it any louder makes it any less true.

Something eases in my chest, something I didn't even realize was there, but now that he's opened this door, I can't let him close it again.

I smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

We say nothing for a few moments while we process. Knowing him, he still feels bad, and with me there is definitely a lingering unease over the gambling.

"It was easy for you to get carried away. That scares me, Cord."

He winces and takes a step toward me. "I know. It won't happen again."

I notice he doesn't promise it won't, and I don't push.

Needing to touch him, to make us both feel better, I rush forward and wrap my arms around him. He slumps against me as if he can't bear his weight, and maybe he can't. I know the toll our situation has taken on him. I see it every day.

We hug silently, soaking up the heat of each other and letting it soothe the jagged edges of our frayed emotions. "Do you forgive me?" he hesitantly asks after a few minutes.

I nod against his chest. His heart still thumps a bit erratically as if he's afraid of my answer. I give him the only one I can. "Yes."

Stepping back enough to look at him, I reach up and grab his neck, and pull him toward me. Meeting his lips, I kiss him hungrily, pushing my tongue into his mouth with no thought of being gentle. He moans, and I kiss him deeper, press against him harder, and swallow all of his needy sounds.

"Don't do it again," I warn. Without waiting for his reply, I peck him quickly on the lips. "I'm going to go take a shower."

When I step inside our room, he's already in bed, his back facing me. I drop my towel and crawl into bed, wrapping around him so I can feel his skin against every inch of my naked body. He's tense, so tense, and I squeeze tighter, until he shudders and relaxes, settling against me. Normally he's the big spoon, but tonight, it's my turn to shelter him. We both need it.

I kiss across his shoulder, my lips barely grazing his skin. He shudders again and the sigh is long and shaky, but his muscles are loose and it's a start.

"I love you, you know," I say between feather light kisses and soft nips to the back of his neck.

"I don't know why, but thank fuck you do."

I bite harder. "Shut up. You made a mistake. The situation we're in right now sucks donkey balls, but we're together and we're smart. We'll figure something out."

He threads our fingers together where they rest on his chest. It feels so good when his big, strong hands weave with mine, like we're a part of each other.

"You're always so optimistic. I don't how you do it sometimes. It amazes me."

"I have you. I don't need anything else."

He gasps and trembles against me. He pulls my arms tighter around him. I know he's uncomfortable with how vulnerable he is right now, how unsure of our future he is, so I let the moment pass without saying anything else. It doesn't take long for his breath to even out. The fight, however brief, took a lot out of him and he doesn't have energy to spare.

His warm skin against mine melts some of the icy ball of fear that clings to my stomach, and I hope that I can trust he won't do this again. I'm not sure what I'd do if he did.

Chapter 10

Brandon

As usual, Cord's gone before I wake the next morning. When I stumble toward the kitchen in search of caffeine, I find my favorite mug waiting by the coffee pot along with a blueberry muffin from the little bakery down the street. It's such a small gesture, but one that puts a smile on my face just the same. Telling myself to let go of the lingering unease about money, Ian Kennedy, and the look of pure desperation on Cord's face last night, I enjoy my morning jolt of java.

The day passes quickly and before I know it, it's time for work. When Nancy knocks on my door precisely at 12:40, I can tell she's surprised by the smile on my face.

"Well, now. That's more like it," she chirps happily.

"Yeah, yeah," I grunt, trying not to give her the satisfaction. "You don't need to take out an advertisement or anything. We had a fight; things are fine now. It's all good."

She snorts, nudging me with her elbow. "Bet the making up was fun."

Not wanting to go there with her, I roll my eyes and ask about her cat, Milo. She goes on and on about the devil cat, talking about it like it's a baby instead of a mass of teeth and claws. The damn thing is the meanest feline I've ever come across. Nancy will be lucky if she doesn't wake up one morning with her face half-eaten off. I've never been a cat lover, but seriously, hers is just plain evil.

Bentley is pleased I'm back to normal, though he pesters to make sure.

Exasperated after the fifth time, I growl. "Bentley, if you ask me one more damned time, I swear I will exchange your lip gloss for lube. And not the flavored kind either."

He gasps and plants both his fists on his tiny hips. "Darling, don't even play like that."

I grin wickedly. "Who says I'm playing? I know where you keep it, too, so watch it. I just might have to stop by your house and bring Gerald those pictures he's been asking me for."

“Hmmp,” he sniffs haughtily. “We’ll see about that.”

I laugh as he stomps away, swishing the whole time.

I fumble with my bag as I walk into the apartment. It takes me a second to realize there’s music playing, candles flickering, and the smell of pepperoni and garlic wafting in the air.

Cord stands by the couch with a bunch of flowers in his hand, looking shy and unsure.

“Five dollar pizza and flowers,” he says softly with a shrug. “They’re not roses but I remember you saying how much you loved these daisies.” Bright pink spots color his cheeks, and the tips of his ears turn red. My heart threatens to burst out of my chest. “I couldn’t remember what they were called but when I told the girl at the flower shop I needed the big kind, she knew what I meant.”

“Cord,” I choke.

“I’m sorry, Brandon. God, I’m so fucking sorry.” His voice shakes. “I know I scared you. I hate that I made you doubt me. I don’t ever want you to feel like that again. You mean everything to me.”

I toss my bag on the couch as I move toward him. Touching the soft petals, I whisper, “Gerbera daisies. I can’t believe you remembered.”

“I remember lots of things.” He must still need reassurance because he begs, “Please say you forgive me.”

“Of course,” I whisper, because really, what else can I do? “I love you.” And this time it’s my voice that wavers. My throat is tight with emotion, and I swallow and close my eyes.

His arms go around me, and he squeezes. A slow song begins to play, the notes soothing and soft. “Dance with me,” he murmurs in my ear, pulling me closer.

I hate fighting with Cord and as I take a calming breath, any remaining tension leaves my body so all I’m left with is a deep, powerful need for him. To feel his body beneath mine, and hear his whimpers and moans as I watch while he comes apart only to be taken again and again.

He nuzzles the side of my neck, and I let him because it feels good and I love it when he does it. His hands knead into the small of my back and his groin

rubbs my stomach as we continue to sway. I press my nose against his chest, inhaling deeply, the scent of soap and him powerful and so good.

The song ends and another one begins, but we don't stop. His lips are on my neck, behind my ear, along my jaw. I slide my fingers into his hair and twist, my grip so tight it must border on painful. I pull until he looks at me, and our eyes lock.

"No more," I tell him sharply.

With no hesitation he answers, "No more."

I sigh and loosen my grip, letting my thumb ghost over his cheek and across his abused bottom lip. "Kiss me," I order.

"About fucking time," Cord groans before he spins and pins me against the wall. His mouth covers mine and his tongue plunges deep inside. He grabs my face, holding me steady while he presses the entire length of his body against mine.

He's so big and hard, all over. I can hardly think as he steps between my legs, bends his knees for optimal pleasure, and grinds our hips together.

"Oh, God," I breathe, ignoring the heaviness in my balls. Cord's legs must ache from the strain of resting his weight on them, but that thought flees as quickly as it comes because he's still kissing me. The kiss stays slow and sensual, and I savor every rasp of his tongue and every sweep inside my hot mouth.

"Bran," he gulps when breathing becomes a necessity.

Cord doesn't slow his hips as his hands get to work. He pulls my shirt from my pants, immediately sliding his fingers over my flat stomach and up my smooth chest. He thumbs my nipples, and sucks on the skin behind my ear, which never fails to turn me into a whimpering mess. He smiles against my neck. "I love it when you make that sound."

I grunt and tilt my head to give him access to more skin. "Do that again and I promise I'll make it all you want."

Working my hand between us, I go right for the zipper of his pants. It takes a little maneuvering because interrupting Cord while he feasts on my neck isn't anything I want, so I let my fingers do the walking until I'm able to push my hand inside his boxer briefs. My fingers meet a hot, hard cock, and we both groan, the deep sound echoing through the air.

“Fuck, yes. I’ve been thinking about your hands on me all damned day.” He hisses when I circle my fingers around his shaft and squeeze.

I lick up the side of his neck. “You have, huh?”

“Hell yes. I always want your hands on me. More,” he begs.

Hands and arms tangle as we’re divested of our shirts, so that finally, *finally*, we’re skin to skin. He feels so good beneath my fingers, and he rocks his hips with each long, perfect stroke of his length. Not too hard or fast, not too soft or slow, just a steady rhythm designed to drive Cord completely out of his mind.

“Jesus. So good,” he breathes into my mouth right before I twirl our tongues together. I play for a few twists and turns. I can’t get enough of his mouth, his lips, or his tongue. I could spend hours just kissing him. It’s a silent war. Continue as we are? Grinding, touching, and kissing. Or fuck him?

Already ahead of me and making my decision easy, Cord falls to his knees. “I love your hands on me, but I’ve also been busy thinking about swallowing your dick down my throat.”

He frees my cock and licks his lips at the sight. Leaning forward, he slowly runs his tongue around the flared head, dragging it through the bit of pre-cum leaking from the slit. He settles on his heels, chuckling at my grunt of displeasure at the loss of his mouth. He jacks me slowly, grinning when I start to thrust my hips.

I slide a hand in his hair, twisting just enough to pull. “Stop teasing and suck me like you mean it. Get me good and hard so I can fuck you.”

Needing no other incentive than that, he opens wide and takes me deep into his throat. He keeps his lips tight around my shaft and lets his tongue trace the vein along the underside as he moves up and down. There is nothing like the hot suction of his mouth, and I throw my head back against the wall and lay my other hand on his cheek. I rub my thumb across Cord’s jaw, the slight stubble catching on my skin, prickling. “God, your mouth,” I tell him.

He looks up. My dick throbs as I take in the sight before me: him kneeling, face flushed, lips shiny and swollen from our rough kisses and being stretched around me. So gorgeous and all mine.

Aching to be inside of him, I thrust my hips, forcing my cock down his throat. He bobs his head a few times and swallows, the bastard knowing that will push me right to the edge. He’s not wrong. “Fuck, fuck,” I pant, yanking his hair tighter.

I can't wait any longer. "Up. Now. Get naked. I want that ass."

Pulling Cord to his feet, I whip him around so fast he stumbles as I push him down the hall and toward our bed. When he's close enough, I push once more until he falls face first. I tug and grapple with his jeans, wrenching so hard I probably hurt him, but seeing him spread out on the bed kicks my need into overdrive. I straddle his hips and lean down to breathe hot and heavy into his ear. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard, you won't be able to walk without feeling it for days."

I thrust my hips, letting my leaking cock slide along the cleft of his ass. Cord's ass twitches, the muscles in his back bunch and roll, and I can't stop my fingers from tracing every inch of his skin. Over his broad shoulders, down to his tapered waist, and across the small of his back, I leave nothing untouched.

When the tip of my finger dips into his crease, he jumps and lifts his hips. "Now that's what I'm talking about," I tell him as I lick a line up his spine. "Spread," I order and nudge his legs apart.

Stretching over his back, I fumble on the nightstand until I find the lube.

"Hurry," he pleads and flinches when a cold, slick finger glides between the cheeks of his ass. The sound quickly turns to a moan as I begin to circle his entrance. "Oh, damn that feels so good," he tells me, arching his back, begging with his body for more.

"Does this feel better?" I ask quietly as I press a finger slowly inside.

I tease and massage until the ring of muscle relaxes. I can tell when the burn turns to pleasure because his breath hitches and a moan rumbles from his chest.

"More, Brandon. Please," Cord begs shamelessly.

I add another finger and push in again, gritting my teeth as I watch my fingers disappear into Cord's willing body. So hot. "You good?" I question, knowing he's perfectly fine. Better than fine if the sounds filling the room are any indication.

"So fucking good. Come on, baby, fuck me. I'm ready, and I've wanted this all day."

My aching dick is ready, too, so I move closer, holding my shaft as I pull my fingers free. Rubbing the tip against his hole, I hold my breath. Inch by inch, I slide inside.

Cord pants through the burn, and I wait until the blinding pressure eases and all he's left with is pleasure. For all the raw emotions we've both been dealing

with all day, the slow build to this moment is more intense, making everything feel better than it normally does. There really was no other option besides this, right here. Leaving him, not having him, is unacceptable. Losing myself in the feel of his body, I begin to move, the rhythm steady, and the strokes mind-numbingly deep.

“Yeah. That’s it, right there.” His voice drops, his words become choppy as I hit his gland every single time.

My head tips back. Thighs burning, my jaw aches from clenching it so tightly. My fingers dig into his flesh; but I don’t care. In and out, over and over, the slap of my balls against Cord’s ass floats in the air in time with every thrust.

Glancing down, I see Cord’s hand move, and I reach out, batting it away. “No. You’ll come just from me fucking you.”

He groans. “Ah hell.”

“Come on, fuck back on my cock. Show me what you’ve got and use those muscles,” I taunt as I snap my hips hard, and pound into him.

He smacks the wall, arching his back to change the angle just enough so that I bottom out inside of him. He looks over his shoulder, a hint of a smile on his face. “Kiss me,” he says simply, and I see that he needs me closer, as close as I can get.

With one hand on his hip and the other wrapped around his chest, I lean forward, pulling him back against me. Our mouths meet in a wet, sloppy kiss, but it’s just what he asked for. Sweat drips down Cord’s back and my chest. We slide against each other. Skin against skin, hot and slick, as I keep fucking him, the motion less smooth but still just as hard. I’m close, so close.

“Let me see you come. Give it to me,” I urge and pinch one of his nipples, biting his shoulder at the same time.

Cord’s hole clenches tightly. “Oh, God damn it,” I hiss as sweet, hot fire spreads from my toes all the way up and out of my cock. I come so hard I see white and just when I’m sure I’ll pass out from coming harder than I’ve ever come in my life, he lets go. He stretches an arm up and around my neck, writhing against my chest. The expanse of his neck, the taut muscle is too much to resist so I bite him again and his cock gives one last, halfhearted twitch.

Neither of us moves while we catch our breath. I rest my head on his shoulder and gently caress his chest and hips. I know he has to be sore; I wasn’t gentle. The room smells of sweat and sex. My spent cock softens until it slips

from Cord's body, and I can't stop the moan when I feel the gush of liquid drip down his thighs.

"Oh fuck, that's so hot," I whisper, trailing a finger through the cooling cum.

"And sticky," he chuckles.

I reach for his chin and turn his head so I can kiss him. His body follows so we're facing one another. His hair's a mess, his lips red and swollen, and his smile is very pleased. He looks well-fucked. He looks ravished. He looks happy.

I lean forward and brush my lips lightly across his jaw, then his mouth, kissing him simply because I can.

"Fuck, I love you," I whisper.

"You just love me for my ass," Cord teases. His voice turns serious as he wraps his arms tightly around me. "I'm so damn sorry."

"I know."

I don't tell him it's okay, because it's not, but I forgive him and *we're* okay and that's what's important.

The dreaded cleanup is hurried and once we're both mostly spunk-free, he lies down and pulls me with him, a tangle of arms and legs. It takes no time for muscles to relax, for breathing to become slow and steady, and for fingers to caress and soothe—in hair, along spines, and over asses. Lazy and intimate, sharing the same air, inhaling the scent of our lovemaking, it's only minutes until sleep is right there.

"Sweet dreams," he whispers, barely louder than the blink of an eye.

I snuggle closer, pressing my nose into the hollow of his throat. "Mmmm, they will be."

I don't make it a step into the apartment before I'm dragged inside and flung onto the couch. Cord follows me down, and his grin is so huge it's possible it will split his gorgeous face in two.

"Are you high?"

He snorts and shakes his head, grinning impossibly bigger.

"Did you win the lottery?"

He glares and sniffs.

“Oh, I know, you got that dildo I’ve been wanting.”

His eyes widen and his mouth hangs open.

“Ooops,” I say cheekily.

“Better,” he whispers before kissing me breathless.

“Not that I mind our present position, but what the hell is going on?”

He kisses the tip of my nose, making me go cross-eyed before he pulls back enough to look at me. “Mr. Thompson came to see me in the cart barn today.”

Oh, shit. The head pro.

“And?”

“Well, first I thought I was in trouble, because why else would he be there, right? But it wasn’t that at all.” Cord takes a deep breath, and it’s like a huge weight has been lifted off his shoulders. “Turns out, he overheard Jake and I talking about what was going on with the apartment the other day while we were eating lunch. He has a garage apartment we can rent for the same price we are paying here.”

“Oh my God, Cord.” I suck in a deep breath.

“Tell me about it! I thought I was getting fired or something and the guy offers us a place to live instead. I can’t believe it!”

“Babe,” I sigh and pull him close to hug him tightly.

“I just... this feels like a whole new step for us, Bran. Like maybe things will be better now.”

I kiss the side of his head, not wanting to let go enough to reach his lips. “I knew we’d be okay,” I tell him, a little smugly because I was right.

“As long as I have you, we’ll always be okay.”

The End

Author Bio

Les Joseph lives in Texas with her husband and children. She's been an avid reader ever since she can remember and enjoys erotica, YA, paranormal and everything in between. Basically, she'll give anything a try. Les has always had a passion for writing. It began when she was little and she and her friends would write short stories and plays and it's continued to grow from there. She's finally ready to take the leap and put her words to print.

There have always been stories in her head and multiple characters at a time trying to talk to her, and it's just a matter of which voice is the loudest. She's working on her first novel and hopes to have it ready to print in the very near future.

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TIME TRIALS

By Jay D. Clark

Photo Description

Nick Vogel presses his teammate, Luke Nevin, against a chain-link fence, both bare-chested and embracing, foreheads touching. Nick has his hand on Luke's chin and lip, a tribal tattoo on his wrist. Luke has his left hand on Nick's bicep. This last summer together turns best friends into lovers, out and proud to stay together. Nick assures Luke that he, too, will pass his time trials so that they can swim together in college.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Look at these two men, caught in a moment of intense conversation. Are they on the same baseball team? Are they out or in the closet? How long have they been together? And what is the one on the left telling the one on the right, the one he's got pressed against the fence? Is this a lover's spat or is he telling him that everything will be okay? The intense look in his eyes took my breath away. The young man on the right seems to be listening carefully to his boyfriend, but might need a bit more convincing, don't you think? And what's the significance of the band tattoo? What meaning does it hold for them?

I would like a sweet and sexy romance with two ballplayers, if possible, and a story arc that includes the moment captured in this image.

Sincerely,

Sandra

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athletes, sports (swimming), friends to lovers, coming of age, first time, coming out, religion, special needs (high-functioning autism), tattoos, young adult characters, family, very distant cousins

Word Count: 28,327

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TIME TRIALS

By Jay D. Clark

Nick

The starting horn blared, and I watched the eight varsity girls two heats ahead of me leap off the blocks, arching out over and then down into the water. They surged forward, hands ahead and lower bodies undulating with dolphin kicks, until they broke the surface to race forward. The medal heat of the girls fifty-yard freestyle race had just started, while those of us in the boys heats of that event stepped up to the blocks.

Second back from block four, seeded first for the championship heat of the boys fifty-yard freestyle race, I waited my turn, enjoyed my earned vantage point, and just savored the moment. I stood proud in my snug-fitting racing jammers and swim cap in school colors and logo. I liked being surrounded by equally fit, half-naked guys who were as pumped with adrenaline as I was. The heat of midafternoon in late May in the foothills above Sacramento was itself a welcome treat; it had been cool and cloudy just a week earlier. The warmth heightened every other sensation of the occasion. For me, it was like being in the eye of the hurricane, isolated from the fury behind me and still ahead of me. Time stood still and flew by all in the same moment.

Seeded number two and flanking me, my friend and teammate Luke Nevin gave me a nervous little smile, shaking arms and rotating his neck in anticipation of the race. If this was the eye of the storm for me, it was the violent leading edge for him. Luke didn't easily wait for anything. He sought my gaze with uncertain eyes and an angelic face that drew my best smile. Luke smiled back, plainly reassured, especially when I put my hands on his arms. His need to calm down was my excuse to handle his smooth-skinned arms and gently knead the veined muscles beneath.

The meet director had called me Luke's "special needs peer guide" in front of everyone, just after the national anthem and before the first event. Swimmers from schools in other leagues had stared at us then, and they were staring at us now, but Luke and I just ignored them. It was not Luke's autism, high functioning or otherwise, that made me vital to his existence. My whole world existed only in his eyes, his face and his body, while I held his gaze on me,

each of us glancing away now and then to hide how much we meant to one another.

It took all of my will power to not press my mouth to his then and there, in front of everyone. Our kisses were rare, brief, and hidden after what happened the first time Luke planted his mouth on mine at age thirteen. The harsh moments that followed because of who saw Luke's first kiss played in my head whenever I thought too long about wrestling tongues with him. At least I could be next to him and comfort him when circumstances and daily pressures got to be too much. I could touch him to reassure him, even if touching him made me want to crush him to me. If anything was ever going to change things for the better, the next few races ahead were our best hope. We needed to do better than win; we needed to set records and change our future.

"I know we have a good five minutes to wait before we step onto the blocks ourselves," Luke admitted, teeth chattering as if suddenly cold on a very warm day. "Thank you for calming me."

"Just breathe and focus on me for the moment," I told him, trying to coax a smile with my own. "Whether you take first or I do, doesn't matter. We're in this together."

"Are we?" Luke questioned me with anguished eyes. "If I win, it means nothing. My parents have other plans for me; plans I have no say-so in."

"The Cal Bears' coach will be watching you, too," I assured him, gently squeezing Luke's powerful biceps. "He wants both of us to swim for him. So, let's swim our best for him right now. He's right there at the coaches' table between my dad and Coach."

"Nick, I can't look at them right now." Luke nonetheless glanced at the third coaches' table down the long line of tables along the pool's edge. Luke instantly refocused his entire attention on me. I could sense how much he needed me. "I can do this because you are here. I'm doing this for you, not them. Not any of them."

"Then, just be here for me and do your best to beat my best." I wanted him to know that I needed him, too. "We're always our best when we race together and against one another."

"I know we are, Nick," Luke agreed earnestly, energetically nodding at me, "but I still need to hear the words from you before we race. You give me peace to focus on the race."

“No one makes me feel”—I traced a heart on his left pec with my finger—“like you.”

“Except your grandmother,” Luke instantly pointed out rather than just accept the praise.

“I love her, and I’m glad she lives with us,” I assured Luke, drinking in every detail of his fit, sexy body, making a half-heart on my pec with thumb and index finger. “But it’s not the same.”

“And then there’s your dad,” Luke pointed out, as if I didn’t know what my dad gave up for me in time and money. “Your dad helps Coach with coaching us. My dad never does that.”

“Speaking of which,” I interjected just then, “you need to look at him and the rest of your family. Your dad, your mom and the whole New Testament are here to support you.”

Luke grinned at my biblical appellation for his three brothers and one sister. His parents had named all five of their children for prominent people in the New Testament, just as Luke’s dad’s twin brother had named his entire herd with names from The Book of Mormon. “They aren’t here to support us,” Luke chided me with a shake of his head. “They’re here to spy on us and make sure we stick to the deal they forced on us that horrible night.”

“It wasn’t all horrible,” I disagreed. “You were the good part; you made my heart pound.”

Luke shrugged and nodded. “And you rescued me that same night, after I lost all hope.”

“At least they are here, whatever the reason,” I told him. We didn’t discuss the humiliating part of that night when Luke first tasted my mouth and let me taste his; it still stung that bad.

My mother had never come to another swim meet after that night. My parents separated soon after. Dad moved out of the house he grew up in, taking only two suitcases of clothes. Staying with Coach Givens was supposed to be temporary while things got sorted out, but five years later, Dad still lived there. And it was there, not my home—my dad’s ancestral home—that I usually saw him, except for swimming. He was my real parent, not my mother. He saw my first steps and heard my first words; she just watched the videos he took of me. How my mother got custody was a mystery to me, and a pain that never left me.

My dad and my grandparents were the ones who took care of me, from my earliest memory until my grandfather died when I was eleven, and my father moved out when I was thirteen. After that, I still had Granny. She still came to my swim meets, but she was late to this last and most important one.

Even before the angry divorce and the strange custody hearing that mostly excluded me, my mom had tried to make me quit the team and never talk to my best friend and next-door neighbor ever again. The same impulsive impatience that had made Luke kiss me, that made him shake like a leaf before each swim event, that sometimes made him rage over problems so small that other people shied away from him, it all made me love him more, not less. Luke had risked everything but had sealed the deal between us with that kiss. And it was Luke's rages that had saved us.

After all the questions, harsh words and slammed doors, Luke had simply melted down and started screaming and yelling so loud that we heard it in our house, a hundred feet away. My mom had tried to stop me, but I pulled free of her grasp and got out the front door, my arms bruised and bleeding. Luke had been lost and crying out for help, help that only I could give him. I recalled pounding on his front door until someone, anyone, opened it.

I relived that moment when I had seen him through the open doorway that I no longer dared cross, and he had seen me and stopped wailing, but shook violently until I ran to him and held him tight against me. I had felt his heart pounding, and I knew he could feel mine pounding just as hard. They had never tried to keep us apart after that, they just watched us, very closely, too closely.

"First call for the championship heat of the Boys Fifty Free," announced the meet director over the sound system, cutting through my lost moment. "Swimmers in that heat should take position behind the blocks."

Luke gently squeezed my biceps, bringing me instantly back to the present moment. I realized that I had been shaking, and now it was Luke's presence that calmed me and got my head back into the race. Luke squeezed my arm muscles again right before we had to turn loose and step up to the blocks. I was good to go, and so was he.

"Swimmers, step up," called the meet director over the sound system, and we stepped up onto the blocks, glancing one last time at one another before focusing solely on the race.

"Swimmers, take your mark," called the director, and the eight of us bent down, put hands over the edge of the block, with one foot forward, and put

most of our weight on the one foot back. A whistle blew, and we all stood up. Someone had broken the perfect stillness that we were supposed to assume.

“Swimmers, take your mark,” the meet director repeated, then after a moment, once assured that we were all perfect statues, the horn blared and I flung my arms up and out, hurling my body forward in as perfect a streamline as I could. I kept my head tucked, ears below my elbows, and slipped into the water a good ten feet out from the block, my feet making only the barest splash by the feel of it. Water surged over me. I kept my hands outstretched ahead of me and pumped my abs, hips and legs in hard, demanding dolphin kicks, racing just below the surface, careful to burst up and swim just within the fifteen-yard streamline limit.

I fell into freestyle stroke form and breathed in a ragged gulp of air, ignoring my screaming lungs as I smoothly cut into the water, pressing hand and forearm against it until I had to pull that arm from the water, elbow high, and stroke down with the other arm. I reached the turnover point in just two breaths and four arm cycles, flipping over and planting my tucked feet against the end wall of my lane. I kicked off with all the might I could muster, my lungs still raging and my arm muscles starting to ache for lack of oxygen. I streamlined and dolphin-kicked until I had to surface, more than halfway to the finish. My arms and my lungs ached, but I only breathed as often as I needed to keep my head clear and my attention focused on the wall. The last three arm cycles felt like an eternity, and then suddenly I was there, hands on the wall, bursting up to gulp air like a drowning victim.

My eyes went to the electronic score board once I could finally catch my breath. I looked for Luke, who had just touched the wall hundredths of a second behind me, but more than half a second ahead of anyone else. My eyes stole a glance at the board, and I knew that both of us had made the mark. Mine was the winning time, and a new section, division, league and team best, but Luke had also broken all the old records to come in second to me. After the eighth-finishing swimmer reached the wall and we all clapped for one another, Luke and I embraced one another over the lane line, careful not to betray the full intensity of our emotion to anyone.

Luke

Nick and I climbed out and strode across the nearly empty space behind the blocks. We pulled our large team towels free from the chain-link fence. We had

ten minutes before the girls would be called back for the one-hundred-yard butterfly race and another ten before we would step onto the blocks again for my favored event. Spectators weren't allowed behind the blocks, and we were glad—really glad—just then. Hugging one another after Nick's victory had made both of us rock hard, and it showed through our jammers. We needed towels around our waists before we went to meet our personal spectators and spies.

My parents and the whole New Testament (as Nick tagged my brothers John, Mark and Matt, sister Mary and John's wife Liz) waited with but a little apart from Coach, Nick's dad, and the swim coach from the University of California at Berkley. My mother instantly claimed me and wrapped her arms around me as if I was still ten and had just swum my first race ever, only now I towered over her, not she over me.

Nick's gaze and smile kept me from pulling away from my mother's invasive embrace. Ever since Mom saw me kiss Nick and tried to keep us apart, I found no comfort from her hands on me. I didn't like people to touch me who didn't comfort me. I had to hang tough and not melt down because of the Cal Bears coach there to see Nick. I had to show Nick that I could endure anything or anyone for him.

"We are so proud of you," my mother gushed. But after twelve years of my competitive swimming, from age six to age eighteen, she still didn't know the events or when my times were really good or just okay. I just wanted her to shut up so I could listen to what the Cal Bears coach was saying to Nick and about Nick to our coach and his dad.

"Twenty seconds, fifty-three-hundredths would win heats in NCAA swimming," the Cal Bears coach assured Nick, his dad and the coach. The university coach suddenly looked at me and added, "Twenty seconds, sixty hundredths is also fast, even in NCAA. I know you plan to serve a mission for your church right after high school graduation, according to your father, anyway. But keep the Cal Bears in mind, in case your plans change."

"They won't change," my father asserted flatly, his eyes on me, not the visiting coach. I looked away; I needed to avoid his gaze. A Mormon mission wasn't what I wanted; I wanted Nick.

"The Church will modify Luke's mission to accommodate his autism," my mom asserted. "Can UC Berkeley make the same guarantee?"

I resisted the urge to melt down right then and there. I needed to be strong for Nick, and I couldn't pull away from my suffocating mother or dare touch

Nick just then. I had to focus on something that would keep me from crashing emotionally right then. Nick's dad smiled at me, put his hand on Coach's shoulder, gently gripping it for the barest fraction of a second. I found the calm I needed to ignore my father's attack. I had Nick's father's support, and that sufficed.

"High-functioning autism isn't the barrier to excelling in sports or academics that it once was, ma'am," the Cal Bears coach assured all of us, his gaze focused squarely on me. "I have trained Olympic-qualifying swimmers with HFA, and if Luke joins us, I will again."

I also felt reassured by the glances that Coach and Nick's dad gave me, splitting their attention between Nick and me. I knew things about Coach Givens and Mr. Vogel that I wasn't supposed to. They trusted me to keep their secret, so as to give me comfort and needed support.

The night I first planted one on Nick, and all that passed after, was because of what I saw at summer practice when no one thought I was looking. I was fixated on what I had briefly seen for days after, until I had to do it with the guy I loved. I didn't know if Nick knew what I knew, but I knew why Nick's dad had really left after I kissed Nick. I knew because his dad had told me himself. His dad didn't want me to blame myself for any of it, so unlike my own parents. What they couldn't blame on me, they blamed on Nick; my dad resented Nick but pretended not to.

Coach later told me that Nick and I had their support in everything, that what I knew about them, they also knew about us. Sometimes, Coach and Nick's dad let me see the barest hint of affection between them on deck that no one else ever saw. Those hints gave me hope and calmed me.

Ignoring my own family, I said to the Cal Bears coach, "Thank you for considering me. If my plans do change, I'll let you know."

My mother pulled away from me, thinking to punish me by withdrawing her touch. But her retreat felt like just another victory to me. Only a warning look from Nick kept me from grinning at her. I patterned my expression after Nick's and let my mother play drama queen all alone.

"Here's my card," the university coach told me, extending it. My father was closer than me and sought to take it himself, but Coach Givens was closer yet, and he rescued it for me. "Call me directly if your plans do change, not the university or my staff. Both of you are that good."

“You’re not staying for our next events?” I blurted. I knew instantly it was a foolish question.

The Cal Bears coach grinned at me. “I wouldn’t miss you swim the butterfly for the world, Luke. But we may not get to talk again afterward, and I want you to be able to contact me directly.”

I was overwhelmed with joy, but overwhelmed was never good for me. My mother saw the danger signs and smiled. But Nick moved faster than imaginable to slip his arm around me and support me. Reassured, I grinned and said to the coach, but really to my rescuer, “Thank you.”

Nick

We were putting my team towel back into the chain-link fence behind the starting blocks, when Luke’s hand strayed down and gripped my cock right through my jammer. No one saw him do it, not through the fence and in the empty grass beyond us, or along the blocks behind us. His towel in my hands also helped hide his hand groping me. I didn’t flinch or pull away; I just let him do it and smiled at him for it. I knew by the hidden gesture that he wanted to kiss me and assure me that he loved me. We found chances when and where we could to touch lips and taste tongues, but we never had time to do what we really wanted for and to one another.

I didn’t reciprocate for the simple reason that if we were caught in the act, people would attribute Luke’s actions to what makes him special in that negative way some people saw him. I did, however, silently mouth the words he needed me to say, “I love you, too.”

Luke silently mouthed back, before giving my cock one last squeeze, “I love you more.”

We couldn’t yet be boyfriends openly, much less lovers. Even so, we had our hidden gestures of love.

Aloud, I said, “Good luck with the hundred fly.”

Bringing his hand from my crotch to my bicep, Luke responded, “Good luck with the hundred free.”

“Hey, ass burger,” snarked the self-proud idiot behind block three as we stepped to Luke’s coveted place behind block four. “Is ‘ass burger’ another word for ‘queer’?”

“They stopped using the term ‘Asperger’s’ because of bigots like you,” Luke coolly handled the obvious homophobe, having heard and dealt with that exact remark a dozen times before.

“I’m not a bigot.” The teen was offended enough to repeat himself, “I’m not a bigot.”

The swimmer to the other side of Luke looked across and said, “You really are. And too stupid to see they make a nice couple. Who cares about the special needs? So, shut up and swim.”

The guy behind block five glanced down at the boner in my jammers and then smiled at both of us. “I wish I had a guy who loved me enough to sport a boner like that over me. You guys are lucky.”

Guys in jammers got hard-ons often enough that most people on deck became blind to them, but not to other gay guys or to homophobes—who were often self-hating closeted gay guys themselves. So, having my erection for Luke noticed by both a homophobic idiot and an envious gay guy made having one all the sweeter for me. When Luke did not react, I nodded our appreciation to the gay swimmer beside us.

I could tell Luke did not know how to respond to being accepted or essentially outed right then. I could feel him tremble and see the telltale glassy look in his eyes as he struggled with that new, unknown interaction. “You did good,” I whispered into his ear. “Neither of these guys know our families, and there’d be no reason for them to say anything, even if they did. Everything’s fine.”

Keeping one hand on Luke’s skin until he was called to step up ensured the erection he had given me lasted until that moment of parting. It also helped Luke stay focused and not melt down at the block. When the call came, Luke turned to look at my eyes and then glanced down to see if I was still hard for him. Seeing that I was as hard as ever made him smile, and I knew he was enjoying it, too.

Moments later, Luke was a poised statue of pure muscle on the block. The horn blared, Luke leaped forward, and I stepped to the edge to watch him arch over the water, plunge down at a perfect angle and then arch again to keep his dive shallow, just below the surface of the water. Hands ahead and lower body undulating vigorously, the water passed over his body like a river of glass as he shot forward mere inches below the surface. Luke’s almost perfect streamline after his beautiful dive took him more than half the length of the pool before he

broke the surface and breathed, his powerful arms plunging down under him. As his face crashed down into the water, his two arms came forward, fingertips barely tracing the surface but shooting out a fine spray as they went. Cycle after cycle of graceful arm swings, hip undulations and arm pulls soon brought him to the wall for his first of three turns. His two-handed touch was textbook, one hand capping the gutter as the other pointed back over his head as he planted his feet, pushed off and streamlined just under the surface, once again traveling more than half the next length before breaking the surface to breath and swim the butterfly stroke.

Luke's plunges down were shallow enough that I could watch the water slide over his muscular back again and again, his every move keeping me rock hard. Luke knew how sexy he looked to me when swimming that stroke with all his might and power, because I told him so every chance I got. I also knew that knowing (and that I would be watching) helped him fight the inevitable fatigue of his fourth and final length of the pool. He was literally swimming to me and for me as he broke the surface that last time, many of the other guys still making their final turns. Most were still streamlining underwater when Luke touched the wall.

Before looking anywhere else or at anyone else, Luke looked up into my eyes, savoring the boner I still had for him even more than the victory he had just earned. He turned to lean against the lane line for support as he applauded the next swimmer in to touch the wall, then each finisher after that. Luke shook hands with the second place finisher, who was the same guy to insult him. The swimmer grimaced as he gripped Luke's hand, "I'm so sorry. I was stupid to say that."

"It's, okay," Luke told him coolly, gripping his hand again. He looked up and I nodded my approval, nodding also to the other guy. Reassured, Luke smiled at the second-place swimmer. "We're good."

Luke then grabbed the wall and climbed out with powerful ease. I had his towel for him as we stepped back from the edge, and I helped him dry off, making sure it shielded his hands as he briefly groped my crotch again. Then, we went to the fence and traded towels. "You handled that perfectly."

"You're not going to tend to that until we are both in the tower windows," he told me, ignoring my compliment. I was used to him abruptly changing topics, especially when time was tight for us, as it was just then before I had to race again. "I want to see you jack off and spill your load."

"And then I want to see you spill yours for me," I told him with a little grin.

Our two homes were 120-year-old Victorians built at the same time and like mirror images of one another for twin brothers. Both had towers as their third floors, each with a railed crow's nest above that. Once everyone was asleep, we often went up into the tower rooms and turned on lights in one room and then the other, trading views. Tablet cameras and live streaming helped the view, but we enjoyed watching one another with our own eyes, as well.

The two historic houses shared a horse corral and combination barn and carriage house at the end of their huge backyards. The horse corral was on Luke's side and the carriage house and barn were on mine. My grandmother lived in the apartment above the carriage house, her windows the only ones that viewed both facing tower windows. We knew exactly how far to stand back from the glass in the tower rooms so that we couldn't see her windows or be seen from them.

All too soon, it was my turn to step up, take my mark and then leap over and down into the water. I knifed the dive just as cleanly as and streamlined as far as Luke did before breaking the surface to swim to the wall and do my first flip turn. I knew my foot plant and push off were so fast and violent as to send spray all over the lane judges behind me. Two more pool lengths, two more violently fast turns; I focused on just two things: swim as fast and efficiently as I could, and make my friend and secret boyfriend proud of me. The need to look sharp for Luke, as well as my college goals, kept me fast, clean and powerful against fatigue in my fourth and final length.

I touched the wall to finish and instantly looked up at Luke, who was allowed to stay there due to his special need. No one else remarked on Luke's HFA and his need to stay close to his peer guide—me. He held his towel-draped arm out just enough to let me see the boner he had for me. We were shameless about using Luke's established special need to mask our secret and mutual special need.

I grinned at him and did my duty as the heat winner and champion for the guys trailing in behind me, clapping loudly for each in his turn.

Once I was out of the pool, dried and both Luke and I had towels snugged around our waists, we walked over to where his family, the coach and my dad waited near coaches' table three. The Cal Bears coach was gone, but the chair he had occupied was unclaimed. My dad said, "He waited until your official time posted on the scoreboard to leave, son. He made other people he came to see wait so he could watch you finish. He made sure to leave additional copies of his personal card for you both and said he will be at your high school graduation without fail."

Just then, my grandmother showed up and hugged me. She smiled at Luke and then hugged my dad. Even in her midsixties, Granny was a looker who kept herself in shape and gray banished from her styled hair. "I was so surprised by that nice university swim coach," she said. "He introduced himself out of the blue and then told me all about the races I had missed, as if he had nothing more important to do than visit with an old lady like me. So, the both of you boys set new section records today; that's very cool. I am very proud of you two."

Granny would be late to her own funeral and then make everyone just glad she was there at all. Even Luke's parents and his three brothers, one sister and one sister-in-law couldn't help but smile at her. She left my dad's side to put herself between Luke and me, sliding a hand around each of our bare waists and hugging us to her. "Nick will turn eighteen on the Sunday after tomorrow, as you know," she went on. "I am having a very special dinner catered for him, in the big house, of course. I'm sure you won't only let Luke attend but will come yourselves as well. Everything will be Mormon-friendly, so no need to fret over that. You will come, won't you?"

Luke's dad nodded and said, "Of course we will be there, Granny."

"Thank you, Shane. I knew I could count on you," Granny told him warmly. She turned to Dad and said, "You'll be there also, son, won't you?"

"Yes, Mom, but—"

She pulled her hand from around me and put a finger on Dad's lips, shaking her head. "No buts, not from anyone, son. Just be there. You, too, Derek; I want you there as well."

Coach Givens just nodded and said nothing.

Granny put so few demands on anyone else that people rarely refused the few things she required of them. She was like a mafia godmother in pink Prada pumps and red hair. Her smile and her frown were serious weapons, and she knew how to use them.

"You folks won't mind if I borrow these two stripling heroes to help their old granny out to her car?" she asked without really asking, then demurred, "I would love to stay and chat, but I have things to do for Sunday. Everything just has to be perfect for my two special boys."

Her car, a vintage 1965 Ford Mustang in powder blue, was parked a good distance from the pool, farther than it really had to be. We passed several good

parking spaces walking out to it. Both Luke and I braved the hot sidewalks and hotter blacktop with our bare feet. Doing so without wincing or fussing was a studly move, which Granny barely glanced at. But when we got to her car and stepped to the shady side of it, she said, "You boys both deserve a kiss, don't you think?"

Luke instantly bent down and kissed her cheek, and I kissed her other cheek. She patted each of us on the cheek and said, "That was sweet and not at all what I had in mind. You need to kiss one another, and take your time at it. Granny will stand shotgun for you while you kiss. Consider it an early birthday present, Nick."

Luke and I grinned down at her, but then looked around to see if anyone was looking our way. I opened the passenger door of her Mustang convertible and sat down, pulling Luke onto my lap. He immediately leaned in on me, his shoulder pressed against my chest. I put my lips to his, but it was Luke who slipped me the tongue. He shuddered violently with pleasure, and I shuddered, too. Our still-damp jammers pressed tight with raised cocks and were soon damper yet with pre-cum as we let hands wander and tongues wrestle, pausing only for enough air to continue.

Granny eventually put a gentle hand to each of our faces. We slowly, reluctantly parted from one another under her touch, Luke standing first and me after. Luke and I checked around to make sure no one was looking and then pecked Granny's cheek once more. She nodded, "Time for me to get going and for you two to head back before anyone misses you and comes looking."

"Nick's dad and Coach will stop that from happening," Luke disagreed. My doubts about that must have been on my face, as Luke and Granny shared a glance and Luke said, "My parents annoy Coach; he never lets them hurry me off after practice in wet jammers. And your dad knows how important Granny is to you. They'll make them wait on us."

"Good answer," Granny nodded at Luke. Splitting her steady gaze between us, she said in parting, "The world won't end just because you two let yourselves be the boyfriends you were meant to be."

Luke

Once Nick finished and turned the lights out in the tower room exactly opposite me, it was my turn. I left the glass I could anonymously press against

in the dark and turned the lights on so Nick could see me dance and jack off for him as he pressed against his darkened window.

Our occasional visits to the tower rooms and their matching windows started out as simple shared calisthenics mirrored in the window for one another on nights we could not be together. After I first kissed Nick at age thirteen and our families went crazy, the mirror effect of the windows slowly transformed into jacking off for one another; my parents and his mother left us no real time together alone. Hand jobs in the window were less risky than having sex in secret. So, the simple act of jacking off for one another evolved into sexual dancing and jacking off.

I set my tablet down, our live-streaming still open, Bluetooth earbuds picking up Nick's happy sigh after he finished performing before my eyes; it was my turn to perform for him. I cued up the music and started off solo dancing and working my cock to Eric Carmen singing "All By Myself." During the instrumental runs between lyrics, I hopped onto an old table that I had screwed securely to the floor in view of the window for that purpose and did one-handed pushups, dipping down to slide my cock over lube I had put on the table top. As soon as the vocals came back up, I did a handstand and flipped off the table, landing on my feet facing the window but safely back from the glass, and went back to slow-stroking in time to the music.

Both of us had taken dance and gymnastic classes together as kids as "therapy" for my "condition," classes my parents stopped after Mom witnessed our first kiss. Making those skills part of our window sex routine helped soothe our anger over all the restrictions imposed on us by my parents with one goal in mind: the straight and narrow Mormon life for me.

"You rock," Nick's appreciative voice sounded in my earbuds. "Keep it up. More."

The tower room was more than a little warm, even in mid-May. I was all too quickly coated in my own sweat, enough so that I could use it instead of more lube on my cock. We usually tried to draw out our cock rock show for one another to include at least five, maybe six preselected tunes. How long we lasted before shooting cum like cannons, as Nick described it, all depended on the day before, the heat or cold of the tower and our individual moods.

I went from solo dancing and slow stroking to Eric Carmen, to doing so to Queen and "Las Palabras de Amor." Between verses, I was again atop the table, air fucking it as I did various gymnastic and yoga poses, using my hand on my

cock only when it couldn't come down in contact with the table top. It was slow and easy, but I was hot. Sweat ran over my body in rivulets, but I was also progressing well toward my eventual goal and enjoying every stroke of it.

"That's so hot," Nick assured me. His comments kept me focused on my routine and helped me change it up some. Thinking just then was bad for the mood; for my hard-on, doing was better.

My third selection was Enrique Iglesias singing "Hero." I got serious with my cock, jerking it hard to his voice. I even lip-synced the words, progressing to the point I needed to air stroke a little to keep from blowing my load too soon. I used those moments to muscle dance in the window, popping first one pec and then the other, rippling my abs and finally each of my glutes before repeating. Doing it right took thinking and sagged my cock just enough to ease back my urgency. Once out of danger, I went back to working my cock, careful to edge but not go over.

"Not yet, not yet," Nick urged me, "You can last one more song, I know you can. I believe."

"Some Nights" by Fun came up, and I danced and continued to edge myself, doubly encouraged by Nick's sweet whispers in my ears. Right in the middle of the second verse, I reached my limit of edging, and I shot gush after gush of cum across the top of the old table top as I always did.

"Way to geyser it!" Nick exulted in my ears as I came all over the table top. "I am so jealous of that old table. Some day, it's going to be me sunny-side up getting painted in your spunk."

Before I could say anything, a repeating flash of light on the window glass caught my eye, and I rushed to shut off the lights of my room. I went right to the glass and looked down into Nick's backyard. A flashlight in the apartment windows signaled: three short flashes, three long.

"Why did you do that?" Nick wanted to know, obviously unhappy to no longer see me in the window opposite his dark one.

"Granny is flashing a light beam on my window," I said. "Why is she up? What does that mean? She didn't see me perform for you, do you think?"

"No, not possible. She's playing shotgun for us again," Nick decided. "Someone must be up in one of the houses, lights on. It's time to get briefs on and clean up, fast. Love you."

"Love you more," I told him, as I always did.

I quickly found my boxer briefs and slid them up, careful to milk the last fluids from my spent cock before I did so. I licked the semen from my fingertips, wishing it was his. I snugged my junk into place in the boxer briefs. Flushable wipes made table clean up quick and easy. I finished by spraying the air with my mother's favorite air freshener. I folded and bagged the wipes, then tucked the bag into my boxer briefs, right under my balls; clean up done.

I quickly worked up a new sweat doing regular calisthenics, so that I had my excuse for being up there all set. But no one came in, and I was able to go down, use the bathroom, flush the only evidence and get into bed unnoticed. That meant the lights were on in Nick's house, not mine.

I realized I still had my Bluetooth earbuds on when my head hit the pillow. Before I could take them off and shut down my tablet, I heard Nick's mom demand, voice slurring from being drunk or high or both, "What the fuck are you doing up here at this time of night?"

I lay still, barely breathing, and listened in the dark.

Nick

I had boxer briefs up, the old table in my room cleaned and the scent of sandalwood in the air, and was doing calisthenics, lights on, when the door flew open, framing my mother in the doorway. She had been a looker once, but she drank too much and took too little care of herself. Her latest "husband" was there only for the free ride she had to offer; it wasn't for her looks. Grady managed to assure her she was still as gorgeous as ever, his only ability being to lie well enough for my mother to believe every word he said. My dad paid all the bills, including for the booze and pot that Mom and Grady consumed regularly.

I answered my mother's first words with harsh ones of my own, "You're drunk, high, or both. You look like shit right now. Go back to bed. I need to go out and check on Granny."

"How dare you—"

"How dare you pretend to mother me when you are staggering drunk?" I cut her off and immediately softened my voice. "You suck at parenting; we both know it. Here, let me help you back down those stairs, woman. I don't want you going down them alone in your condition."

"But what were you doing up here in this heat?" she persisted, her own voice less harsh, less angry. She didn't argue with my assessment of her

parenting; she knew. We both did. I knew she loved me in her own broken-down way, and that was enough. I had a real father in my dad, even if he didn't live with us and I only saw him away from my home, his childhood home.

I had suspected that my dad was gay like me for a while. I was sure that he and Coach were lovers, but if so, it was their secret and not my place to pry. All I knew for sure was that my good parent didn't live with me, but my broken parent did. And I cared for her more than she ever took care of me. I had to respect my dad's choices, although I didn't understand them. He stayed in my life enough that I could not hate or resent him for not being there all the time.

"I was working out," I told her. "Our house has six bedrooms, four baths and no workout room, except for the tower room. I always come up here to work out, especially when I can't sleep."

"You should at least open a window," she suggested as we started our way down the stairs. She leaned heavily against me, the smell of her addictions getting on my sweaty skin, by far the worse smell between us. Body odor from honest sweat was a smell I liked; the stench of stale pot smoke, booze and sex without cleaning up was purely disgusting. But the smell of Grady on her made me want to retch more than all the other offensive smells. I had no use for him at all.

I saw her to her bedroom door and then went to mine.

"Aren't you checking on your grandmother?"

"I thought I would slip on gym shorts first," I lied. What I wanted was to get her smell off of me with a quick shower. "Then I will be dashing across the backyard to her door, believe me."

"She won't mind the boxers, especially if she really needs the help," Mom told me.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you for caring," I nodded. I thought of her as "Mom", I really did, but I couldn't use that word without betraying all the anger that went with it. "It means a lot."

I instantly left her and went tearing down the stairs, wondering if Granny really did have a late night emergency or if she was just playing shotgun for us as she had done to Luke's and my surprise hours earlier. As I ran through the large house and out the kitchen door into the backyard, I heard Luke observe, "You handled your mom perfectly. I will do better myself."

"You did just fine yourself today with both your parents," I assured him.

"Yesterday," he corrected me, as he often did with such details. "It was yesterday now. It's well after midnight."

"Yes, it is," I agreed. "And I loved every minute of it that you shared with me."

Granny met me at her door, which surprised me, given the flight of stairs she had to come down. She reassured me, "I'm fine. I was playing shotgun again, watching the second floor windows of both houses. You need to be careful because of your age and Luke's parents' perception of his special needs. I thought I could help."

"Have you seen what we do in the windows?" I asked, somewhat taken aback by the thought of my grandmother seeing us jerk off in sight of one another.

"TMI in that question, Nick." She shook her head. "You boys stay far enough back from the glass—whatever you are doing up there—to be seen. Your secrets are safe, even from me, but since you are here, do come up and visit for a bit."

I shook my head. "I stink from helping *her* back down the stairs, Granny."

"If it bothers you that much, you can shower here before we visit," she persisted. "I have some old jeans that were your grandfather's that you can put on after the shower. I am sure they will fit you just fine."

Once upstairs, I waited in the great room without sitting down, eyeing the combination kitchen, dinette and living room I knew well but did not visit as often as I used to. Granny came back with a pair of faded jeans and had me press them to my front. I nodded, "Thanks, Granny."

She handed me a white plastic grocery bag, telling me, "Put your boxer briefs in that if you are taking them with you. But feel free to leave them in the laundry hamper, if you want."

"They're pretty grimy, Granny." I shrugged without looking down. "I'll take care of them myself. It's not like I don't know how to use a washer and a dryer."

I knew exactly where Granny's bathroom was. I had taken many a bath in her bathtub as a child, long before my parents separated. I had no memories of my mother caring for me as a child, only my grandmother and my dad. I only remembered having to be stronger for my mother than she was for me. I was there for Mom, not her there for me.

The court gave physical custody of me to Mom at age thirteen; the family court judge was a conservative with traditional views about everything, including motherhood. The evidence against her state of motherhood didn't matter. She got use of the house, sixty percent of my dad's pay, and I got a long-term, unpaid adult babysitting job.

The house couldn't be given to her or sold for cash because it belonged to my grandmother, not my father, and reverted to the family trust on her death. Both houses belonged to the trust, and Granny, as trustee, decided who lived in which house. Neither family could sell, rent or lease their house without her written consent, because our two families had once been one family. Granny had final say on such matters until she died or named her successor.

I closed and locked the door, remembering that as a kid, it was a spanking offense to lock it. Knowing how slow the hot water was to arrive, I turned the shower on before doing anything else. I put the jeans, tablet and bag down on the edge of the sink, stripped down and got into the water. It was barely tepid when I first got in but soon got warm enough. Lathering up with body gel to rid my flesh of its stale odor, I thought of Dad and Granny washing my hair as a kid with no-tears child shampoo. Thinking about those days made bathing there now very special to me.

Once I was done showering, Itoweled off, racked the towel and tried on my dead grandfather's jeans. They were a little snug but still a good fit. Gramps had been a lean, wiry man to the day he died. It sort of shocked me to fit in the pants of a man who once towered over me, although they were a bit snug in the ass and the thighs. I put my Bluetooth earbuds back in and made sure my tablet was active. I used some of the men's cologne in the medicine cabinet, a scent my grandfather had often worn. I put the boxer briefs in the bag, rolled it up tight, and went out to greet my grandmother properly with a hug and a kiss.

Afterward, she looked me over and observed, "I am glad you fill Gramps jeans so well; you are even more like he was at your age than your father was. Keep them and think of him."

"I will," I promised, then sighed. "I miss him and wonder what he would think of me now."

"He would be as proud of you and who you are as I am," Granny assured me. "You are so very much like him. He would be grinning ear to ear at you if he were here to see you now."

"But he loved girls, not boys," I reminded her, humbled by the comparison.

“He loved who he loved, and you are here because of it. He knew your father was gay before your father did, before I did. He was so angry at Star for getting his gay son drunk. But the first time he saw you and held you, all of his hatred of her melted away. He had been prepared to let our family end with your father, until you came along.” Granny had the glitter of tears in her eyes as she said, “Your father had his example as his guide in raising you. And you will have both of them as your guide in raising children of your own, gay or not.”

The flood of ideas hit me hard. I sat down next to her, as vulnerable and crushed as the day my dad moved out. I hid out at Granny's and wouldn't tell him good-bye until he came to find me. The touch of Granny's arm over my bare shoulders reassured me now as it had back then. I had to search for the words to utter. “I like that idea, a lot, but what if I have to adopt to be a dad? That's the most likely way for me to become one.”

“I won't care if your children carry our blood or not, Nick. I just know that someday you will be a dad yourself. They'll still be my legacy and yours: the next generation of this family.”

“I like the way you think, Granny,” I nodded, relieved, suddenly mindful that I had a future beyond swimming or even being with Luke. “I haven't dared think beyond being able to finally be with Luke. I have no idea how he feels about long-term plans or marriage or kids. We are just kids ourselves. But now I want to have a family, so I can give back what you, Dad and Gramps have given me.”

“That is the only way we ever give back to the generation before, by giving love to a new one,” she assured me. “Family is about love, not genetic bloodlines. If I am still alive when you become a father, I will love your adopted little ones just as much as I love you, both of you.”

Tears welled in my eyes and ran down my cheeks. Luke actually let out a sob in my ears. It was fitting that my first chance to out myself was with her and that she took loving lead in the conversation. It was also fitting that our talk should be about family and not about being gay.

“I want you to know that I hit the jackpot the night your mother got your dad drunk enough to get her pregnant with you,” she told me, as I tried to dry my tears and then failed to. “Both your dad and I know what a gift we were given by your mother's manipulation to be part of this family. Regardless of what happens ahead, I will do right by her, just as your dad has always done right by her because of you. You are precious beyond words to me.”

Granny let those words sink in for several minutes. She hugged me, and I hugged back. I always knew she loved me; she always told me so and showed it, but I never knew just how intensely, unconditionally, until that moment. "Thanks, Granny. That means a lot to me."

Nodding and smiling at me, she went on, "What I want from both of you, since I can assume you have those earbuds on to hear Luke and your tablet active for Luke to listen, is to know what you two want for yourselves as a couple. So, what do my grandson and my grandson-by-love want most for yourselves?"

Luke

I fed the horses earlier than usual the next morning. That daily chore became my pretext to go visit Granny but without Nick. I wore cargo shorts and a swim team tank top, which bothered my Mormon parents as much as going shirtless. A tank top was proper enough by Granny's values, regardless of what Mom and Dad thought. Granny's door was open, and I went upstairs to greet her with a hug and a kiss. She had me sit with her on the couch to visit.

I hadn't been inside the apartment above the carriage house since I was eleven, when Nick and I had our last sleepover together. The two of us had stayed there with her at her request between the time her husband died and his funeral. Both big houses were full of her extended family, all of them family and friends of my family in those days. Granny's "cottage" was also the only place we could have sleepovers together, until my dad said I was too old for "such nonsense."

I was pulled back into the present from that sweet, forgotten memory by Granny fussing with boxes and photos on her coffee table. She saw the look on my face and said, "The spare room is exactly the way it was when Gramps died and you last shared it with Nick. You should take a look. It will help you remember that visit."

I stood up from the sofa as Granny set down a large, flat box and a small jewelry box on her coffee table. When I glanced at them, she said, "These things can wait a moment. Those old memories are tugging at you, aren't they? They need to come out, and so do you, even if it's only to people you know will accept you as you really are."

I stepped past her and into the small, short hallway with three doors. Her bedroom was to the left. The center door was the large, old-fashioned

bathroom. The door on the right went to the spare room. I opened it, drew a deep breath as if to swim underwater a long ways, and stepped in. I suddenly recalled spooning with Nick, his chest against my spine and his arm draped protectively over my ribs. It was early morning and the twin bed meant for me was still untouched; we had spent the whole night snuggled together, unaware that it wasn't normal behavior for two men in some people's eyes, much less boys as young as we were. We were too young to know about sex or sexual orientation. We just knew we belonged together.

The door opened in the early light, and Granny stepped in bearing a tray for breakfast in bed. She set it down in such a way that we had to squeeze together even more as we sat up for it to fit. She touched our cheeks and said to us, "What happens in Granny's cottage stays here. This isn't something to share with anyone else, until you are ready. Just know that God made you this way and that your love for one another is God's gift to you, your sacred birthright. Never let anyone convince you otherwise. So, cherish the gift and hang onto it."

That sudden memory made me realize that we had always been gay and gay together. We had been a couple before we were old enough for that to have any sexual meaning. And Granny had known it from the very beginning, even before we did. I left the room, full memories and raw emotion. Granny took me by the hand and sat me down, smiling at the angst in my eyes as I sought to solve the puzzle. Granny had protected our secret even from us until we found it ourselves, waiting and watching. "I remember," I said. "I remember every last word you said."

"Good," she replied. "That makes exactly one of us. I remember the gist of what I said back then, but hardly every word of it. Your personal gift is that memory of yours. Nick's memories won't be so crisp, but he will be able to give you context to your memories. Finding context is his gift, not the memories themselves. God has a gift for each of us, but it's on us to find it and use it."

"Biding your time must be your gift from God, Granny," I told her in awe. "Waiting for so many secrets to come out, bit by bit, must be hard. I'm not sure I could do all that the way you have."

"But you already have, sweetie," she smiled at me. "You have waited all this time to be together with Nick and belong to one another forever. And you have kept Ethan and Derek's secret—not just recently, but for years—even from Nick. You have that gift more than you know."

As soon as I nodded agreement, she tapped the boxes on the coffee table, "Let's see if some of these old things I have kept for years will meet Nick's and your needs and desires. If not, we can go shopping for the things that will. Let me be your fairy godmother and see what magic I can do for the pair of you."

"Pun intended?" I smiled at her. I noticed then that she had included very old photos and modern photos of older paintings from both Vogel Houses. Most but not all images were of the original Vogel twins. Most of those depicted them together, side by side.

"Only if it pleases you, which I can see it has," she grinned back, bringing my gaze back to hers. "Open the small jewelry box first."

Inside the small, old-fashioned ring box were two identical men's rings in yellow gold, each edge decorated in what appeared to be chains of white and yellow gold; chains crossing twice across the face of each ring. At the point the crossed chains formed two Xs, two small diamonds were channel set so as to not pass above the precious metal bands. There was a small, folded piece of faded paper in the box behind the rings. The paper looked very old, all by itself.

"Shane and Dane Vogel's wedding bands," Granny told me. "I have their wives' wedding bands as well, stored separately. These are kept together by their own instructions in their joint wills."

I nodded at her. I knew my dad and his twin were named for the Vogel twins who had the Vogel Houses built so long ago, because my great-grandmother had been Charlotte Vogel Nevin, the only daughter of Dane Vogel and the reason my family occupied one of the two Vogel Houses. Dad and his brother were the first twin boys in either family since the original brothers.

I considered the boxes, what I knew of the Vogel twins and the mirrored twin houses. I knew they were born on the same day. They didn't really look like twins or even brothers in the old photos, cousins maybe. Nick and I were distant cousins who looked sort of like one another and could pass for brothers, if we insisted we were. "There is a secret to all this, isn't there?"

"Several, actually," Granny nodded. "Keeping them secret goes with being trustee-in-trust for the Vogel Houses. Tell me what your guess about the secrets is, and I can tell you if you are correct or incorrect in your thinking, but no more. And the price of knowing you are right is keeping the secret yourself. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can keep secrets," I nodded. "I can keep this secret."

“From Nick as well?” Granny held my eyes to hers.

“I can, I will.”

“Then, take your guess. I won’t laugh at or deride any guess you make.”

“These rings are kept together because the brothers married women but loved one another,” I blurted, suddenly doubting myself. Granny said nothing, and I ventured to guess further, looking at the old images of the twins. “They look alike but were not identical. Not all twins are identical. In these photos, they look at one another the way Nick looks at me. They were in love, that much I am sure of.”

“Fraternal twins secretly in love with one another?” Granny questioned, her eyes on my eyes.

“No.” I shook my head. I stared at the photos some more, then said firmly, “I somehow know they were cousins, not real twins. Nick and I look like we could be brothers, but we’re not. We’re cousins, but not closely related ones. The Vogel twins are like Nick and me. We’re like them. They used their shared birthday and last names to say they were twins and hide their love for one another. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Granny nodded. “You’re right, of course. You see the tells in the images. You just don’t have the words to fit what you observe. They were cousins, but not first cousins, so they were a lot like Nick and you. The important thing here is how certain you were about being right, even though you couldn’t explain yourself. It’s why I picked you and not Nick to be the next trustee. Knowing is more important than sharing or proving to this important family job.”

I nodded. I knew lots of things but didn’t always know how I knew them. I just knew I did.

Granny went on, “Those are the two secrets of this box but not the only secrets of these two houses. Dane and Shane were cousins born on the same day; they grew up next-door neighbors, like Nick and you, and fell in love. They came to California to seek their fortunes together and told people they were twins, not cousins, so their closeness wouldn’t be questioned. But now that you have guessed those secrets, you are sworn to keep them, even from Nick. He must also guess on his own, in his own time. These two are the most sensitive of our family secrets and the reason for all the others.”

I had asked Granny to help me find the perfect engagement rings for Nick and me. I wanted to come out so that I could lay claim on Nick as mine more

than for any other reason. I nodded at Granny, fighting a rush of raw emotion. "You are offering to let these rings be our engagement rings?"

"I am, and not just because of their symbolism for you, now that you know their secret," Granny told me. "See the folded paper inside behind the rings? Carefully take it out, unfold it just as carefully and read it aloud."

I moved my hands slowly and very carefully to obey Granny. When the small handwritten note was unfolded and opened, I read, "To our descendant or descendants who can take these rings and lovingly exchange them man-to-man or woman-to-woman, whether in private among discreet friends, as we had to, or in legal marriage, as we never could. Signed Shane and Dane Vogel."

I stared at the old photos and photos of old paintings. I carefully refolded the note and just as carefully tucked it behind the two rings. I found myself fighting back the urge to cry, my eyes getting moist. "I am Dane Vogel's heir and Nick is Shane's heir. Nick and I look like them; we are them, in a way. We can complete their secret legacy. We can use their rings as intended."

"And keep the secret all the days of your lives," she told me. "When family members rage that you two wear those rings, you can't say more than that I, as Trustee-in-Trust, gave them to you to wear for your lifetimes or so long as you remain together. If you break up or both of you die, the rings go back in this box until the next time they can be used as intended."

"Have they ever been used since the original brothers died?" I asked.

"This box has only been opened one time before for prospective bearers, but never used," Granny told me. "Other than to see them the day I became a candidate for trustee, I am the only trustee to ever open the box more than twice. This is the third time I have seen it opened."

"Nick's dad, Ethan," I guessed.

"Obviously," she nodded. "But don't be hasty in your next guess. You only get three guesses per family secret, right or wrong, and you have used one. It's how the twins wanted family trustees to be trained. Let it all roll about in your mind. See who my son interacts with and avoids."

"Ethan's first love was someone he now avoids," I guessed. "That'd make sense. It'd hurt to see a love who rejected you."

Granny nodded. "So, take your time, observe and then guess only when you are certain."

Something suddenly occurred to me; I couldn't contain the notion in front of her. "You mean guess when I'm so certain that it's not really a guess, right? Is why they made you trustee?"

"I became a candidate to be trustee when I correctly guessed the secret of the matching rings from a painting of the twins," Granny nodded. "I told my guess to Lucas Vogel, my future father-in-law, on the day of my engagement to Ethan, Sr. My Ethan and I saw the rings together when the box was opened. Those two secrets were very hard on my Ethan until the day he saw our Ethan kiss another boy at the horse corral. Then it all made perfect sense to him."

I didn't need to ask the next question; I knew. I was now a candidate to be trustee after her not because I had seen the rings or might use them for Nick and myself, but because I correctly guessed their secret. The look in my eyes had to have made her guess my self-doubts.

"You were made perfect in God's eyes, and in my eyes, just not in the eyes of the blind who choose to be," Granny assured me. "God wouldn't give so many of his children minds like yours if it wasn't a gift and a secret to be learned. Embrace the gift."

I nodded as Granny closed the ring box and placed my hand over it. "Keep them safe until you and Nick use them to propose to one another. No one can know you have them until Nick and you wear them. It can be Sunday, a year from then or when you choose. You have the rings."

I pocketed the box, and she opened a large, faded garment box, the sort that might contain the gift of clothes at Christmas time. In it were two handcrafted shirts in black see-through lace. "I made these at my son's request for his beloved first love and himself, so that they could come out together and wear the rings."

"But they never wore them or the rings," I guessed. "And now the shirts are part of the secret of the rings. What kept them apart, broke them up?"

Granny looked at me with a little smile and just waited. Then I guessed and nodded. "Star got Ethan drunk, and when she knew she was pregnant with Nick, she confronted Ethan."

"She confronted all of us," Granny told me. "All three of us, my two Ethans and me. She never knew who Ethan's lover was, and we never told her. She confronted us the day I was to give our Ethan the rings and the shirts. My Ethan was furious, which surprised and scared Star. She hadn't reckoned with us knowing or accepting that our Ethan was gay."

"My dad wasn't Ethan's lover, although they are about the same age," I reasoned aloud, "Dad's two years older than Ethan?"

Granny nodded, eyes holding mine, waiting, "Closer to three years older."

"My parents already had one kid, and Mom was pregnant with me. But Dad knows who it is, doesn't he? That doesn't count as one of my guesses, does it?"

Granny smiled and shook her head.

Then an impossible thought occurred to me, and I slowly, carefully thought out loud, "My uncle Dane didn't marry until after Nick was born. They used to tease him about never dating after his mission, while my dad married my mom just three months after his mission. My uncle Dane and your Ethan avoid one another like the plague. I don't need to guess, Granny, I know."

"I know you do," Granny assured me, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

I felt a sudden stab of pain in my heart. Granny saw the doubt in my eyes. "Dane is why Dad hates me and resents Nick."

"Your father loves you," Granny assured me. "And he does resent Nick, but not for being gay. Your father was once Dane's closest friend. He knew his brother was gay and accepted him completely. Your dad protected Dane and Ethan's love affair from his father and their family."

"How old were they when Dane and Nick's dad first kissed?"

Granny sighed, "A lot older than you and Nick. Dane was nineteen and Ethan sixteen. Shane and Dane were about to leave on their missions for the Mormon Church. After that kiss, Dane almost stayed home and didn't go. Only the fear of getting outed to their father made him go. Ethan wrote to him every day of his mission. And Dane answered daily. I still have all of their love letters."

"Can I look at them, read them?" I asked. "I shouldn't have asked that."

"When it falls to you to protect the family secrets, then you can read them as you please," she told me. "And you will want to read the secret letters between Shane and Dane, as well."

"Dad's angry at Nick because he's why Dane and Nick's dad aren't still together," I guessed and then shook my head. "That's even worse than hating us for being gay."

"Or just as bad," Granny agreed. "Your father is a good person at heart, your mother, too. They have just lost their way. They used to double date with Ethan and Dane in West Sacramento."

“So, the breakup because of Nick hit them hard,” I nodded.

“Too hard,” Granny assured me. “They overreacted. They made Dane’s tragedy their own.”

“What about the Church and my grandparents?”

“Your father and mother were prepared to leave the church, to be shunned by your grandparents, if Dane coming out to be with Ethan caused that to happen to him. That’s how much they cared.”

“I don’t understand how they got from there to where they are now!” I lamented.

“They do, but they live in denial rather than face bitter truths,” Granny told me. “Your love for Nick and his for you is the key to opening their hearts again. You can heal them with your love.”

“How?” The notion overwhelmed me, made me shake.

“That is why you have your fairy godmother in me,” she smiled, putting a calming palm to my cheek. “I have a plan that will help end some bitter secrets and yet protect other, sweeter ones.”

“It all comes down to the family secrets.” I pressed my cheek to her palm, needing the contact.

“You are stronger than you know,” she assured me with a gentle pat of my cheek. “Soon, all the family secrets will be yours to keep. When that day comes, I will name you my successor.”

“And Nick?”

Before Granny could answer, her phone rang. I looked at the clock and knew it had to be my parents. It was time for my mom to leave for work and drop me off for school. I started to get up, but Granny shook her head and answered the phone, “Hello. Yes, he’s here.”

Granny paused to listen, then responded lightly, “And good morning to you, by the way. Luke and I are visiting.”

Granny nodded, glancing at me, “You can leave for work now. I’ll see he gets to school on time.”

After another pause to listen, Granny shook her head, “Well, actually, that agreement sunsetted three months ago, when Luke turned eighteen. Legally, he is free to visit me anytime he pleases. And right now, I am discussing some of

his rights under the Vogel Family Trust, which means you will politely butt out, thank you.”

“What he tells you or does not is entirely his choice. If I find you have pressured him, you know the consequences. And you know I won’t hesitate to invoke them.”

“I’ll count that as a correct guess. Yes, Susan, that is my plan for Luke, but again, you will not discuss that with anyone, not even Shane,” Granny warned. “That’s the burden of making correct guesses around me as Family Trustee. If you want to visit more, see me on your time, not Luke’s. As you pointed out, he has limited time or he’ll be late to school. ’Bye, now.”

I looked at Granny as she carefully but casually put the receiver back on the charger. “You wanted her to call now, just so you could have that conversation with her.”

She smiled at me. “That will have your mother thinking and stewing in a good way. So, when she asks you anything about our conversation, just tell her she has to take it up with me.”

“And now I know the answer to my question without asking again. I say nothing to Nick.”

“Nick can be told I have given you the rings to use, and whatever else he correctly guesses,” Granny told me, “but nothing more until the day you wed or I die, whichever comes first.”

“I’ll keep the secrets because I love you, Granny,” I told her. “I don’t want you to ever die.”

“We all die, some in our proper time and turn, some not,” she told me. “I just want to live long enough to see my two grandsons-in-love tie the knot and perhaps become parents after that. Do you want to drive the Mustang, or shall I?”

I stood up. “Of course, I want to drive, but I need to go put school clothes on.”

“Clean cargo shorts, clean shirt, clean socks and shoes. You look just fine for school to me.” She looked me over. “You have your wallet and driver’s license?”

I nodded and smiled.

“The world will not come crashing down if Lucas Dustin Nevin wears a tank top to school,” Granny asserted, sliding two other photos in front of me.

One showed boys and girls cross-dressed in clothing from the early 1960s. The other showed boys and girls in sheer shirts and dark eye makeup of 1980s Glam Rock. The girls wore black bras and bustier tops underneath their see-through glam rock shirts.

"That's me and the boy next to me is my Ethan." Granny touched two faces in the first photo in turn. "Two generations of this family fought hard for the relaxed dress code you kids now enjoy. And wearing that tank top is not only your right, but also homage to our past protests against tyranny."

"Why the cross-dressing in that photo? What was the point, besides being fun?"

"We got all the boys and girls in our high school to do it," Granny told me. "By the time we did it for two days in a row, most teens in the whole state were doing it. It won girls the right to wear pants and for boys to wear jeans to high school, for the first time ever."

"And the see-through glam rock shirts and eye makeup?"

"They won the right for boys to wear tank tops and girls to go sleeveless," Granny told me. "The boys in that photo are Nick's dad, your dad and your uncle Dane; a freshman and two seniors."

"My dad was a dress-code protestor?" The idea shocked me first and then steeled my resolve.

"Not just your dad," Granny grinned, tapping the image of a girl in a black bustier and hot pants under her see-through glam rock shirt.

"Oh my God! That's my mom. I'm so wearing tank tops to the end of school."

"That's the spirit!" Granny told me, and then once again waited me out.

I looked at her and knew there was more but not to the last two photos. She had all the photos fanned out in front of me, really old ones and the newer ones. It was guessing time for me. I took a breath, considered the fan of photos and said, "Our family's been activists for personal choice and social justice from the very start. Haven't we? And when I wear tanks tops, come out or do whatever, I need to hold to our Vogel family values. I need to be out and proud."

"And smart enough to pick our battles wisely," Granny advised. "So, let's start with tank tops."

Nick

Birthday or not, the two horses in the corral still had to be fed, and early in the morning at that, but feeding them also usually meant seeing Luke first thing in the morning. So, of course, I showered, shaved, put on cologne and then went shirtless just the same to do that chore. I had to be my very best for him, birthday or not. I went early because Luke had fed them without me earlier in the week, the day Granny gave him the antique rings and dropped him off to school in a tank top. He looked so sexy in it, but even at school we had to be careful because of the Mormon kids we both knew. So, I had to look as sharp and sexy for him as I could on my birthday.

That morning, I did not see Luke down at the corral and ended up feeding the horses alone, my personal grooming efforts a waste on their equine sensibilities. I lingered until I suddenly smelled a whiff of hot, fresh pancakes coming from Granny's apartment above the carriage house. The enticing aroma soon made me abandon waiting for Luke and go to Granny's, opening her unlocked door, bounding up the stairs, and calling ahead, "Hey, Granny, it's just me, the Birthday boy."

As quickly as I topped the last step and entered the small great room, I saw Luke sitting shirtless at the table across from Granny, the small table loaded with all my most favorite breakfast foods. My eyes were torn between the love of my life looking deliciously sexy and the food: sourdough pancakes, sliced strawberries, homemade whipped cream, bacon, fried ham, buttermilk biscuits and sausage gravy, and steamy hot chocolate, Mexican style.

I kissed Granny on the cheek and then more thoroughly kissed Luke on the mouth as I sat down in the chair on the end between them, the other side of the table being against the apartment wall. Each offered me a hand, and Granny nodded for me to say grace, which I did, "Lord God, thank you for this food and my two favorite people in this world. Protect Granny and keep her strong. Protect Luke and help us find ourselves together forever with your blessing. Amen."

I had what I thought was a small helping of everything offered on the table. My plate ended up stacked much fuller than I intended. Granny grinned at me and shook her head.

I took a couple of bites of different treats, made sure I chewed and swallowed before observing, "We have our to-do list, we have those cool antique rings, and we have this great breakfast, so what else is on your mind, Granny?"

Granny smiled at me. "You know me too well."

"And?" I asked after enjoying and swallow a couple more bites.

"You two are going to have both houses pretty much to yourselves for an extended amount of time today," she gently reminded us.

"You don't have to remind me, Granny," I assured her, gazing long and hard at Luke.

Granny waited until I looked her way again. "I have a really big favor to ask of both of you during that time when you are here alone, free of spying eyes, as you call them."

"Whatever it is—"

Granny stopped me with a single shake of her head. "Listen carefully before you agree. I have good reasons that will serve you well, but what I ask will not be easy for either of you."

Luke gave me a warning look. He had told me what he could of his private visit with Granny earlier in the week. She made him promise to keep secrets from everyone, including me. I gave her my eyes and waited for her to go on.

"Based on what you've told me and how I have seen you interact, both of you are still virgins," she told us. Before I could speak, she added "And no, jerking off does not count, and no, we are not discussing that further right now. The point is that when you do, your behavior toward one another will change. You will give off little tells here and there. Trying to avoid those tells just gives off other ones. I will know it. Ethan and Derek will know. And most importantly, Luke's parents will know it. I think they will still follow the path we are nudging them toward, whether you have real sex before dinner or after, but waiting gives you coin to spend in sealing the deal."

"You want us to wait to have sex until after dinner tonight," Luke sighed heavily, gazing at me.

"I want you to succeed in the hopes and dreams you have shared with me." She shook her head. "What I am simply saying is that you have waited this long because you feared losing one another. How about waiting just a little more to give yourselves the best chance to stay together and bring Luke's family along? Can you wait a few more hours out of hope instead of fear?"

I looked at Luke for the longest time, and he at me. Finally, we both nodded, and I said, "We will do what you ask, Granny. We promise because we love you and have faith in you."

Granny smiled, but shook her head. "Don't promise, just give waiting a try. I won't be angry if you don't wait. I just think that if you can and do wait, it will make a difference. I am counting on our plan jarring them back to their senses, and sensitivity toward you two and your love. And if you can't wait all day, so be it, just try to wait until all the work we have to do is done."

Luke nodded. "No promises, just our best efforts. You sound like Coach before a meet."

Granny smiled and nodded. "Treat today like a swim meet and dinner as the final wall to touch. And one last thought on the matter: Do you really want your first time to be a rushed quickie?"

Luke and I looked at one another for several seconds before we both shook our heads.

After that, conversation turned to our day's agenda, what was on the menu for dinner later in the evening, but mostly, we ate quietly. Luke and I had a lot to think about due to that one simple promise and how that was going to change our whole day for us.

I got up to help with clearing off. Granny took the plates from my hands and pressed something else into one palm. I looked at what she put there and hardly believed my eyes: car keys. I had spent the last two years borrowing one of her vehicles but never having one of my own. I needed a car for our plans that day, but those keys had a Cal Bears key fob on the key ring.

Granny said, "Your first present of the day is parked in the alley behind the carriage house and I think you will like it. You and Luke go take it for a spin while I clean up. There's time before the day's schedule starts to stack up. So, go."

I kissed her, thanked her and then took Luke by the hand before rushing out and down the stairs. We had to go through the carriage house and past an antique carriage and an antique touring car, both with wooden spoke wheels. What I found in the parking area against the back of the carriage house, once outside, was a used but newer Ford F-250 pickup with an extended cab, lift kit and chrome lettering proclaiming its four-by-four drive-train status. It was even navy blue.

Luke and I looked it over thoroughly before we got in. We noted the long bed and the fifth-wheel mount in the bed, which meant it was all set up to pull our fifth-wheel horse trailer, a boat or even a travel trailer. All of those were

things both of us meant to have someday. By the time we finished checking it out, Granny had come down and was watching us with a big grin.

“Thank you so much,” I told her, rushing to hug and kiss her without crushing her. I immediately pulled back and asked, “How can you afford to buy me something that expensive?”

Granny shared a smile and a slight nod at Luke. He said, “The Vogel Trust is about more than these two old houses. Our families are pretty rich, but it’s all tied up in the trust. Everyone gets their piece of the pie, so to speak, when they turn eighteen. You can have your yearly trust fund stipend paid each month, each quarter of the year or once a year, after you do the paperwork.”

“Cool,” I said, only partially listening. When Luke finished, I asked, “Want to go for a ride?”

I saw that ignoring his careful answer annoyed Luke, but my persistent smile made him smile back. He glanced at Granny, accepted her nod and nodded to me as well. “Sure, let’s go.”

I grinned at Granny. “Thanks again.”

“Just remember to stick to the plan, boys, or more than this ride will turn into pumpkins.”

“I promise,” Luke answered instantly.

“Me, too,” I agreed. “We can have some fun and still stick to the plan.”

I climbed up into the cab on the driver’s side and Luke got in on the passenger’s side. The real leather seats felt good against our bare backs. I noted that the center seat also had a shoulder harness. I looked at Luke and said, “If everything goes right this evening, I want you strapped in there, right next to me when we take her out for a spin.”

Luke nodded at the center seat as he buckled into the door-side seat, lifting his gaze to mine, “If there was no chance of it messing up our plans, of us being seen too soon, I’d sit there now.”

We drove around the neighborhood slowly, well within the speed limit, but both of us wanted to take it out onto the freeway and let it roar. There just was not time, not yet. Instead, I eventually ended up in front of our two old houses and parked along the sidewalk.

“Is there any chance of my being your ride to church this morning,” I asked Luke as he got out and down from the truck, “Especially since I plan on attending?”

Luke shook his head. "Let's stick to the plan, so we don't mess up."

I looked at Luke's veined forearms as he leaned against the open truck door, then at my own. "We have an hour to kill before we have to get ready for church, so let's spend it together."

"What do you have in mind?" Luke asked, already getting into the truck again.

"Let's go get our first tattoos," I grinned.

"That'll take a lot longer than an hour. We don't want ink that looks rushed, sloppy."

"Not if we do them in henna first to make sure they're what we want for keeps," I assured him.

Luke's worried look instantly turned into a grin. "Great idea. The design we have in mind will still freak my family out, henna or not."

As quickly as Luke buckled himself in, we were off to get wrist tattoos bearing one another's name in henna and a mind to make them ink later, if we liked them there.

Luke

I made sure to leave space next to me on the pew for Nick when I sat down with my family for church. Teenage Mormon boys took care of setting up the sacrament table for church. Older guys my age would bless it, while the youngest teenage boys would distribute the blessed bits of bread and tiny cups of water to the congregation. When asked to be one of those to bless the bread and water that Sunday, I politely refused. Before I had to explain I was expecting a guest for church, Nick appeared in the entryway, dressed in a dark blue suit. He looked extra hot that way.

My dad got up to greet Nick. My dad's twin brother left his seat of honor on the stand to go down and personally greet Nick. Everyone in my family and extended family knew exactly who Nick was and the threat he posed to their plans for me. I was good at puzzles but not human faces, which could also be puzzles. I depended on Nick for that, but I knew hypocrisy when I saw it. Uncle Dane could no longer hide from me his resentment and rage for the boy who changed his whole life so much. I shook Nick's hand, "You came, Nick. That's so cool. Thank you."

The words “visitors welcome” stood out on the front of our Mormon Church and all others, right under the church’s long name, but some visitors were more welcome than others. Visitors who brought big problems when they came were less welcome. Visitors they saw as a threat were welcomed with fake, angry smiles. That was the greeting Nick got.

Nick smoothly ignored every unwelcome glare over a fake smile that he got. His eyes were on me, and my eyes were mostly on him. I could not ignore the stir he caused, and I wanted to savor it as the best Sunday in church ever for me. They were finally getting some payback.

Sitting next to Nick without touching him was torture, but I felt the pressure of his shoulder and arm against mine through the fabric between us. That was contact enough with him for the time being. When the bits of blessed bread and tiny cups of water in memory of Christ were served, I showed Nick how to partake of each. Nick already knew, but showing him so openly made it impossible for other church-goers to not stare right at us.

Visitors were normally offered what other Christians called “communion” and Mormons tagged “sacrament.” Mormons only denied it to members on their bad list, but never to visitors. No one stopped me from sharing the bread and water with Nick, but it angered a lot of haters.

I replayed the memory and smiled through two long, dull sermons. The pressure of Nick’s body next to mine helped me sit through the boredom. I wanted to feel that same pressure in private and without the clothes. From time to time, we would pull back the sleeve cuff and let one another secretly peek at the fresh henna tattoos on the underside of our left wrists. The rest of the time we would scroll things to see or read on his phone or mine. I had the Mormon scriptures on the top page of my phone, so that I could open them before letting anyone else see the screen.

My leg started twitching toward the end of the boredom, until Nick put his hand on my knee, calming me instantly with his touch. Dad glared at us, but Mom’s face softened. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she did not wipe them away. Her tears confused Dad, but not me.

I had heard Granny’s end of the conversation three days before. On the way to school, Granny had told me more about the trust and the trustee. The trustee decided who lived where on what Vogel Trust property and that most of the extended family lived in houses owned by the trust. My parents got almost a quarter of their monthly income from the trust. Some pretty strict rules went

with accepting the money, especially the money they got for each of their kids under age eighteen. Mom knew that Granny was grooming me to be the next trustee. That alone had to have her rethinking all sorts of things about her relationship with me.

Top of the list, as Granny had suggested to me, was the idea that I was a family asset and not a burden. Second was the fact that I would be getting my next monthly stipend and that they owed me three months of it, if I were to demand it paid back. But mostly, Mom had had three days to think about the fact that Dad and she were losing their tight grip on me. And Dad knew none of it.

After the worship service, there was more church to go, a lot more. We did not plan to stay. My uncle, the bishop, caught us in the foyer going for the glass entry doors. He said, "I was hoping to visit with the two of you in my office, Luke, Nick."

My uncle was more than the bishop; he was our high school choir teacher. He was boring, but he knew his music. I now knew his homophobia included himself. His classes were never full, and I suddenly knew why. His life was a lie, an angry fiction made up to hide from the hurt he still felt. His unhappiness affected his whole life, his teaching and his music. The look I gave him as I suddenly understood him made him blink at me, then avoid my eyes, which really surprised me.

I said, "The deal was that if Nick came for sacrament meeting, I'd go with him to try out his new truck. It's his birthday today, you know. He turned eighteen. We're both eighteen now."

"Maybe next time," Nick told the unhappy bishop. I saw Uncle Dane glance at Mom and she at him. She had obviously told him as her bishop what she couldn't tell Dad. He had to wonder what secrets of his Granny had shared with me. That was why he avoided my eyes. He knew.

By that time, my parents and the whole New Testament had gathered in the foyer. My dad started to step forward to get physical in trying to stop me, but my mother put her hand to his arm and shook her head. "It's Nick's birthday, Shane, and he did come to church."

She searched my eyes and then Nick's. I smiled at her, but then almost defiantly took Nick by the hand. Tears ran down her cheeks and she held my father back with her hand on his arm. She held Uncle Dane back with a stern look, but her eyes softened the instant they fell on me again, and she nodded at

the two of us. "Thank you for coming to church, Nick. We'll see you at dinner tonight. Happy birthday, Nick. I love you both."

That was nothing I ever expected to hear from her. I kissed my mother on the cheek, side-hugged her with one arm. I turned away, still holding Nick by the hand in front of everyone, and we left. This time, when we climbed up into Nick's new truck, I slid over to the center seat and buckled in right next to him. We shared a kiss as he started up the engine. He drove out with one hand on the wheel and his other hand in mine. We were officially out and proud of it.

Nick

Dressed down to cutoffs, shoes, gloves and no shirts, Luke and I spent most of Sunday afternoon supervising and helping work crews Granny hired to make some changes to the main house, the carriage house apartment, and one project involving Luke that had to be done before his parents got home from church. I had misgivings about that project, but both Luke and Granny insisted that we stick to our plan. Both felt that if his mom's change was real, she'd be on board with that project, like it or not. It'd be the litmus test of how deep that change of heart was for her.

Other than to visit with Luke and I when we first got home, Granny was gone most of the afternoon, out on a shopping spree with my mom and Grady, in a chauffeured limo no less. Among several stops, Granny had them help her check out a variety of nicer apartments in West Sacramento. While there, she texted me a photo that depicted a café surrounded by a wide covered veranda with men in couples and groups at the tables. There was gay rainbow flag on a pole over the café. The caption read:

Grady likes apt, hates outdoor gay café across street. Café is Ethan's fav.

Nice view, I texted back.

Luke grinned at my response, took my phone and added,

Luke 2 Granny, buy it.

LOL boys, will do.

"I wish I could see their faces when Granny explains to them who the condo is for," I told Luke.

Luke smiled and nodded. "She is being more than fair in the offer, all things considered."

By that point in the afternoon, Luke and I were tired, sweaty and pretty grimy from our efforts, but the work was done and the work crew of ten guys and girls was gone. I looked at Luke, and asked, "Think Granny would object to us sharing a shower? We got the work all done."

"Sure, as long as we save the sex for tonight after dinner," Luke told me. "We've waited this long, and I like the idea of our first time not being a quickie."

"So, no soapy hands in the shower?"

Luke grinned, "Why even shower together without that? Kiss, touch, enjoy, but don't come."

"So, which shower?" I asked, grinning back. "There're four in the big house and one in the apartment."

Luke closed his eyes. "I'm counting to a thousand. Be naked with the water on when I find you."

We hadn't played hide-and-seek together in years, but the erection in my cutoffs showed us both how much I liked his updated version. I kissed him on the mouth, sharing tongue, and then said, "Start counting. I'm outta here."

Figuring I had time, I stopped in the kitchen and grabbed some prepackaged granola bars for us to snack on along with two bottled sport drinks from the refrigerator. I went up the back stairs from the kitchen and to the old-fashioned main bathroom on the second floor. It had an antique tub with claw feet and a circular shower curtain. When I got there, the water was running and the curtain was open just enough for me to see Luke standing naked in the running water, his big cock rock hard. He grinned at me, "You never said what to count by, so I used hundreds."

"Asshole," I grinned, setting down the food and stripping off cutoffs and shoes as fast as I could, my hard cock throbbing as fast as I could set it free.

"'Asshole' means 'bottom'," Luke snickered back. "That will depend on who wins the wrestling match after dinner."

I loved the sex games he kept turning our old kid play into.

"So, if I want to bottom first, I have to throw the match?" I asked, climbing into the tub and grabbing him by the cock for support as I did so. He instantly grabbed my cock back and pulled me to him. We kissed hard and deep, pausing several times for breath while slowly stroking one another's cocks and balls.

Finally, Luke pulled back his tongue from mine and said, "Winner gets to pick how the first time goes."

"Rules?"

Luke grabbed my balls and gently squeezed them. "Anything that doesn't spoil the mood is okay; anything that's a mood killer isn't."

I grabbed his balls and squeezed them a little harder than he had mine. Luke's cock throbbed and gushed a little pre-cum. He was angled just right for the shower water to not wash the pre-cum away. I looked into his eyes and asked, "Can I?"

"Lick, yes, suck, not yet," Luke told me. "Licking is foreplay, sucking is oral sex."

Luke had pigeon-holes for all sorts of factoids. They helped him negotiate life. But right then the ones he was using on me had me hornier than hell for him. I instantly went down on him and licked the pre-cum from the corona of his cock. My tongue work made his cock gush more pre-cum, but before I could lick his cock any more, Luke pulled me to my feet. "No more of that or we won't be able to stop. Kiss me and stroke me, but that's all right now."

I already did not want to stop, but I nodded my acceptance of his limits on our fun together.

Luke sometimes found loopholes in his promises as big as the Grand Canyon, but as far as he was concerned, he always kept them. Bent was not broken, not to Luke. Sucking his cock right then would break our almost promise, our implied promise. We owed so much to Granny, and she thought waiting a little longer would help Luke's parents accept us. Waiting would make later that night all the more fun and sexy. And if it helped our cause, so much the better.

After that, Luke and I kept one another hard with hand strokes and occasional pre-cum licks, but we did not let one another climax. We got out of the shower just as hot and horny for one another as we got into it. It was torture, but fun torture because it was a choice we made for ourselves.

Wrapped around the waist in bath towels, we put our cast off clothes in my room. While there, I got out the old, small jewelry box that Luke trusted me to hide for him and looked at the rings. I extended the box out for him to take but misjudged his grasp on it, and the box fell to the carpeted floor, spilling the contents.

Luke instantly bent down to gather everything back together and eventually stood up with the box, note and rings, along with two old-fashioned keys in his hands and a second handwritten note. The second note read, "Find the locks to doors that are not doors when you seek our safe harbor from prying eyes. Signed, Shane and Dane Vogel."

The identical keys were gold or gold-plated and had the same yellow and white gold chains on their heads as were on the gold wedding bands. Luke gazed at the key heads and read the note aloud again. He suddenly grinned, "The grandfather clock on the landing of the main staircase in each house has this same white and yellow gold chain effect on the door locks to the weights and chains."

Luke gave me the jewelry box with the first note tucked behind the remounted rings, tucking the second note in under the velvet ring mount. I put the box away in my socks drawer and Luke handed me one of the keys. I looked at the key head, edged in alternating gold chain and saw the array of five staggered bars or cylinders on it. "I have an idea, a guess, really."

Still wrapped in towels, too intrigued by our discovery to dress, we bounded down the main stairs of the old house to the landing halfway down. I easily slid my key into the lock of the glass door of the old grandfather's clock and turned it. Once I had the door open, I held the key with shaft and teeth down, head up. I positioned the five clock weights in the clock cabinet to match the pattern on the key head. Suddenly the hands of the clock turned around twice in opposite directions, arriving back to the correct time of day, then the clock suddenly clicked and opened into a recess in the landing wall, revealing a doorway and tight, stone steps curving down in a spiral.

Luke and I looked at one another. He nodded for me to go first, since it was my discovery. There was an old-fashioned light switch inside the narrow curving stairwell. I turned the key head handle and small electric wall lamps lit up down the stairwell. I went down slowly, carefully, with Luke right behind me. At the bottom, we found a narrow, antique door with an old-fashioned knob and keyhole. I inserted the key again, turned it and then the doorknob, opening the door. Again, I found an old-fashioned light switch, turned it and saw a large room light up that had to extend under both houses.

There were four antique round tables with six antique chairs at each, an old-fashioned bar with a brass boot rail and real brass spittoons, a mirror behind it, and rows of hard liquor in very old bottles to either side of the large, flawless mirror. The very old painting above the mirror depicted men dancing with men and women with women in the same tavern-like room.

“The legendary Vogel Speakeasy,” I guessed aloud. “It really does exist.”

Luke nodded but his attention was on the antique player piano to one side of the bar. We stepped to it and immediately saw that it was electric and not powered by a foot treadle. Luke flipped the switch to activate it. A large cream-colored scroll of paper with square holes in patterns began to roll before our eyes. The piano keys depressed as if by unseen magic, and a slow, sentimental tune that had to have been popular during Prohibition and the 1920s started playing. Luke smiled at me. I said, “Want to dance?”

“Our towels’ll slide off,” Luke noted more than objected.

“Not if we take ’em off, first,” I said, pulling mine off and draping it across the back of a chair.

Luke grinned at me and did the same with his towel. Both of our cocks instantly engorged and only got harder as we embraced, hand in hand and body to body in a slow, rhythmic two-step in time to the tune. I kissed him, sharing tongue, slow and easy in time to the music, lost in ourselves in our love and the old-fashioned piano music.

“You might want to consider putting your towels back around you,” we suddenly heard Coach Givens voice direct us. “Nick, your father is helping Granny down the stairs, even as we speak.”

“Too late,” Granny corrected him as we broke apart to face the coach and inadvertently both my father and Granny. “But it would still be nice to put those towels on, anyway.”

Luke and I scrambled to put the towels snugly around our waists, both of us blushing clear down to our navels. As soon as we were wrapped, Granny stepped to us, put an arm around each of us at the waistline and said, “Don’t be embarrassed. We aren’t. We intruded in on your romantic moment uninvited; the mistake is ours, not yours. We’ll just know to knock first before barging in like that, won’t we Ethan, Derek?”

“Or text ahead,” Dad suggested. “The speakeasy has its own electronics repeater array.”

Derek added, “Smart phones are the electronic doorbell of the new century.”

Dad grinned at the two of us younger guys. “Now that Derek knows about the speakeasy, I think it could be a toss-up as to which couple will be using it at any given moment. There has to be some benefit to keeping it clean and maintained all these years.”

I looked at Dad, who was carefully watching my face more than Luke's. He had just outed himself to me, officially, and as casually as if he had just ordered a pizza for delivery. No big talk, no long explanations. Just talking as if I always knew what I had long suspected about him.

Coach smiled from beside the player piano, touching control buttons. The music stopped. We heard a whirring noise as the old scroll rolled up, replaced by a different one: Andrew Lloyd Webber's "The Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*. Coach grinned at us as we recognized the tune. "I couldn't resist. It's Ethan's and my theme song. That's dance music."

"And now, you will have a lot more help keeping it up," Granny nodded to Dad after smiling at Coach, then glanced at us, "Won't he, boys?"

"Sure thing," I agreed, mind still seething more than I let on.

Luke also nodded, his eyes and attention on me, "Absolutely."

"Dad," I said, stopped and took a breath, then tried again, "Luke and I are boyfriends and plan to be more than that soon. I thought I should be honest with you about us. That's what family does, right, Dad? Be honest with one another about personal relationships, right?"

"Ouch," Granny grinned at my dad, her son. "Burned by your own son over what you thought he couldn't handle. I guess it sucks to be you, son."

Dad grimaced and nodded. "I guess I deserve that."

I shook my head, successfully fighting back real tears. This was a good moment, and I didn't want to spoil any of it, but I also had all those times that I had to bottle my feelings around Mom or her current boyfriend. I had learned to wait until I could talk to him or to Granny. All of those bottled up feelings had just been uncorked. "What I want and deserve is a hug and a kiss from my two dads, my real parents, and no more bullshit about not being a couple."

Dad and Coach immediately stepped to me and hugged me between them, each of them kissing me on a cheek, Coach fighting back tears of his own.

I looked at Coach and then gently tore into him. "You are still my coach, Pops, but I get to give you your family title since you never claimed it as you should have. Right, Pops?"

"You can call me 'Derek,'" he told me with a little smile. "I'm not a big fan of 'Pops.'"

"Nope." I shook my head, keeping my face somber. "You are more than just 'Derek' to me and you know it. You always have been, so suck it up and let me call you 'Pops.'"

"I like 'Pa' better," Coach told me, putting one of his big hands to my cheek, his eyes serious. "But to be clear, you are not angry with me because your dad moved out to be with me?"

"No, Pa, I'm not," I sighed, slowly shaking my head. I decided to keep that point light by teasing, "Dad has much better taste in men than Mom does. And I want you as my parent."

"Thanks," Pa laughed with a wink. "Ever since your dad and I became a couple, I have thought of you as my son. I just feared you'd hate me if you knew he moved out because of me."

Dad looked at me and said, "I didn't move out just to be with Derek. That was the sweet part of the deal, but not the real reason. We knew then that you two were gay like us. People would have blamed it on Derek and me, not simply accepted that two generations of men in the same family could be organically gay. So, I moved out, downplayed the fact that we knew you were gay, and we kept our relationship mostly secret to not bring too much attention to you two."

Granny added her thoughts, "Your mother played it all up in the custody hearing, and that judge bought all of her good mother bullshit. I am glad you don't resent him for what he did for you."

"So, do Derek and I get a hug and a kiss from our future son-in-law?" Dad demanded of Luke.

"Sure," Luke told him, letting the two of them lavish a sandwich hug on him and a kiss on each of his cheeks, "But we haven't formally asked each other yet."

"Formalities are for formal occasions," Pa added as he joined the group hug. "Here it's just family and no pretenses."

Dad looked at Granny and said, "The five of us are all here, so how did Star and Grady take the change in status?"

Granny smiled, "All the details will have to wait until dinner, but I will tease you boys, all four of you, with one detail: Grady got to find out up close and personal why my rented chauffeur came with us and did not stay with the car. He was not very happy to find it out, either, especially since I made a point of hiring a gay driver, and Grady is nothing if not a homophobe."

“You’re not gonna dish any more than that until dinner?” I demanded with my best grin.

Granny grinned back, patting my cheek, “Of course I will dish more—five great big bowls of ice cream—just as soon as you two go upstairs get some cartons out of the freezer. Whatever else you two do down here after dinner or later, the hard liquor stays on the shelf and out of your hands. Promise?”

“Promise,” Luke nodded.

“Promise,” I nodded a moment later, gazing at the shelves of bottles. I knew when to admit defeat and changed the subject, “Which ice cream flavors? I had all new cartons stocked.”

“All of them,” she said, “It’s not like I can actually spoil your appetite now, can I?”

I smiled at Luke and said, “Ice cream is an okay substitute for what I really want, even more than old liquor.”

Luke grinned at me, kissed me, eventually telling me, “Good answer.”

Luke

Eating ice cream shirtless while leaning against the speakeasy bar turned out to be a good thing. I spilled several droplets of melted ice cream right down my pecs and abs in my hurry to enjoy the treat. Each time I spilled some down my front, Nick would grin at me then lean forward and lick the splotch right off my skin. He would then “spill” some down his front and I would lick it off his skin. I liked the taste of his skin, even without the ice cream. But the little game was fun.

Granny and Nick’s two dads would just laugh at us, Mr. Vogel and Coach kissing one another every time either Nick or I licked ice cream off the other one. But when Nick spilled some down near the edge of my towel and it started to seep inside, Nick’s dad said, “That one’s out of bounds, boys. Use a napkin on yourself for that one, Luke.”

“We need to keep this game family friendly, boys,” Nick’s pa agreed.

I grabbed a paper napkin and complied. “Spills” below the belly button all got wiped away, not licked away, after that. It was the most fun I had ever had during family time. I was sad when the ice cream was gone and so was our time to enjoy it.

"I wish I had a dad like you two," I told Nick's two dads as we washed up the spoons and bowls in the sink behind the bar. "Eating so much ice cream, listening to fun music and flirting with my boyfriend right in front of you is so cool. You have no idea."

"You do have a dad like us two," Coach told me, tussling my hair. "You have us. And we know exactly how much fun it is to flirt in front of a loving parent, right, Mom?"

Coach and Granny exchanged smiles, and I knew Nick's dad and the coach had her full approval, just as much as Nick and I did. I loved all their approval, but I wished my own family could accept me and my relationship with Nick the way his family did.

Coach went on, "No more 'Coach' or 'Mr. Vogel' for you. It's either 'Dad and Pa' or 'Ethan and Derek' from now on. You have your own dad, of course, but you are our son-in-love now and will be our son-in-law after you two man up and pop each other the question."

I liked the idea and nodded, but did not try calling either one of them by those new names. Nick smiled at me, kissed away my self-doubt and promised his dads, "We'll work on that one."

Nick was still eyeing the bottles of alcohol on the shelves to either side of the large mirror when he noticed something and exclaimed, "Half of these bottles have 'Vogel Brewery' on the label. Do we... does the trust own the brewery?"

"That's the source of much of our wealth," Granny nodded. "This speakeasy was a hopping business back in the days of prohibition. That, and the fact that several Vogel and Nevin boys ran bootleg for our then illegal brewery all throughout northern California. It's all legal now."

I laughed at the thought. "My parents must love that bit of family history."

Nick's dad shrugged and smiled at us, "They both used to laugh at it a lot."

"My father and grandfather were brew masters," Granny added, glancing at the time. "The caterers will be here soon, Ethan. Do you and Derek mind going up to watch for them?"

Ethan nodded, picking up the leftover ice cream cartons. "We'll put these away, too, Mom."

As soon as the last footsteps of Ethan and Derek going up the spiral stairs faded, Granny pointed to a door opposite the open one. "Both of your keys

open that door as well. The stairs lead up through the grandfather clock on the landing in the other house. The same clock weight combination will work on that side as well. The doors to the right of the bar lead to the bathrooms, which include showers as well as sinks and toilets. The door on the left of the bar leads to a row of underground bedrooms and a long hallway that ends in a staircase right under the carriage house cottage stairs, exiting in the carriage house from inside the tack room. Ethan has a key, and so do I. Now each of you have one, too.”

“Can we spend our first night together down here?” Nick asked his grandmother.

“Of course,” she smiled. “Just make sure your dads know that you are staying here tonight. And bring some fresh clothes down for the morning.”

We escorted Granny through the long tunnel to a fairly large sitting room under the carriage house. Granny told us, “This was the official guest entrance into the speakeasy, the only entrance known to most people. Getting to wait down here was still no guarantee of getting in, but they did let people buy drinks here while they waited.”

“All this was built underground after the rest of it as a speakeasy?” Nick asked.

Granny shook her head. “It was put to use that way during Prohibition. It was built by the Vogel twins after they made their fortune so that they and their gay friends had a safe place to socialize in a past and very homophobic era. Keeping it up and keeping it secret is part of being trustee.”

She showed us the door up and the stairs into the carriage house, and how to secure both top and bottom doors from inside. Nick and I followed and parted company with her at her front door. We raced back to the house, went up the back stairs from the kitchen, and got dressed for the evening in black slacks and the black lace shirts. Nick and I gathered such things as we might need to spend the night together from Nick’s room. I found the lube where he told me it’d be, along with an anal douche kit Nick hadn’t mentioned. When I showed him that I had found it, he shrugged and said, “Feel free to use it; I already have. And I’ll do it again, after dinner.”

I grinned. “I have a pocket kit in my stuff, and I used mine, too. I wanted to make sure I knew how to use it in front of you. I know we need to use them again after dinner.”

“Thinking about getting to do whatever we want with one another has me a bit nervous.”

I nodded. “Me, too. We can take it slow and just sixty-nine each other, if you like.”

“We can talk more about that later,” Nick told me, adjusting the front of his pants and adding, “when it does not instantly get me so hard it shows.”

I grabbed him by the cock right through his pants, guided his hand to where my dick pressed against my pants, and said, “I am glad talking about it makes us both this hard. Too bad if we have hard-ons all evening, just as long as we finally get to use them tonight down in the speakeasy.”

We took what we had put together for our sleepover in the speakeasy down the stairs to the grandfather clock, opened it, set the weights, and entered the spiral stairs to descend, but this time, I closed the clock door behind us and locked it as Granny had shown us how to do. It was a stout door, and even if someone discovered that it was there, it would be hard to get through.

Nick and I had picked the second of three bedrooms in a row along the carriage house tunnel. We liked the king-sized bed, the mirror on the ceiling, the soft lighting and old-fashioned feel of the room. We eyed one another while making the bed with the fresh linens set out for us, looking for little pretexts to touch fingers or kiss one another. Leaving our things in the room, we smiled up at one another in the ceiling mirror and kissed in view of it. We thought we looked really sharp in the black see-through lace shirts. I knew the shirts would test my mother and anger my father, but this was about us and what we really wanted, not them.

There were voices coming from the formal dining room when we relocked the clock door on the landing and went down the final half-flight together, hand in hand. The caterer was serving salads around the table. Granny was at the head of the table. Nick's two dads sat to her right; my parents to her left. Two chairs and table settings were at the foot of the table, chairs close but manageable for two guys in love, like us. Nick and I wanted this dinner party to be small, intimate and with us firmly in control, so it would just be the seven of us, no one else.

We walked to the table and lifted our joined hands over the backs of the two chairs, sitting down in the same moment so that our hands held tightly together. The gesture was not lost on my parents or Nick's family. Granny smiled, as did Nick's two dads. My mom nodded in acknowledgement of us, but my dad just stared, expressionless. But Dad was often hard to read.

“Happy Birthday, Nick,” his dad told him. Nick’s dad and Derek knew about us wearing the shirts made for Uncle Dane and Nick’s dad, but seeing us in them made him tear up, just the same. But we could see the pride in his face for us.

“Happy Birthday, son,” Derek told him, instantly drawing my parents eyes to him.

“Happy Birthday, sweetie,” Granny nodded.

My parents each murmured, “Happy Birthday, Nick.”

Neither of them challenged the see-through black lace of our shirts. I’d had the tank top discussion with both of them already. I told them I’d seen their protest photos. They didn’t fight me on wearing tank tops to school or anywhere after that. Our see-through lace shirts were mild compared to what they wore as dress-code protestors themselves and they knew it.

“Happy Birthday, my love,” I added, and then kissed him full on the mouth in front of everyone.

Granny and Nick’s two dads beamed. My mom sighed and nodded; my dad just stared.

When Nick and I finished the kiss and turned our eyes on my parents, my dad appeared ready to bolt for the door, restrained by the lightest touch of my mother’s hand on his arm. Mom looked at Nick and politely inquired, “Your mom and Grady are not joining us? Are they, ah, ill?”

My parents rarely mentioned Nick’s family, but my mother’s query told me that she knew perfectly well what drunks Nick’s mom and stepfather were. Nick shared a glance with me, his eyes telling me that he had similar thoughts. He said to Mom, “Mom and Grady no longer live here. I am eighteen. Her custody of me ended at midnight, so they have a new place in West Sacramento. Granny helped them move in today. I did not invite them to my birthday dinner.”

“What made them pick West Sacramento?” Dad wanted to know.

I grinned at him. “Actually, Nick and I helped Granny pick it out for them. Nick and I really liked the neighborhood. It’s very friendly. Do you have a problem with West Sacramento, Dad?”

Mom glanced at Nick’s dad, shook her head. “We used to like West Sacramento just fine. Your dad and I used to double date a couple we knew and dined there many times.”

Granny spoke up. "The trust is paying for the apartment and it will be another family property, so Nick's mom will be compensated the rest of her life for giving us Nick. I chose West Sacramento because we really don't have much trust property there. And Star needs to learn to accept our Nick for who he really is. I really hope West Sacramento will do that for her."

Dad turned his gaze from Granny to me. He cleared his throat and tried to choose his next words carefully, "We sort of noticed how empty your bedroom looks at the moment."

"That's because Luke is moving in with me," Nick told them. "We are both eighteen, now. All of his things are put away in our bedroom. He won't need that room anymore."

Dad turned red, Mom looked pale, and her hold on Dad's arm tightened, but she nodded. "Your father and I discussed that possibility before we came over," she told me, trying to control her emotions. "We are prepared to accept that arrangement without argument, son. We—I have always known how special Nick is to you. My soul struggles to accept what my heart already has: you love Nick and Nick loves you. It may not fit what the Church teaches us, but it does fit both of you. I accepted that kind of love between Dane and Ethan because I saw it happen. They fought falling in love until they couldn't resist one another anymore. But we were too involved in Dane's anguish to accept it when it happened again with you. I have lost five years of your life trying to make you fit into a Mormon square hole when you are clearly a round peg. I won't waste another day that way."

The look on Dad's face puzzled me until I realized that he was looking at Derek and that Derek was looking back. Derek shrugged, "I've known about Ethan and Dane's past for a long time. Ethan never stopped loving Dane; he just made room in his heart for me, too."

My parents both looked at Nick's dad, who just nodded affirmation of what Derek had said. They suddenly lowered their eyes, Derek's words and Ethan's nod somehow hitting them hard and in ways they were not ready to deal with. I stood, reached for my mother's hand and assured her, "Thank you, Mom, for what you just said. I love you so much for saying it."

She raised my hand to her lips and then pressed it to her cheek. "That's the first time you have told me that since that night when I saw you kiss Nick and made all the wrong choices. I wish I could take all of that back and have memories of better choices on my part. You have always loved Nick, and we

knew it. We fought it but it was not our battle to fight. It was not what we wanted for you or what the Church wants for anyone. But it's not about wants; it's about needs. The need to be loved, the need to be understood and accepted. You're all grown up and I need you now more than you need me, so it's my turn to do the accepting. Now, I just need for you to be happy so that you can let us be part of your life together."

"That is why you are here and Nick's mom is not," I told them. I waited, watched their faces. Both nodded their acceptance. I finally saw Dad soften his grimace into a tentative smile. "We have something special planned before we eat and hope you will sit through it and accept it. We won't be offended if you can't, but we wanted to give you the choice to accept it or not."

I gently pulled my hand free of my mother's, reached into my pants pocket, and pulled out the old ring box. Dropping to one knee beside my chair, I took out the ring sized for Nick and showed it to him and everyone, saying, "Nick, I love you and want you to be mine. Will you marry me?"

"I love you, too, Luke. Of course I'll marry you." Nick accepted the ring as I slid it onto his ring finger. I returned to my chair and we kissed. Before anyone could say anything, Nick slid out of his chair and knelt, offering me the other matching ring, "Luke, will you marry me?"

"Yes, Nick, I love you more," I grinned as he slid that ring onto my finger. Once he was seated again and the box was back in my pocket, we kissed long and fully. Nick's family cheered and I heard my mother cheer as well. Once Nick and I parted lips and looked around, I saw that Dad's was more genuine. His eyes were on our heirloom wedding bands. He sighed deeply, nodding.

Mom asked us, smiling as best she could, "Have you set a date for your wedding?"

Dad suddenly gazed at her, easily pulled his sleeve free of her grasp and took her gently by the hand instead. She beamed at him, squeezing his hand again and again. She grinned at me.

"Mom," I said, speaking for Nick and myself, "We still need to graduate next month and then there's college. That means that Nick's my mission, my only mission. I'm swimming in college with him, not letting the Church treat me like a broken toy on a pretend mission. Nick gets me; he helps me grow. The Church has failed me on both counts. I just wanted it clear to everyone that I have found my true love and that marriage is part of our plan. We don't know when or where we will marry, but when we do, we will be sure to invite you and Dad to be there."

“No,” Dad suddenly barked, then shook his head, lowering his eyes. “I mean, yes, of course, it’s your right and no one else’s to decide when to marry. But I want you to marry one another here at the Vogel Houses. Let’s do things right by you two, for a change.”

Everyone around the table startled and then clapped approval; I kissed Nick and we nodded.

Dad suddenly decided, “It’s time for the neighbor fence to come down and stay down. We can have the wedding there and fill the shared backyards with chairs and people to see that special day for all of us. Will you two boys help me take it down tomorrow after school?”

The neighbor fence had been up ever since Nick and I were eleven, just after Gramps Vogel’s funeral, when something caused a rift between our families. Nick and I never knew what it was and no one ever said. The fence was designed to go up and come down easily to accommodate shared and separate plans of the two families, but it had been up and stayed up for almost seven years. Nick and I nodded, Nick saying, “We can take it down now, if you like.”

“No, that would mar this special evening. It can wait until tomorrow.” Dad paused, then looked to Granny, “May I bless the food and this engagement?”

Granny nodded, and Dad offered her his hand. We all quickly linked hands around the table, everyone closed their eyes and bent their heads to focus on the words, everyone except Granny and me. We shared a smile and a wink before we closed our eyes to listen to the prayer.

“Dear Lord in Heaven,” my father prayed, “please forgive this fool of a man for not seeing and rejoicing in the true love his son has for Nick and that Nick has for him. Thank you for sending Nick to us to heal the wounds of our family and to love our son. Continue to bless them, Lord, and give them added strength. Bless us through their love for one another. Bless this food to nourish us and strengthen us all in the holy name of thy Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

I lost my fight against tears about halfway through Dad’s prayer. I looked up after he finished to see everyone else in tears, happy tears, but with “the waterworks on” as Dad usually put it. Dad broke through the raw emotions and said, wiping his own tears on his free sleeve, “Let’s eat.”

Nick

Luke's dad smiled at the stare Luke gave him and said, "No, son. I haven't been kidnapped and replaced by aliens. But I have been expertly manipulated into waking up to my old self, thanks to Granny, with plenty of help from you two. I feel like Theoden being saved from Wormtongue. Just without wizards, magic or hobbits."

"There's the old Shane we used to know, full of allusions to his favorite stories." Granny told the rest of us, "He used to be his twin brother's best friend and closest confidant. Shane knew all of Dane's personal secrets. Didn't you, Shane?"

Luke did his best to appear surprised by what was said, but he didn't fool me. I guessed that Granny was filling his head with her secrets. The guilty little glance he gave me made sure of it, but I was okay with it. Luke was Granny's pick to replace her as trustee. I never wanted to be.

After the main dish was eaten and the caterers were clearing dinner plates, Luke looked at his father and asked, "Dad, why did the neighbor fence go up and stay up so long?"

His dad looked at us and said solemnly, nodding at us both, "This is as good a time as any to 'fess up on that one. The morning after Gramps Vogel's funeral, you were staying over in their apartment as you often did. Granny's door was open and so I went up without bothering to knock. You boys were eating one of her breakfasts in bed. I heard her tell you that your special love for one another was a gift from God. I almost interrupted but froze and stayed silent. I left; I was so angry. I resented everything about Nick even though I knew I shouldn't."

Luke's dad looked at me, "None of it was your fault, of course. I had spent four years of my life too deeply involved in my brother's personal life. Two years on our missions and the first two years of my marriage to Susan. Dane was ready to leave the Church to be with Ethan before we knew about Nick. I was ready to leave the Church over him, if it came to that. Then, Star confronted Ethan over her pregnancy with you. Dane was crushed and turned to the Church instead of away from it. He purged himself of everything and anything to do with Ethan. I supported him all the way in that abrupt change of direction for us; and Susan supported me."

Luke's dad blinked back tears, wiped his eyes, and went on, "You two boys were friends from your first visit together as toddlers. I still don't know how or

when young people know they're straight or gay. I just couldn't accept you two being gay so young, or Granny knowing it. The only thing I could think to do was put up the neighbor fence and never let Luke stay there again. I never said a word to anyone, not even Susan. Dane appeared to pray his gay away, so I meant to prevent Luke from becoming gay. When Susan saw you kids kiss and didn't want our son to end up like my brother, I let her fears hide my anger. But we were happiest when we supported my gay brother in being himself, not the phony super Mormon he now is. I want to be that happy, supportive person again. I still lost Dane to his wrath; I don't want to lose Luke, too."

Luke's mom nodded and put her hand to Luke's dad's face. "Thank you, Shane. Good choice."

Dad looked at Pa and said to Luke's dad, "How about letting Derek and me help you take that fence down after dinner, so you can stop thinking about it. This is a happy night. No more tears."

Luke's dad smiled at them and nodded, "I'd like that, Ethan. We used to be much better friends before... before Nick was born. I want to be better friends again, this time with both of you. We three dads have sons in common, now... always, really. We need to be friends and allies."

Just then the caterers wheeled in a serving cart with a large sheet cake, decorated for our engagement instead of my birthday. As the server got ready to cut it, Luke's dad protested, pulling his smart phone from his pocket. "No, no, thank you. Our sons have to cut that cake. No more special events between them without photos."

As Luke replaced the server behind the cake, cake knife in hand, the cute guy showed the two of us how to hold the knife handle and successfully wield it together, hand on hand. He smiled at us and we thanked him with smiles of our own. Luke's dad stood up and took several photos of the cake and then several of each serving we cut. He even snapped a shot of me kissing Luke.

Shane Nevin set his phone down, walked to us and took Luke's left hand in his and fingered the antique wedding ring on it. "Dane told me everything he knew about these rings. I'm glad Granny let you use them. And thank you, son, and Nick, for helping me to wake up to who I really am and who you really are. And, Susan, pardon the strong language, but fuck Church leadership for having their holy heads up their holy asses. We were for equal marriage once and will be again. One God, one savior, one love."

As Luke's dad started to drop Luke's hand, he suddenly saw a peek of the henna tattoo. He snickered gently and asked Luke, "May I see it, son?"

Luke opened the cuff of his sleeve and showed us all the design. "It's henna and Celtic runes for 'Nick.' We're still deciding if we want the design there or someplace else."

I opened my cuff and revealed my matching wrist tattoo. "Mine says, 'Luke.'"

Luke's dad nodded. "Simple, hideable and subtly out there. I, for one, like it just as you have it."

"Thanks, Dad," Luke smiled at him and at me. "You ever think about ink for yourself?"

"Actually, I did once," Luke's dad admitted. "Eight of the nine actors who portrayed *The Fellowship of the Ring* had their own take on the 'One Ring' poem tattooed to a butt cheek. I thought that was so cool. I just never had a slogan or a reason, until now."

Luke's mom laughed and shook her head. "I'm not getting a butt tattoo, not even for you."

Luke's dad laughed himself, and so did everyone else. "Well, not there," he persisted, suddenly unrolling his own sleeve to reveal the underside of a still fit forearm. "If we all agreed, I would have the five of us put it here and again in Celtic runes, like the boys: 'one love.'"

"I love you for the sentiment, dear, but it's not going to happen," Luke's mom laughed again, and everyone else laughed with her. To Luke, she said, "I like us this way better, too, son. Thank you for helping me find my way back. Nick, you are the best mistake your dad ever made, and obviously a miracle God sent to heal us all. Thank you for loving our son and helping him to help us back to sanity."

The words were not meant to sting, but they did, and I needed an answer from my dad. "So, which I am to you, Dad, a mistake or a miracle?"

Susan Nevin blushed and she said, "I was joking, and I see that I hurt you. I am so very sorry."

I shook my head. "You and I are fine, no worries, but I do want an answer from my dad."

Dad said, bluntly, "Susan had it right, son. You're my greatest hope and the cause of all my worst fears. I seemed to abandon you, and you forgave me. You could have been as bitter as Star, but you're not. Embrace it, savor it. Jesus did a lot of good, but you're my savior."

Pa said, "Well, team, the time trials are over for this family and we are the victors, thanks to our very best swimmers, almost nineteen years ago and now."

Everyone laughed at his vulgar reference to Luke's and my conception as "swimmers," although Susan Nevin laughed and blushed at the same time. After that, conversation turned to other, less memorable table talk as we ate the cake and strengthened our renewed family bond.

When the cake was gone and the caterers removed the dessert plates, Granny said, "Thank you all for coming. This little old lady needs to wander back to her cottage and get some rest."

Luke's dad looked surprised. "You are not moving back into the main house?"

She shook her head. "The cottage has been my home for almost nineteen years now. My Ethan died there, and I plan to do so also. Besides, I want Nick to have real memories of family with his two dads and with Luke in this house. But I would like to see you and Susan visit me in my cottage again, like you used to when Ethan was with us."

Luke's mom nodded. "I would like that, too."

The awkward moment came when Luke's parents left and Luke did not. His mom hugged him to her for the longest time, and he let her, melting into her warm embrace. Finally, she sighed, turned loose of him and smiled at me. I let her hug me and tell me, "We love you, too, Nick. We really do."

I nodded, "Thank you."

Luke's dad looked at his wife and then at my two dads. "The fence can wait until tomorrow."

"Or the two of us can still take it down tonight, if you're okay with that."

Luke's dad nodded. He smiled at Luke and me, and gave each of us a one-armed hug. "Good night. Don't be strangers to us. We want the fences in our hearts down, too."

"We won't," Luke promised. "We'll come visit you tomorrow."

Luke's parents looked at the two of us standing side-by-side one more time and then let Granny walk them out. They had accepted us as a couple and yet still struggled with the thing they could not mention, the two of us sharing a bedroom and one another. Luke all but collapsed into my arms the second they were gone from sight. We kissed. He murmured between kisses, "I love you so much."

"I love you more," I whispered back, stealing his usual line.

Moments later, thoroughly hugged, kissed and ready for greater privacy and intimacy, Luke and I left the dining room, went up the first half-flight of stairs, opened the clock door with my key and locked it behind us to descend the spiral stairs, one at a time yet still hand in hand.

Luke

Once down in the speakeasy, Nick and I promptly got our male douche kits and went to the bathroom. I did not have much shit to dump but Nick dropped a load to rival an elephant. I made sure he wiped thoroughly before using his kit again. I quoted a favorite gay webisode to him: "Nobody likes a fudgy bottom, Nick."

Once we had our asses irrigated, pants back up, and hands washed, we went back into the main saloon of the speakeasy. There, we let our hands wander a bit more freely as we kissed, but we took our time. Nick and I were excited about the moment, but a little nervous, too. When we parted lips, Nick said, "So, compared to Westley and Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*, how does our kiss stand up?"

"Rank amateurs, all of them." I grinned, trying to quote the movie, "Of all the greatest kisses that ever were or ever will be, our kisses leave them all far behind."

"Now you are just paraphrasing the movie, not quoting it," Nick grinned.

"They really need to redo the movie with two Westleys and no Buttercup," I observed, "but let's stop talking about the movie before we spoil seeing it again."

Nick nodded, fingering the highly textured black lace of my shirt, fingers touching skin beneath the lace. He started unbuttoning my shirt and let me undo his. He slid his hand into my shirt and gently yet eagerly groped my chest. "I love these pecs of yours."

We shared a smile and gently yet more urgently finished taking off one another's shirts and carefully laid them aside, now more mindful of the music from the electric player piano in the background. Derek had told us he preprogrammed it for us, tailored to our tastes in music. Once, stripped to the waist, we started dancing to a favored tune we had used to jack off to only days before. When the music faded and while we waited for the paper rolls to change, we took off our shoes and socks, leaving our pants and boxer briefs on

as we danced to the next, more vigorous tune a little more rapidly. The next time the player piano changed rolls, we took off our pants, ending up dancing nude together again after yet another tune.

From the first tune through to dancing naked, body to body, we were very aroused, the dancing only barely reducing our hard-ons. We kissed and felt one another up. I loved the feel of his pecs and nipples; he loved to grab my firm, muscled buttocks. We both loved to handle one another's cock and balls. As soon as the music faded again, I went down on him, gripped his butt cheeks in my hands and deep throated his cock. He knew I had gagged on a lot of bananas to get ready for the real thing. I gazed up into his eyes as I mouthed his big penis and sucked on it.

I loved the feel, the taste of his cock in my mouth. It was ten times better than I had ever imagined. No more bananas, no more jerk off fantasies for me; I had the real thing to do with as I pleased. I explored his dick with my tongue and lips, teasing him and pleasing myself at the same time. He trembled with pleasure as I unmouthed him just long enough to invite him, "So, face fuck me, lover boy, face fuck me hard."

Nick gently cradled the back of my head in his big hands and thrust his cock back into my mouth and down my throat. He went slow at first, gaining speed as he slowly got his thrusting rhythm in control. I kept my teeth from scraping his cock, lavishing each thrust with my tongue and lips. Having him in my mouth made me feel whole, real, complete.

All too soon, Nick pulled out of my mouth, reached down and pulled me to my feet. He kissed me long and hard, and then licked both of my nipples. He slathered his tongue down my abs and navel, tickling and teasing me, finally sinking to his knees. He mouthed my throbbing cock with an unrehearsed ease that surprised me, although he choked on my cock at first. He hadn't practiced as much as I had, but he quickly got the hang of deep throating me. Nick was way more spontaneous than me because he could afford to be. We both hated bananas by that point in our lives, but I could see in his eyes that he loved cock as much as I did. I, just as slowly, carefully started fucking his mouth, shuddering and moaning with pleasure.

After thrusting into his mouth several dozen times, I pulled back some but left the corona of my cock in his mouth to be polished by his tongue. I told him, "Table top or floor, I want to sixty-nine with you, now."

We ended up in the middle of a round, sturdy table with me on my back and Nick in push-up position over me. He rammed his mouth and throat down on

my cock as I thrust my hips up to ram into that sensuous suction of his. The tricky part turned out to be getting his cock into my mouth. I had to turn my face to prevent getting jabbed in the eye, so I grabbed his erection and guided it into my mouth. Every joyous sensation of sucking and being sucked by him multiplied totally out of control. As much as I loved doing that with him, I finally pulled off his cock and said, "No more foreplay, Nick; take me to bed and fuck me, fuck me hard."

We got off of the table almost instantly, and Nick led me by the hand to our bedroom. I got the lube as he turned down the covers. We slid in together, Nick pulling me to him and raising my legs and butt off the bed just like we had seen in a porno together. Nick licked my balls, then the space between them and my ass. Eventually he took a single, tentative tongue touch of my ass, then another. Moments later, he was swirling his tongue over my asshole like the pros in our favorite pornos—the ones we played more than needed to teach me what to expect.

I gasped with pleasure and my cock gushed pre-cum as Nick rimmed my anus with his tongue. "No more, Nick, just lube up and stick it to me. Go bareback. I want to feel you inside me, not fucking rubber."

Nick obeyed my every word and within a few seconds he was gently, persistently pressing his cock against my anus to thrust it into me. It hurt a little at first, but the pain just made me hotter for him. We swam, we wrestled. We knew how intimate pleasure and pain were to one another. Again, his cock in me made me whole, made me better. "Fuck me, fuck me hard."

It took Nick a couple of tries to find and hit my prostate gland with his cock, watching my reaction until I felt it, gasped with pleasure and nodded vigorously. Even then, he still missed hitting it just right from time to time but it still made me shudder and groan in pure pleasure. I watched his eyes and loved the look on his face as he fucked me as hard as he could. But once again, he pulled back. He grabbed me by the shoulders and rolled over in the bed, taking me with him so that I ended up on top of him.

"Now you fuck me and make me shoot all over my abs," Nick told me. "Just lube up and go in."

"That's not going to happen, Captain America," I refused his impatient demand. "I'm going to prep you and take my time."

Nick protested, but I ignored him, and he let me wrestle him over so I could roll him up and spread his legs. I was not so shy about rose-budding him. It was

something in pornos that really turned me on, and I loved licking his asshole just as much I as thought I would. And he loved it, too, gasping in delight when I pressed my tongue into his ass. I gently slapped his butt cheek and told him, "Good boy, no fudge, just sweet, clean ass to lick."

Nick giggled and then gasped as I licked a finger and slid it into his ass. "You get three fingers, one at a time, before I put my cock in you. I know you did not practice on your dildos as much as I did, did you?"

"I love it when you take charge like this, Luke," Nick confessed. Games were always easy for me to run, take charge of, as long as I knew all the rules in advance. Sex play just turned out to be my favorite game to direct. And I had watched enough porn to have a good feel for our rules.

Once I had finger-fucked Nick with all three fingers as promised, I lubed my cock and positioned it against his tight anus, gently but forcefully thrusting forward. His anal opening yielded under pressure and my cock slowly slid into him. Nick let out a yell of pure joy as I slowly went in all the way. I quickly found his sweet spot, the bulge of his prostate with my cock, but I still wanted to explore his ass with my erection and make all of it mine. I very slowly fucked him at first, but then he grabbed my buttocks in his hands and propelled me hard into him. "Fuck me harder, Luke; you know I can take it. Throw it to me."

I obeyed, loving the sensation of my shaft in him. He was tight and smooth, bucking up against me as I thrust down on him and into him. I only got a dozen good thrusts into him before my cock got urgent to unload. I started to slow down but Nick slapped my ass and pulled my buttocks down, thrusting my cock into him hard. "Go ahead and shoot it inside of me."

His inviting words literally took me over the edge and I came, gushing my seed into him. Almost but not quite in sync with me, Nick's cock erupted and he shot cum all over his own face and torso. As quickly as I finished coming, I licked the cum from his face and snowballed it back to him in a kiss. I collapsed against his torso, the rest of his cum load spreading out between us like too much mayo on slices of hot toast. We kissed and kissed for the longest time, and then lay still against one another, enjoying his warm stickiness between our torsos.

"That was so worth the wait," I assured him. "Thank you. Was it good for you?"

"Thank you," Nick answered me. "But don't relax too much. As soon as our cocks are good to go again, we are doing it all again."

“Good answer,” I told him. “The best answer ever.”

Nick

Granny, of course, texted us about midmorning on Luke's phone, which was handier for me to reach than for him.

Don't worry about school. Both excused. Breakfast or not?

Luke and I were spooned together in the sheets in the gentle glow of dimmed lamps, my morning wood pressed against his spine. I gave him the phone and put my arm over him to grab his morning wood as he texted back.

Breakfast big yes. 15 to shower up.

Stay in bed. Text back when set up in saloon.

Sorry. Need 2 P.

Go pee, shower up and towel up. Be there in 10 with food.

“Sex in the shower while we clean up?” Luke invited me.

“I am not in the mood for quickies with you,” I told him, “only take-our-time longies for us.”

“Good answer,” he replied. We got up, tossed the covers up and left for the bathroom, hand in hand, using the passage that went between the bar wall of the saloon and the speakeasy storage room, glancing at the door to the carriage house tunnel just to be sure we were alone.

I turned on the shower before we took turns taking a leak. We quickly brushed our teeth and gargled mouthwash so our first kiss of the morning would be sweet and fresh. We locked lips and entered the warm water while groping one another and wrestling tongues. Eventually, cocks quite hard, we lathered one another up and took care of getting cleaned up.

We had towels around us, erections firm against the fabric, when Luke realized he'd left his phone in the bedroom. I had mine, but Granny had texted to his phone.

When we ventured into the saloon instead of going for the phone, we saw a table spread with all our breakfast favorites. Granny stood by the table with a catering cart beside her, fingers on the push bar. “I'll leave the cart. Bring back the dishes and any leftovers when you feel like it.”

“Thank you, Granny.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled at us. “Just don’t spend the whole day down here. You still have people who care about you and want some of your time as well. Now eat up. I love you both.”

“We love you better,” Luke assured her for both of us.

Once Granny left, we sat down and ate. About halfway through the meal, Luke let some strawberries and whipped cream fall to his chest, whether by accident or design I did not care. I instantly leaned forward to lick my favorite pancake toppings from his smooth warm skin. I playfully spilled some strawberries and whipped cream down my front; Luke instantly licked them away, but paused at my belly button. His grin teased and taunted me.

I suddenly grabbed him, pulled him up to his feet, shoved our plates aside and laid him down hard onto the table, pulling off his towel. I took the strawberries and ladled them all over his torso, the whipped cream following and then I started licking both off of him, tossing aside my towel. He giggled, “You had better share some mouthfuls back to me as you kiss me.”

“Oh, I will, trust me,” I assured him with my mouth partially full already. “And I have some hot cream to share after the cold stuff is all gone.”

“Fancy that,” he laughed as I did my best to tickle him with my tongue, “I’ll have some of that to share with you as well. And I love you even more when you’re crazy like this.”

“Good answer,” I told him. “I love you so much it makes me crazy.”

“Stop talking, keep licking and then share. I’m hungry, and not just for what’s in your mouth.”

I kissed him to silence him, strawberries and deflated cream oozing out between our mouths and tongues. He crushed me to him, making the spilled toppings gush out between our torsos. I noticed that my phone was precariously close to the sweet mess we were making. I started to move it, then had another thought. I reached out with it and took a selfie of us all smeared in strawberries and cream from the waist up.

“What was that for?” Luke demanded, surprised but too horny to be upset.

“Just making some memories of us for others to share someday,” I grinned at him. “You told me we have to start journals and keep photos of ourselves because of you being the next trustee.”

Luke pulled the phone from my hand and set it safely aside. He moved suddenly and rolled me under him, scattering dishes, causing some to fall and

break. The breakage damped my mood until Luke teased me, "That's coming out of your first trust check, not mine."

I took advantage of his hesitation and rolled back on top of him, causing some leftovers to hit the floor, breaking more plates. "That's on my check. The first ones are on yours."

Luke changed the subject on me, his cock hard against mine, "We never did have that wrestling match I promised you. So, let's have it now, all covered in strawberries and whipped cream."

I nodded, said nothing more, and did my very best to comply with my lover's request. We eventually ended up on the floor after breaking nearly everything but my phone. When I realized that the way to win the game was to lose, I quickly let him pin me and surrendered to his will. And then the fun really began.

The End

Author Bio

Jay D. Clark was born in and has returned to live in rural northern California after living in other states and countries. His life has been a mixture of really great moments mixed with some pretty difficult ones, both of which inspire and shape his writing. He feels that since his own personal and family histories read like romance novels M/M romance is his writing niche. He spends time with his family and friends, having a passion for reading and writing. He loves rural living, horses, open spaces, swimming and all things outdoors and in nature. He is new to M/M romance but finds in it a sense of completion missing for decades in his own life. The only downside of writing M/M romance fiction is having less time to read stories from the true masters of the genre. Jay D. is thankful for so much inspiration from life and good friends for his writing.

Contact & Media Info

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TO THE END

By Kathleen Hayes

Photo Description

A hooded man walks down a mist shrouded alley. He is dressed in a black doublet with blue sleeves. His face is shadowed by the hood he wears. In one hand he holds a bloody knife and in the other a gold piece of jewelry.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“Deth will come for you.”

Deth—the name he bestowed upon me so long ago that I barely recall my real name—is the bogie man that parents threaten children with when they misbehave. Yet it is those who would rise against the King who fear me most for I am no bogie man at all. They know I am real and who I serve. I am the ghost who, in the dark of night, enters their home unseen, taking nothing with me when I leave; nothing but the life of their loved one.

I am the King’s Assassin.

I no longer exist in the world I once knew. Those who knew me then mourn for me, as they do for my parents, believing me lost in the tragic carriage accident that took their lives.

But I was lost and my parents were dead long before their carriage rolled over that cliff. The new King taunted me with their deaths, and then threw me to the Assassin’s Guild. There, he said, I should be trained to live up to my name—Deth. I was seven years old.

Deth is all that I am now, but for one tiny keepsake that I have hidden away. How the King missed the glint of gold in my ear, I will never know. I am only glad that I have it. My childhood friend gave it to me as he and his family departed for distant shores, never knowing what fate had in store for me. It is knowing he is safe and free from the darkness that consumes me is all that keeps me clinging to life.

Sincerely,

SueM

P.S. I am definitely flexible on specifics such as his name, the carriage, his age, the keepsake, etc. I’d prefer a HEA if possible, please, and no BDSM. Thanks!

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: assassin, enemies to lovers, hurt/comfort, no sex, past abuse, reunited friends

Content Warnings: Gory description of torture chamber and victims of torture.

Word Count: 7,079

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TO THE END

By Kathleen Hayes

*Knock Knock, Death's at the door.
Run if you must 'cause there's nowhere to hide.
He knows all you've done; He's seen all your sins.
Tick Tock, your time's running out.
Run if you must 'cause there's nowhere to hide.
Death sees your soul and he's coming for you!*

~*~*~*~

“Seriyanah has been found, My Lord.”

King Sirath's eyes glowed with cruel pleasure. “It has been taken care of?”

“Yes, My Lord. Neither your exiled sister nor her child will ever bother you again.”

The cruel glint in his eyes sharpened with triumph as he gestured towards the three women cowering on his bed.

“I am well pleased, General. Please take your pick as a well-earned reward.”

The General's stomach clenched in disgust at the thought of taking one of these poor women to his bed, but if he did not pick one all three would be punished. He nodded towards the one closest to him and she followed him out of the room without a word.

Twenty Years Later

Deth stalked silently through the night. He had the layout of the streets memorized and it took little effort to find the house he was looking for. It was like every other house on the street—wood front practically rotting off and shingles barely holding themselves to the roof. The outer walls appeared not to have had a coat of paint or even a decent washing in over twenty years. The only thing that differentiated this house from its neighbors was the occupant.

MarShael, leader of a rebel group that was currently vexing King Sirath, lived in this house. Deth was first among the King's Assassins and had been

sent to rid MarShael of his ties to this life. Deth melted into the shadows beside the house to listen, to make sure his presence was undetected as of yet.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let his consciousness spread into every crack and cranny, sliding around corners and through windows. All around him people slept. Three houses away, the baker was sneaking into his daughter's room, and Deth pulled his mind back when they touched his thoughts. It wasn't what he was here for tonight, but he made a note of it. The baker was living on borrowed time and didn't even know it.

When Deth was sure no one was awake and paying attention to him, he reached in his shirt and pulled out the chain with a gold ring hanging on it. It was smallish, and worn smooth from the number of times Deth had gripped it in his fist over the years. As he kissed it and tucked it back into his shirt, sparkling blue eyes flashed in his mind. They were young and full of mischief, and he had no idea who they belonged to.

He knew his parents had been killed when he was younger, but Deth's only memories were of growing up as a dedicant to King's Assassins. He'd had the ring for as long as he could remember, which was odd in itself because dedicants were allowed nothing of their own—no clothes, no jewelry, no toys, nothing. And yet, he'd known the ring was important, and kept it hidden from his Masters and his fellow dedicants.

A familiar but unwelcome ache bloomed in his chest before he forcibly pushed it away. With the grace of decades of training, Deth swept into the house and all the way through it to the bedroom at the back, where MarShael was reported to sleep.

He paused in the doorway and froze momentarily. The man lying in the bed had dark, curly hair that had spread all over his pillow in his sleep. His pale face was peaceful in the moonlight that streamed through the lone window, high up on the wall. This man was beautiful—but more than that he seemed familiar. Deth shook himself at the absurd thought and forced his mind back to his mission, annoyed that he couldn't seem to keep focus tonight.

He drew his long knife from its scabbard and stalked the remaining paces towards the bed. Deth would never know what had given him away because he had remained as silent as the grave, but suddenly Deth was staring into blue eyes he swore he recognized. Sparkling, youthful, mischievous. The flash lasted only a moment before he realized these eyes were slightly different—they were surrounded by small wrinkles and held a measure of grief that the younger ones did not.

Deth did not have the chance to continue his reverie because as soon as those eyes sighted on him, the man in the bed lunged forward. The next few moments played on sheer instinct as Deth manhandled MarShael onto the bed and straddled him, holding his arms above his head with one hand and placing his knife at MarShael's neck with the other.

Deth was about to pull his knife across the pale throat beneath him when he had his second major shock of the evening.

His blade pressed against a chain much like his own. Resting on the bed by his target's ear, still attached to the chain was a gold ring. A gold ring that was an exact match to his own. With lightning fast movements, Deth threaded his knife through the necklace and pulled the ring closer to get a better look.

A jolt of startled rage blasted through him. In a voice unused to speaking, Deth ground out, "Where did you get this, traitor?"

Deth could tell his question shocked MarShael. His eyes blinked twice before he tried to speak. He had to clear his throat and try again before any sound came out.

"Childhood friend and I got them together. Haven't seen him since." MarShael's voice came out almost as jagged as Deth's had sounded in his own ears. The air struggled to make it through a throat tight with fear and surprise.

Shock rolled through Deth and wiped out any remaining anger. Slowly, he leaned back. He didn't sheath his knife, but it wasn't quite so ready to spill blood as it had been a moment ago. He reached with his other hand and pulled his own necklace out.

Voice still rough, he said, "I've had this since before I can remember." Deth leaned forward slightly holding his ring up next to the one still dangling from the end of his knife.

MarShael's eyes widened and his voice came out in a whisper, "Iry?" It seemed that utter disbelief and hope were warring in this strange man's eyes as Deth continued to stare at him.

"What?" Deth growled, more confusion leaking through than he would have liked.

"Iry. That was his name." MarShael said this with more confidence. Even as a whisper, his voice now held a clarion quality that seemed to draw Deth in. It

made him think of late nights sneaking behind the tavern to steal dregs of ale and getting dragged by their ears all the way home when they were discovered. He shook his head, trying to clear it of this obvious nonsense.

He'd never had a friend growing up. Or a mother.

Steeling himself against the hope in this other man's eyes, Deth finally spoke after long moments of silence. "Well, my name is Deth, not Iry."

If anything, that statement caused MarShael's face to whiten even further. His surety blazed from his eyes even as he spoke with quiet wonder. "Iryandeth Hirat. That was your full name. I called you Iry for short."

MarShael had sat up as they were talking, but at that statement, Deth surged forward and pressed him into the bed again, knife once more at his throat.

"That's a lie. I grew up as a dedicant to the King's Assassins. It is all I have ever known. I am here to kill you because you have betrayed your King." Deth said this in almost a rote fashion. It had to be true. There was no room in his life for hope or this strange fluttering in his chest. He hoped his words sounded more convincing to MarShael than they did to his own ears.

A look of revulsion flitted quickly across MarShael's face but was quickly pushed aside. Cautiously, as though he realized how close to death he really was, MarShael lifted a hand and placed it against Deth's cheek.

"My name is Akrandsmar Shaelen. You would call me Akr. Mother hated it. So, of course, I refused to respond to anything else." A wistful smile flitted across MarShael's face as he spoke.

Suddenly, a memory flashed through Deth's mind. A small, bright room filled with cheerful laughter. A woman, no older than he was now, baking bread with two young boys sitting at the table throwing scraps of dough at each other.

His hand shook, and the knife was close enough to Akr's throat that blood began to trickle down towards the bed.

"No," Deth whispered. But even he could recognize a losing battle while he was still fighting.

Akr saw the opening. "Iry. Let me show you. Let me help you remember who you are. Let me show you what I'm fighting for."

Deth had almost given in until that last part. He was a King's Assassin, bred to do his will, loyal to the end, beyond question, and this man was a traitor. He lifted his arm to slit Ak... no MarShael's throat, but at the last minute, diverted

the blow. He brought the hilt of his knife down on MarShael's head and knocked him out.

He had been given five weeks to find and kill the leader of the rebel group. It had only been one week. He could always find MarShael again and finish the job later. With that thought, Deth fled into the safety of the shadows.

Deth spent the next two weeks trailing MarShael. It didn't seem like he did anything particularly traitorous. The longer he followed MarShael around, the more he seemed to remember about the time before he became a dedicant. It was just small things—the smell of his mother's hair, his father's boisterous laugh, skinning both his knees trying to sneak sweet bread from the baker's cart with Akr.

Akr appeared to be a few years older than he was, but it seemed like there was nary a memory that didn't include him in some way. Deth still had trouble connecting the Akr of his memories with the man those outside the rebellion knew merely as MarShael.

Deth settled into an empty corner of the alley beside MarShael's house and wrapped his heavy cloak around himself. He extended his consciousness to check on all those around him—to make sure he was safe, he firmly reiterated in his own mind. It wasn't to see the man sleeping just on the other side of the wall he was leaning against. He'd spent every night of the last two weeks sleeping in this deserted corner, and if his back was somewhat the worse for wear, it was no harsher than much of the training he had been through as a child.

No matter how much Deth told himself to just get on with the job and return to the castle, every night he found himself, here, listening to MarShael sleep.

Except tonight, he wasn't sleeping. He seemed to be listening just as intently as Deth usually did. Deth held his breath for a moment.

It whuffed out of him as he heard MarShael whisper through the wall, "Iry, I know you're out there. Why don't you come inside?"

The words were so quiet Deth wouldn't have heard them if he hadn't had his senses so attuned to his surroundings. Yearning tore through him in a way he had never experienced before. Growing up as a dedicant, it was assumed that nothing would be given and thus nothing was expected. Wanting did no good, and Deth had been a very practical sort of child.

He sensed that the decision he was about to make would change his life forever, in ways he couldn't even imagine yet. In a moment of absolute irrational exhilaration, Deth made the decision to go inside. His surge of energy and bravery lasted until he made it to the doorway of Akr's—yes he had decided to start thinking of him as Akr—bedroom.

Suddenly flooded with uncertainty, Deth asked, "Are you really my friend?" The words came out filled with incredulity and unfamiliarity. Deth had no idea what a friend should be like, except from the few memories that had been dredged up in the last two weeks.

Akr looked up from the bed, seemingly startled to find him standing in the doorway, despite the fact that he had invited Deth—or more precisely, Iry—inside.

"I was. And I'd like to be again." Akr gave him a tentative smile and it felt like his gaze bore holes through Deth's soul.

Deth nodded. Then he nodded again, like he couldn't stop himself.

Akr walked towards him cautiously, approaching as you might a wild animal you weren't sure you could trust yet. Appearing to be reassured when Deth didn't startle or move away in any manner, Akr reached out for him.

Deth was too shocked to move when he felt Akr's arms wrap around him. He stood stock still, hands by his side for a long moment before he allowed his arms to mimic the ones tightly clutching at him. He let himself revel in the feeling for the space of a deep breath, thinking he might like to be this Iry person Akr evidently believed him to be.

It was so tempting to just fall into it, to trust that this stranger would catch him, but all his experience—the years of training, hardship, and cruelty told him that wasn't the way the world worked. In the blink of an eye, Deth had his walls back up. If a small measure of the warmth Akr seemed to radiate so easily had sneaked inside them, Deth would do his best to ignore it.

Deth stepped back, forcing Akr's arms away from him. "Stop it," he growled. "I'm not one of your rebel comrades. I'm here to stop you." He paused and continued much more quietly, "I don't have a choice."

Akr seemed to understand and appeared to choose his next words very carefully. "Please. Let me show you two things. If you still feel the need to stop me, then I won't try to keep convincing you otherwise." Akr paused. "That's not to say I'll just lie down and let you kill me, though."

Deth thought about that for a moment. He still had two weeks before he had to report back in. Some part of him that he had no idea what to do with just wanted to give into any demand that Akr made, just to stay in his presence. He firmly pushed that idea out of his mind, but found himself nodding anyway.

“You have one week.”

Akr's next words had Deth jerking his head up to look him in the eyes and sent a red-hot shock through his whole body.

“Stay with me.” It wasn't a question and it took everything in Deth not to treat it like one.

Knowing it was the wrong choice but unable to stop himself, Deth nodded once more.

The next night found Deth pressed against the wall in a hidden passageway inside the castle, eavesdropping on a conversation between the personal aide to the General of the King's Assassins and the King's personal advisor.

Akr was pressed against him from knee to shoulder and had one hand over his mouth. He had to force himself to concentrate on something other than the lean body herding him against the wall. Deth's hands clenched at his side as he was blasted with unfamiliar emotions. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths, which worked until he was startled by the rough touch of Akr's cheek against his as Akr leaned forward to whisper in Deth's ear.

“Stay quiet. The aide is ours. We've worked five years to get him so well situated. Listen.”

“*The King wishes his nephew dead?*” The aide's voice seemed loud in the echoing hallways. Deth burst with questions at this statement. Everyone knew there was no heir to the throne.

“*Yes. Preferably an accident, like the boy's parents, but he will accept any means that results in his death.*”

“*I understand. Being the King's first assassin is a dangerous post. I am sure something appropriate can be arranged when Deth returns from his current assignment.*”

Deth's heart seemed to stop in his chest for a moment, and his muscles tensed in preparation for action he hadn't quite thought through yet. Denial raged through him at the same time the truth of the words rang clear in the air.

The only thing that kept him from giving away their position was decades of training and Akr's fiercely renewed grip on his arms. The conversation quickly concluded.

"You will be well rewarded for your troubles."

"Thank you, My Lord."

Deth and Akr waited in their strange embrace until the sharp staccato of boots on stone was long gone. As soon as it was apparent they were in the clear, Deth shoved Akr away from him.

"You expect me to believe *I* am heir to the throne? That the *King* had my parents killed? For what reason?" Deth hissed quietly, in deference to the echoing stone.

Akr responded in a similarly controlled tone. "Your mother was Crown Princess Seriyannah, sister to the current King Sirath. She was first in line for the throne after their parents until she was exiled for marrying a commoner—your father. Before they died, King Iryandan and Queen Sakranah realized the kind of man Sirath was becoming and threatened to disinherit him in favor of his sister's offspring—you. They met their untimely—but seemingly natural—demise before any of this could be enacted of course. No one suspected Sirath and no one had heard from Seriyannah in ten years."

Akr paused.

"You and your parents had been going to visit friends two days' travel west of here. All I knew for years was that my best friend had been killed when the horse pulling the carriage was spooked on the road and the whole carriage—passengers included—fell over a cliff nearby." Akr's voice was rough with emotion and Deth was surprised to see unshed tears clinging to the edges of his eyes.

Unconsciously, Deth reached up and wiped a thumb under each of Akr's eyes, collecting the tears gathering there. Akr's breath stuttered as he continued to speak in a low whisper.

"It wasn't until years later, when I was old enough to join the rebellion myself that my parents told me who you and your parents were and that you might have survived the 'accident'."

Akr leaned forward, pressed his forehead against Deth's and grabbed either side of his head like he was holding on for dear life.

“I can’t believe you’re really here, Iry.”

For the first time, it felt like Akr was using the correct name when he said that. Memories flooded behind his closed eyes. Being ripped from his mother’s lap by a soldier before the horse and carriage were forced over the cliff. Those first weeks as a dedicant when all he wanted was his best friend to come and rescue him. The torture and starvation he had been put through to break all ties to his previous life. Memories of Akr and his previous life slowly disappearing beneath the weight of the brainwashing he and his fellow dedicants were receiving. Through it all, keeping that damn ring hidden from everyone. Touching it to give him strength when he thought he would die, holding on to it when he wished for death, using it as a talisman of luck whenever he was sent on an assignment.

As the floodgates opened, more memories crashed through him. It seemed whatever block had been erected was now like so much dust.

Overwhelmed, Iry croaked out, “Akr, I remember.”

Akr looked up at him, and Iry got lost in his eyes for a moment outside of time. Eventually, Akr broke the stare with a blink and a smile. “Really? Everything?”

“Everything,” Iry rasped.

Iry smiled for a moment as well before it turned melancholy.

“I get why I would want to kill the king—knowing what I do now about my parents. But why does everyone else want to kill him?” His confusion was clear in his voice.

“Let me show you,” Akr said, glancing towards the darkened end of the secret passage they were hiding in, before they found Iry’s once more.

Iry nodded. “Lead the way.”

Akr held out his hand, to give Iry a choice of whether or not to take hold of it. Iry stared at it for a long moment before experimentally threading his fingers through Akr’s. A joyful surge sped up his arm when Akr squeezed his hand and didn’t let go as they started down the secret passageway once more.

A short while later, they were forced to let go in order to descend a narrow staircase into the labyrinthine basements of the castle.

A winding journey through wine cellars, storage rooms, and holding cells brought them to another set of stairs.

Akr paused before he started down. “Only King Sirath and a few select are allowed down these stairs. The King is at a royal dinner tonight so it should be empty. But be prepared for anything.”

Iry nodded and drew one of his knives from its scabbard. Akr gave him an approving look and drew his own knife from the top of his left boot.

Iry grabbed Akr's arm as he turned to continue down. “Wait. Just a moment.”

Iry pulled out the ring from beneath his clothes, kissed it and focused. He spread his consciousness down the stairs and into the basement area they were about to enter. He didn't sense any guards but as he teased the corners and dark spaces, anger bloomed white and hot inside his chest and he felt his face harden at what he found.

His whole body went stiff as Iry pulled his consciousness back into himself.

“Come on,” he bit out. At Akr's confused look, he said, “There's no guards to worry about.”

Akr appeared mystified but nodded and followed Iry. Unerringly, Iry led them to a large room off the main corridor. The first thing Iry noticed in the dark of the room was the stench—the stench of dying rotting flesh and the stench of the processes of living with nowhere to go, feces, urine, blood, vomit—the works.

He heard Akr gag behind him and add a fresh contribution to the noisome air. Slowly their eyes adjusted to the low light provided by the intermittent torches along the wall and the stench was no longer the most terrible thing about this room.

In cages along the east wall were dogs and cats in every stage of starvation with gaping wounds and missing limbs. Along the west wall were similar cages, only these were holding human beings—mostly women. Along the north wall was a large table with manacles attached to it and shelves of devices Iry would have to make educated guesses on how they were used, along with more knives and saws than he had ever seen in one place. Then, just to the left of the door on the south wall was a pile as tall as a man's waist and running the whole length of the wall. Upon closer inspection, Iry realized it was a pile of corpses. The bottom layers were mostly bone at this point, sitting in puddles of blood and decomposing bodily fluids. The top layers were fresher—bodies beyond recognition, severed limbs and even something that looked like it might have been a baby.

The minds of those in the cages were so broken, Iry's consciousness had barely been able to recognize them as human. He threw up all his walls and forced himself to walk towards the cages of animals.

He inspected each one before determining none of these animals could survive their wounds. Then one by one he caressed their heads, whispered a prayer and slit their throats. Better a merciful death than one more day in this hell hole.

Iry steeled himself as he walked to the other side of the room. Akr had regained a semblance of composure and handed Iry an iron key ring.

Iry used it on the first of the human cages. Inside was a naked woman whose hair had been shaved off completely. She was missing about half her fingers, one breast and the dried blood covering her groin indicated she was probably not whole there anymore either.

Iry knelt in the filth of her cage and lifted her face to look at him.

"Are you the angel of death?" the woman said, barely above a croaking whisper.

"Do you want me to be?" Iry responded. The words came out of his mouth without thought.

"Yes," the woman said as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Iry closed his eyes and centered himself as much as he could without taking a deep breath. This was something he knew.

"What is your name?"

"Ceresea," the woman responded, desperately.

"May you meet the keeper of the gates with a pure heart and find peace, Ceresea," Iry intoned with the gravity of a well-practiced but much-revered prayer.

She sobbed and said, "Thank you," just as Iry brought his blade up and across her throat in one quick and efficient motion.

In all, Iry collected fifteen names for the keeper of the gates from that place. Only two chose to continue living. One, a woman, had two children on the outside and was missing only a hand. The other, a man, was battered and bruised almost beyond recognition but otherwise remained whole. They appeared to be the most recently acquired prisoners.

Three hours later, Iry and Akr had returned the two survivors to their families amidst many tears and much joy.

As they started towards Akr's home, Iry quietly said, "I need a shrine. Or a temple."

Akr merely nodded. "There is a shrine a few streets over from my house."

Iry and Akr walked in silence until they arrived at the shrine, offerings to the various gods and goddess overflowing all around it. Iry picked his way through the offerings of flowers and bread and ribbons to where a bowl sat, stained red brown from previous blood lettings, at the base of the small stone altar.

He knelt, crushing flowers under his knees and pulled a small knife from its sheath at his wrist. Iry pressed the tip of the knife into a small round scar at the base of his thumb until the blood welled. He wiped the knife on his sleeve and re-sheathed it.

"Great Ozandirath, keeper of the gates of eternity, I offer my blood in honor of those whose blood I have spilled this night. May my recompense bring peace to their souls and appease the debt you are owed."

Iry then let the blood that had pooled in the palm of his hand drip into the bowl, coloring the rust-colored stains bright red once again. As his blood flowed, he spoke the name of each of the prisoners he had killed and he mentioned the animals as well, if not by name.

When he was done, Iry stood, bowed towards the shrine and walked back to Akr. He pulled a clean bandage from one of his pockets and wrapped his hand before silently urging Akr to continue to his home.

The first thing Akr did when they walked through the front door was pull Iry into an embrace. This time, Iry's arms immediately wrapped around his friend. They clung to each other with shuddering breaths for an unknown amount of time.

Eventually, Iry broke the silence. His voice was hard with anger and absolute assurance. "He is going to die."

Akr leaned back to look in Iry's eyes before he spoke. "Are you sure?"

"I have spent years of my life killing those he declared deserved to die. None of them deserved to die as much as he does." There was not a single quaver or echo of uncertainty in Deth's words.

Akr nodded in agreement and then a ghost of a smile crossed his face. "You do realize that if you kill him you become heir to the throne."

Iry started visibly at that. After what happened in the dungeon, he had almost forgotten about the conversation they had eavesdropped on.

His heart ached that his parents had been so callously killed, but his head couldn't quite wrap around the idea that he was royalty.

"I have no desire to be king. That doesn't change the fact that Sirath will die by my hand." Deth shook off the statement. No one would ever make him king. No matter whom his parents really were.

"You may not be given a choice." Akr sounded like he was speaking words of warning but the spark in his eyes belied his tone.

Still not giving his royal parentage any real credence, Iry responded, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Inexplicably, a grin spread across Akr's face as he spoke. "Yes, we will." Akr reached for his hand, pulling him towards the bed. "Let's get some sleep."

Iry turned to go into the kitchen where he had made a pallet on the floor by the stove last night, but Akr resolutely kept hold of his hand as he walked towards the bedroom.

Iry's breath caught in his throat and his heart felt like it was beating out of his chest, but he didn't fight Akr.

They took off their outer clothes and climbed into bed in their underclothes in silence. For a moment both Akr and Iry lay flat, staring at the ceiling, seeming almost afraid to touch. Until Iry gathered his courage.

He reached over, grabbed Akr's hand and rolled on his side facing away from Akr. The motion forced Akr to wrap his arm over Iry's waist and mold his body to Iry's back. Once Iry made the first move, Akr sighed deeply and pulled Iry as close as he could go.

So lightly he could barely feel it, Akr brushed his lips against Iry's shoulder before laying his head back on his pillow.

Something inside Iry broke at that tender gesture and uncontrollable sobs wracked his body. He cried for his parents, and all the time he had lost with Akr, and for all the people who had been tortured to death by their King, and for the young boy who had been forced to forget his family and become an assassin. Iry cried and Akr held him until they both fell asleep.

Akr stood nose to nose with Iry as his finger stabbed Iry in the chest to punctuate each word.

“It is too dangerous. I won’t let you do it.”

The angry tension in the room was almost palpable.

Iry ground his teeth and did his best not to yell.

“My whole life has been dangerous. You know what? I’m the most dangerous thing out there. The King trusts me. And I have spent the last twenty years becoming the most efficient killer in the entire kingdom. It’s the only way.”

Akr practically deflated in front of Iry’s eyes. He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “I just don’t want to lose you again so soon. I just found you.”

Iry put a hand under Akr’s chin and tipped his head so that they were looking each other in the eyes again.

It felt like time stretched and shrunk at the same time, as it seemed wont to do whenever Iry got lost in Akr’s eyes. He had meant to say something reassuring, something to help Akr understand why he had to do this. What he hadn’t meant to do was step forward and press his lips against Akr’s.

But somehow, that’s what he found himself doing. For a brief instant Iry just stood there, fingers on Akr’s chin, lips pressed together in a chaste kiss. Then, all of the sudden all the anger from moments before morphed into heat. Iry and Akr stepped closer to each at the same moment, bodies colliding in passion.

Iry slid his hands to tangle in Akr’s curls. Akr slid his arms around Iry’s back and pulled their bodies flush. All the while, their tongues danced and their hearts beat a loud tattoo in their ears. Iry couldn’t get enough of the slide and push of Akr’s tongue and reveled in being this close to him. A hole he hadn’t fully realized existed inside him began to fill itself in as Akr gave pieces of himself to Iry.

Eventually, passion settled into wonder and they broke the kiss. With wide eyes and short of breath, Iry vowed, “You’re not going to lose me. We’re in this together and I intend together to last long after that filthy excuse for a king is dead.”

“Okay,” Akr replied. “I’m not going anywhere either. Together—to the end,” he vowed in return. Then, he added, “An end someday far in the future.”

Everything was going according to plan so far. Iry—Deth—was well-known around the castle so his presence was unremarked upon. They had chosen the day the King held open court to make their move so that Akr would be lost in the crowd of those who could not gain audience with the King based on personal connections. One more loyal subject waiting for the judgment of his king.

Many hours passed before the court secretary's voice rang out calling, "Akrandsmar Shaelen," to come forward. Iry made his way through the crowd until he was even with Akr. Iry nodded encouragement to Akr before Akr turned his attention back to the King and dropped to one knee with a bowed head.

"What matter do you bring before my court this day, Akrandsmar Shaelen?" The King's voice rang out hard and cruel through the stone hall.

Head still bowed, "I come to make an introduction, Your Majesty."

Murmurs passed through the crowd. This was unusual. Iry stepped from his spot at the edge of the crowd to join Akr. As if sensing Iry's presence at his side, Akr stood. Iry pushed the hood off his head and faced the king without making any signs of obeisance.

The King became visibly enraged at this show of disrespect. "Deth, what is the meaning of this?"

Instead of answering, Iry gave Akr the floor. "Your Majesty, may I introduce you to Iryandeth Hirat, son of Blediyan and Seriyannah Hirat, who was the oldest child of King Iryandan and Queen Sakranah, former rulers of this kingdom."

The mottled red of rage faded from the King's face and the white pallor of fear took its place. The crowd went silent for a brief moment before astonished chatter broke out all over the room. Iry let it play out for a moment before he held his hand up for silence. It was a move of such supreme confidence that almost everyone obeyed without a thought.

Iry's voice boomed clarion clear in the silent room. "I have come to challenge King Sirath to a personal duel for the affront of murdering my parents as well as the murder of countless of his subjects in the dungeon of this very castle by means of rape and torture. As is my right as a challenger of royal blood, I demand to be met in this challenge by Sirath himself and not a proxy."

The crowd gasped and the King paled even further before speaking. "This is preposterous. You have presented no proof of your identity, nor of the murder of your parents." The lie was clear in his voice.

It was at this point that the personal aide we had eavesdropped on only a few nights before stepped up. He was holding a large records book in his hands.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty." He cleared his throat. "Entry from the fifth day of the seventh month in the third year of the reign of King Sirath. Name and lineage of new dedicant: Iryandeth Hirat, son of Blediyan and Seriyannah Hirat, grandson of Atirkas and Niernah Hirat and Iryandan and Sakranah of the royal house of Kirnas. Age: seven years old. Status: orphan. Signed: General Ribkanit Arnolos."

He shut the book with a loud thud.

With as much sincerity as he could muster, Iry asked, "Do you accept my challenge, or do you accept guilt for the crimes I have accused you of?"

King Sirath seemed to have gotten a hold of himself for the moment. He sat back on his throne and waved at his guards insouciantly. "Kill him."

The guards hesitated for only a moment. Deth's reputation preceded him and no one was eager to begin a fight with him. It was enough though. Several people in the crowd stepped forward, disarmed, and captured the guards before they could make their move.

Iry was impressed with their speed and skill and still surprised there were so many people willing to be a part of this rebellion. He waited until the guards had been led out and secured in another room before speaking again.

"I will ask again, Your Majesty, do you accept my challenge or do you accept guilt for the crimes I have accused you of?" Iry's voice rang clear as a bell throughout the large room.

With a scream of inarticulate rage, King Sirath drew his sword and rushed towards Iry. Iry knew his skill would prevail but it didn't do to underestimate one's opponent. Despite his age and seeming lassitude, the King had been very well trained and still practiced regularly. Iry met his attack with a series of quick blows that forced the King to retreat until he tripped on the steps up to his throne.

The fight lasted another few moments before King Sirath finally realized he was beaten and his confidence faltered. In that moment of weakness, Iry struck—quick and deadly. The victorious assassin offered up a brief prayer to

the keeper of the gates, knowing he would be more thorough when he said his prayers at a shrine later.

He leaned over to wipe off his bloody sword on a patch of the King's clothing that was not already soiled, and then turned back towards the stunned crowd.

Akr stepped forward, took the hand that was not holding his sword and raised it above their heads.

"The King is dead. Long live the King."

Stunned silence met his declaration.

Louder and with even more force, Akr repeated himself.

"The King is dead. Long live the King."

Finally, the crowd erupted in cheers.

Iry glared daggers at Akr. Akr turned to look at him, sparkling eyes filled with mischief.

"I am going to kill you, Akr." Iry said, voice rumbling with shock and embarrassment.

Akr's response was to smile and plant a kiss firmly on Iry's lips.

"Together—to the end," he said.

The Beginning

Author Bio

Kathleen Hayes is a bit of an all-around geek. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats and is excited to have just added a fellow super geek to her clan. Kathleen loves to explore worlds—whether in her head or on page. She welcomes you into her worlds and hopes you have as much fun there as she does!

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TO YOU I AM BOUND

By Cam Kennedy

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: Two men on rocks, in front of water, with their backs to the camera. One is sitting with his hands on his knees, and the other is standing with his hands interlaced on the back of his neck. Steam is coming off the water, and they are dressed in tight black shorts or possibly boxer briefs

Photo 2: Kissing, naked men, one dark-haired and the other lighter, rub intimately together.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please take inspiration from the song Bound by Julia & the Doogans. Just to pique your interest, follow the link for the lyrics:

[Bound](#)

For the most part, I'm open to whatever this song speaks to you. But to help, here are some things that I happen to enjoy:

** GFY/OFY, coming out, dirty dancing/clubbing, sports/athletes, soldiers, forbidden lovers, angst (oh please, don't give me something super fluffy, give me something with depth that makes me want to crawl in a hole and mourn for a while.), friends/enemies-to-lovers, one night stands/fuck buddies turning into something more.*

** I'm cool with brocest, lighter kinkness, dark stuff, but please give me a happy ending that makes the journey worth whatever comes between the start and the end.*

** No thanks to threesomes+, other than that, do what speaks to you (genre included, go to the world you want, just bring me back a piece of it).*

Sincerely,

Samantha

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, post-apocalyptic

Tags: dystopian, alternate universe, law enforcement/special agent, homophobia, men with children

Content Warnings: child abuse/abduction (off page)

Word Count: 21,575

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Dedication

To Samantha who left me with a wide-open canvas on which to paint. To the Readers who wanted more of my world from “Carry On”. To Lou Sylvre and Jodi Pushkin, without you both I would be a mess. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

TO YOU I AM BOUND

By Cam Kennedy

Felix

It was his first day off in six weeks, and all Felix wanted to do was go to the gym, eat a huge meal, and sit on his ass in front of a vid-screen and watch entertainment vids. He should have known he'd be called up to the headquarters building before he was even ready to wake. He stabbed the End key, threw his com-device down on his desk, and cursed the thing. Felix should have turned it off before he settled into his rack for the night, but since he didn't, he headed for the shower, grumbling the entire time.

He ended his tirade when the hot water rushed over his body, leeching some of the tension from his shoulders. It had been far too long since he'd had a decent shower with good water pressure. He'd been too tired the night before to indulge himself. His bed's siren song had been too loud to ignore. He idly wondered if he had enough time to bring himself off in the shower, but quickly decided he didn't. With his luck, someone would come looking for him at a crucial moment. Easier not to get started. He made quick work of soaping up and rinsing off, barely bothering to dry himself thoroughly before dressing in the black tactical uniform, a routine which had defined the last several years of his life.

Felix had joined the organization generically named the Agency five years earlier, to try to make sense of the violence being waged against homosexuals. He'd needed to make a difference. When Felix joined the Agency, it was still considered a terrorist movement. It had recently been legitimized, and the agents' criminal records were wiped clean by the newly formed United Western Alliance. Overnight, the world had broken apart and reordered itself. The UWA versus the Eastern Religious Republic (ERR). The corporate machine that powered the UWA saw and met the demand for equal treatment of all its citizens. After all, the oppressed couldn't spend money. The ERR was exactly what it sounded like, a safe-haven for the religiously inclined who believed homosexuals and their like shouldn't be allowed to exist. Felix shuddered, thinking there was no place on the planet he'd hate living more. His inclinations favored men, and he'd never had an ounce of shame to spare for his preference.

He stayed lost in his own thoughts, and almost passed the command center. He quickly redirected himself and walked into the more formal setting. He squared his shoulders and straightened his back, walking up to the iris scanner and allowing it to scan his eyes.

Walker, Felix Zebediah. Time with the Agency five years, seven months. Access Granted. Report to the director's office, Mr. Walker.

The computer-generated voice made him want to grit his teeth. He found it annoying, but he kept his expression neutral, until the directions had been relayed. He stalked toward the director's office, not bothering to return the greetings of his coworkers. Irritated that his day off was being interrupted, he didn't care who knew it. He refused to allow himself to worry about the nature of the visit, even though he'd only met the director twice. The last time had been during his early years with the Agency. Felix stopped in front of the director's door, and had just raised his hand to knock when the door slid open, revealing the immaculately clad director sitting behind a sleek metal desk. Felix met the director's eye and tried in vain to discern the other man's age. *Older* was all he could come up with. He seemed ageless. Snowy white hair, maybe a bit too long to be considered professional in this business, much like a lion's mane. If Felix had to hazard a guess, he'd probably say the man was about as dangerous as any of the other operatives he worked with.

Felix stepped into the room and came to attention at the desk. "You requested my presence, sir?"

The director moved his fingers over the vid-screen built into the desk before him, obviously rapidly sorting through files. "Agent Walker, I've been told you have a background in law enforcement. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir. That is correct. I worked as a detective before joining the Agency five years ago."

"We need you to go to the East as an interdepartmental transfer." The director's gaze was assessing, waiting for Felix to react.

Felix kept his face impassive, even though every fiber of his being was screaming, *what the fuck?* "Respectfully, sir, you want me to volunteer to go to the East?"

The well-dressed man, who held his life in his hands, grinned as if he could read Felix's thoughts. "We believe that you could provide us with very necessary information about the laws and the transition process. There is a two-

year period before the borders close. Your liaison assignment is to last eighteen months, so you will be out in plenty of time.”

Felix allowed his shoulders to sag just a little. He had no desire to spend the next year and a half surrounded by homophobic theists, when he'd fought so hard to gain the freedoms they'd just won. He'd hoped to find someone and settle down, now that the United Western Alliance had declared them fully equal citizens.

He was so lost in his own thoughts he didn't even notice the director cross the room. When the director's heavy hand landed on his shoulder, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Smith was dressed in the finest suit, with just a hint of silver pin-striping running through it. It made the man seem even more intimidating than his agile grace. It brought to Felix's mind his earlier assessment of a caged feline. His eyes though—they were kind and sad. “My apologies for having to ask this of you, Agent Walker. You are the only top agent with the credentials and the background we need for this mission. No one else has the police background that you do.”

Felix sighed and nodded. “I'll do it. I'm not happy, but I'll do it. My only question is, how do I get past the blood test?”

Mr. Smith flashed a brilliant smile, his eyes twinkling with excitement. “We have a liquid compound that you'll have to drink every day. This compound will trick the test into showing you to be heterosexual.”

Felix couldn't help but feel like he'd been sucker punched. “I'm not going to suddenly start liking women, am I?”

“No, Mr. Walker, this will simply trick the blood test. As we both know, there is no way to alter the way you were born. You can be homosexual or heterosexual, and some lucky individuals are bisexual, but there is no changing it. The compound is very safe, I assure you. I was the original test subject. I would never allow my operatives to take something I didn't think was safe enough for myself.”

Briefly, Felix wondered if he'd just received the coveted confirmation that Director Smith was indeed gay. He didn't allow himself to dwell on it, though, as the director's sexuality had no bearing on the mission he faced. His focus needed to center on this mission. At the end of the meeting, Felix's head was spinning. His whole life had been turned upside down in a matter of minutes. Eighteen months of acting straight in the East, where his particular preferences could get him jailed or even killed.

Fuck! What the hell did I get myself into?

Seamus

Seamus Breckenridge sat straight, his body almost rigid, and looked across the battered wood desk from his balding and slightly overweight supervisor. His jaw dropped, betraying his astonishment. "I have to what?"

"Look, Breckenridge, I understand that this isn't ideal, but you have to comply with the new laws."

"You are telling me that if I don't move back in with my parents, the child welfare division is going to seize my kids, and you want to spout words like ideal?" Seamus's voice had risen as he spoke, and by the time he finished, the veins in his temple were pounding, and he could feel that his normally fair skin was flushed scarlet.

"You damn well better get ahold of yourself. The new laws are the new laws, and I'm damn sorry that I have to be put in the position of having to tell you this. They don't give a shit that your wife... died. The new law states that children have to live with a married couple in the home to provide a stable environment. It's damn stupid if you ask me. Something about trying to curb the rise in deviant behavior." Supervisor Adams looked uncomfortable. Sweat was starting to trickle down the side of his portly face. Adams, Seamus was sure, didn't want to cross the Breckenridge family, but the pressure being put on him from above was leaving him with no choice in the matter.

Seamus's broad shoulders slumped, as he felt the weight of the world lay heavy across them. He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to will himself not to break down in tears in front of his boss. He had just moved himself and his children into a new home the month before, because the memories of their mother's suicide made it hard for his little ones to sleep at night in the same place their mother had died.

Damn it, he'd lose the deposits, and he didn't want to think about the expense of moving. The tightened security, due to his father's prominent government position, meant a huge loss of privacy as well. Seamus squared his shoulders and nodded at Supervisor Adams. He knew if he tried to speak he'd probably break down sobbing, and it would be unacceptable for him to have a crying jag at work.

Adams clapped him on the shoulder and told him to take the rest of the week off to sort things out. Again, Seamus just nodded, still not trusting himself

to speak. He didn't speak to anyone at all on his way out of the station. In fact, with the scowl plastered across his face, everyone steered clear. As soon as he made it out to the personal transport lot, he used his com-device to contact his mother.

The com-device barely started to connect before Fiona Breckenridge, his mother, was answering. On the screen, her face creased in the same perpetual scowl she had always worn. He often wondered if her face hurt being stuck in the unpleasant position. Fiona Breckenridge was never happy. She didn't laugh. She was an unpleasant woman who seemed to do her best to make everyone else unhappy as well. She wore her hatred of the world wrapped tightly around her. She hated anyone different than her.

"Mother..." Seamus started to talk, but she cut him off, as usual.

"Seamus, would you like to explain to me why the National Department of Children's Services came to inspect our home?" His mother's voice sounded hard and angry. Seamus cringed inside. Her constant criticism grated on him, which was one of many reasons why he'd left home as soon as he was able.

"They passed a new law that children have to have a male and female married influence living with them, and since I no longer have a living spouse that puts me in violation of the law." He tried to keep all emotion out of his voice. His mother frowned on overly emotional men.

"So, that means you and your whelps will be moving back in here then. Good, we could use it in your father's next campaign. You can stay in the caretaker's cottage with them. It was already approved by those government officials that were here. Especially since you insisted on letting the officer from the West have use of the carriage house." Her voice sounded smug and self-satisfied. Seamus had to catch himself before he groaned out loud.

"Very well, Mother." He felt as if he were being told he had to lead himself and his children to their executioner, but he couldn't bear the thought of Bryan and Brynna being taken from him. The twins were the only bright spot in his life.

His mother didn't even bother to reply before she disconnected, leaving Seamus feeling like he needed to spill his stomach right there in the lot. He trudged the rest of the way to his transport and resigned himself to having to figure out how to arrange his move back to the one place he swore he'd never return.

Felix

He'd been traveling for about forty-eight hours; his transport had mechanical issues the entire distance; and the person he'd been seated next to kept a running commentary on the sins of the sexual deviants of the West and was a prime example of the reason he worked for the Agency. His nerves were worn thin, and there was only his undercover status to keep him from fishing his blade out of his luggage and cutting the idiot's tongue out. He used the gruesome images to calm his rage, as he departed the rickety transport. He followed the deluge of other passengers as they all went to retrieve their checked baggage. He saw his black duffle almost immediately and snagged it in an effort to try to escape the close press of bodies.

Felix scanned the area, watching families reunite, which made him a little bit sad. He was surprised to turn and see his name on a sign held by a sexy blond man in a police uniform. He allowed himself to observe the man for several minutes without revealing his presence. The man's blond hair was cut in an edgy style, spiked-up but still soft looking. His face was covered in blond stubble, and he looked as if he hadn't slept in a while. His body language was stiff, but his uniform was stretched over his muscular physique perfectly. He obviously didn't want to be there and likely felt stupid holding up the plastic sign. Felix decided to have mercy on the man, and he started moving forward, delighting when the man's eyes caught his own and lit up with some unnamable emotion. Relief, maybe.

Shifting all his baggage to his left hand, he extended his right in greeting. "Felix Walker." He also gave the sexy officer a bright smile, trying not to come across as flirty. The sexy officer shoved the plastic sign under his arm and engulfed Felix's hand in his own. His voice was a rumble baritone, causing shivers to course up Felix's spine.

"Seamus Breckenridge. I'll be your partner."

Felix's body clenched tight. *Oh shit, this was bad.* Having to work next to a sexy guy and not be gay for over a year was pretty much his idea of hell. He pulled out of the handshake and faced towards the exit. "Awesome. Let's get out of this airport."

Felix let Seamus lead the way out of the crowded airport and through a busy transport lot. He stopped at an older police transport. Seamus caught Felix's look of disdain at the transport and he shrugged. "Budget cuts, man. We get what we get." Felix just climbed silently into the dubious ride, wondering how bad this year was going to be.

Both men seemed content to let silence surround them, however, Felix started getting nervous when, instead of heading toward the city proper, Seamus drove them outside the city into more sparsely populated areas. He must have made a sound of alarm or protest because a flush stole over Seamus's features. "Shit, I mean damn, I mean shoot. Felix, the department decided that it would foster your sense of community values if you stayed with a local family during your time with us."

Felix wasn't really sure how to respond to the statement without coming across as a complete jerk. *Community values? What the hell was this crazy government playing at? Did they suspect him of being a spy?* "How... quaint." Felix said, his voice flat.

Seamus cleared his throat. "Look, I know that it isn't ideal. I pulled some strings though, and since my family's estate has an extra living space, you'll be staying with us. You'll be afforded much more privacy in our carriage house than you would staying elsewhere. Things have just been difficult since the reorder. Laws are becoming tighter all the time."

Felix stared hard at the blond, as if trying to read his thoughts. He spoke carefully. "Thank you, Seamus. I admit that sounds like a much better prospect than sleeping in someone's guest room like a foreign exchange student." Both men laughed, breaking the tension.

More relaxed, Felix couldn't help but feel the last forty-eight hours of traveling start to catch up with him. He nodded off at some point, only jerking awake when Seamus turned onto a long drive winding beyond a wrought iron gate. Massive stone walls flanked the gate on either side, and Felix assumed they surrounded the estate. He would have felt like they'd stepped back in time, if it had not been for the high tech security, complete with iris scan, in order for the heavy gates to swing open.

Tension filled Felix again, and he rotated his shoulders in a futile attempt to relieve it. No wonder the department had agreed so readily to Seamus's request. This was a fortress, and where better to keep a foreign police detective from getting into trouble than by having him live in a veritable prison. Dread pooled in his stomach. Would he even be able to complete his mission? Already, he was virtually cut off from his team—from everything he knew. Now, securing information and making his scheduled updates was going to be close to impossible. He sure hoped he'd be able to come and go a little more than the high tech security and stone walls seemed to suggest.

Seamus must have picked up on his discomfort, because he smiled reassuringly. "My father is in government. We must have impeccable security. My parents and younger brother live at the main house, when my younger brother isn't away at boarding school, and my father isn't at the capitol." He pointed toward a massive, almost castle-like building. It did not look inviting at all. It appeared intimidating. "My children and I occupy the caretaker's cottage." Seamus gestured toward a quaint stone house that looked much more like a home. "And you will be staying in the carriage house." He gestured towards what looked more like a small stone barn, almost the same size as the cottage. "We'll be neighbors, but I'll try to keep the children from bothering you too much."

Felix relaxed a little when he realized he'd have his own space. In truth, after living in the barracks for the past several years, it would be a little odd to be rattling around such a large place alone. "It looks fine, Seamus. You said you have children? Do you have a wife as well?"

Seamus looked sad, and his voice was quiet. "No, she committed suicide right after the reorder."

Felix had no idea what to say, but he was saved from having to think of something, when two ginger-haired children came tumbling out of the cottage door followed by a sour-faced woman who looked on with disapproval. Felix feared the woman's reaction would set the tone of his stay.

Seamus

Seamus was nervous as he drove Felix from the airport. He wasn't sure why, but something about the other man commanded his attention. Maybe it was the bit of rebel spirit which seemed to lurk in his eyes. Like he was going along with the program to humor everyone, but it was all down to his choice. Seamus had never been a rebel. He'd always towed the line as the eldest child and heir to the family estate. His only rebellion had been to enter the police service rather than go to school to be a lawyer like his father. Otherwise, Seamus Breckenridge's rebellions existed in only one place. His mind.

Driving gave Seamus a chance to study Felix out of the corner of his eye. The man looked apprehensive of the living arrangements. It couldn't be helped though. There was no way his father or other government officials would allow a police detective from the West to run about the country unaccompanied. No doubt, the eastern counterpart sent to Felix's part of the world was experiencing

similar restrictions. Seamus only hoped in time Felix would understand he was trying make it easier on him, not play spy. He'd never been any good at lying, which was one of many reasons he didn't follow in his father's footsteps.

Pulling up to the heavy wrought iron gates and going through the security protocol was tedious, but his father insisted. When he turned to look at his companion, he couldn't help but wince at the cold stare Felix shot his way. Felix had obviously come to the correct conclusion. His stay here was merely that of a caged bird.

Seamus tried to reassure the other man, but he knew only time would prove him an ally. Instead of trying to convince Felix, he pointed out the buildings of the estate. He grinned when his two ginger-haired children raced toward the transport; his face relaxed, and his stomach unclenched. Nothing matched the joy of his twins. He and Felix hadn't even made it out of the transport before their cries of "Daddy", and their longwinded stories of the day were soothing him. He waited for them to quiet before introducing them to Felix.

"Bryan, Brynna, come meet Mr. Walker. He'll be staying in the carriage house for a bit and working with Daddy."

It was an almost solemn moment to watch Felix Walker, with his dark cap of curls, kneel on the ground to shake each child's hand in turn. "You can call me Felix, or Mr. Felix if your dad prefers. And if it's okay with him, I think I may have some candy in my bag."

Crystalline blue eyes turned on him, pleading, and Seamus almost couldn't keep from laughing. He kept his countenance serious though, as he regarded the twins thoughtfully. "I don't know. I'll have to ask the nanny if you had good behavior today." He knit his brow when the twins' happy faces fell, and they looked at the ground. He glanced toward Felix who had his gaze set on the doorway to the cottage. Instead of the nanny like he expected, there stood the unpleasant woman who'd birthed him. Seamus grimaced at the twins and shooed them toward the backyard.

Turning toward his mother, he lifted an eyebrow at her scowl. "Where is Ms. Randall?"

Fiona Breckenridge drew herself up, as if she were a queen and expected to be afforded that type of deference. She was dressed in a smart pantsuit, and her artificially blonde hair was pulled so tight against her head, Seamus was sure it was pulling her face taut. "I sent her home. She allowed the children to get muddy and track it through the main house."

It took everything Seamus had not to completely fly off the handle. Only knowing Felix would be there to witness his meltdown had him tempering his words. "They are children. They are supposed to get dirty and track mud. Why else do you have an army of servants to clean the floors?" He spoke through gritted teeth, with a feral smile fixed upon his face.

His mother merely sniffed, looked at Felix, and nodded. "Mr. Walker. I hope you enjoy our hospitality. Perhaps you can convince my son that he would do well to be more... disciplined." After her high-handed pronouncement, she swept past them to walk the distance to the house. As the two men watched her, her rigid posture never slipped. Seamus always wondered if she'd been born with a steel rod instead of a spine.

When Seamus looked back, he saw an odd smile on Felix's face. "So, is your father more pleasant than your mother?"

Seamus snorted. "Not really. He's just as cold, but not as rude. I doubt you'll have many occasions to meet him. He stays in the capitol most of the year." He was surprised when Felix lay a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"So, what's for dinner? I'm starving."

Seamus laughed at the way Felix had changed the subject. They quickly herded the dirty children inside and began to talk about dinner. For the first time since the day he found out his wife had committed suicide, Seamus thought things might be okay. Something about the other man put him at ease the way he'd never been with any other person, and if some of his thoughts were inappropriate, he'd never tell.

Felix

In the eight months he'd been a "guest" of the Eastern Religious Republic, Felix had been amazed at how seamlessly the partnership with Seamus Breckenridge had fallen into place. Their bosses were amazed at their closure rate. They'd become fast friends, and they worked together as if they'd always been together. Felix would be the first to admit he was falling head over heels for the far-too-serious Seamus Breckenridge, and he'd already fallen hard for the man's four-year-old twins.

Unfortunately, as seamlessly as the partnership had evolved, the unrest in the East was growing, and the communications from the West were talking of pulling him out early. The East was letting fewer and fewer people through the

“open” borders, and reports of suspected homosexuals going missing were rising. What Felix couldn't figure out was whether they were being smuggled out, or whether the government had something to do with the disappearances. If it was the government, they weren't using the police to round them up. For Felix, the scariest aspect was how many of the missing were children.

Now, Felix bent over his battered metal desk in the corner of the squad room, where he and Seamus had been assigned to fill out paperwork. He was poring over the file he was putting together of all the missing children, when his field of vision was filled with a coffee mug. He looked up and smiled at Seamus. Grabbing the coffee, he thanked his friend.

“What has you looking so serious?”

Felix leaned close and said quietly, so as not to be overheard, “Two more twelve-year-old boys have gone missing from the next town over. Someone said the tests came back Homo-positive.”

Seamus sat down hard and held his hand out for the file they'd been secretly working on for the last couple of months. “We shouldn't work on this here. People are starting to get suspicious of us pulling those files. Adams called me in the office earlier and requested I keep you under closer observation.”

Felix sighed. Working in secret was a pain in the ass. They'd stumbled upon the missing persons cases several months before, and Seamus had brought it to their supervisor's attention because the victims were just children. They were quickly shut down. Adams didn't want any attention being brought to homo-positive kids, and neither did those who outranked him. At first, Felix was surprised that Seamus continued to doggedly pursue the cases. He had proven himself to Felix in a way that Felix hadn't expected. Felix knew now that he could trust Seamus. Part of him wanted to tell Seamus his true purpose here in the East, but he didn't want to put his friend in jeopardy. He tore his thoughts away from the inner workings of his mind and focused back to the task at hand. “We need to figure this out soon, Shay. I have a feeling this isn't people helping these kids to get to the West where they'll be safe.”

His partner scowled, “I am aware, Felix. I just don't know what we're supposed to do about it when or if we do find out. Going against the government is a death sentence, even if I am a Breckenridge.”

“We'll worry about it when we get there, Shay. Now let's pack up and head home. I promised Brynna, I'd play tea party with her.” Felix smacked Seamus on his shoulder as he started towards the exit.

"I swear Felix, I don't know what I'm going to do with the kids when you go back to the West. You've spoiled them." Seamus started looking a little sad when he thought of his friend leaving.

"Oh now, none of that." Felix flashed a smile and waited for Seamus to catch up.

They were almost to the exit when Adams stuck his head out of his office and bellowed at the two men, "Mandatory blood tests for the whole department tomorrow. Don't be late."

The men nodded but Seamus looked nervous. "What's the matter, Shay? Just a blood test, no big deal."

Seamus mumbled, "Being Fergus Breckenridge's son means I never had my sexuality come into question. It's never been required I take the blood test. Plus, I hate needles."

Felix looked at him oddly, his mind racing a million miles an hour. How in the hell had Seamus never been tested, and why the hell would he be nervous about it? Unless he had some reason to be nervous. "Shay, you had a wife and two kids. It's not like the test is going to come out positive."

Seamus swallowed hard. Felix could see his throat working like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. When he finally spoke, after they were safely inside the transport, the words were choked out. "You see that's the thing Felix. The kids. They aren't mine."

"Why do you say that, Seamus? They look just like you." Felix spoke carefully, trying to puzzle out what Seamus was telling him.

"The twins are my father's children. He was having an affair with my best friend, Myra, and when she took pregnant, he forced me to marry her. My mother, Fiona, had already adopted one of his 'illegitimate whelps,' and had no intention of doing it again, especially at her age." Seamus used air quotes when he said illegitimate whelps to illustrate those were Fiona's words, not his own.

"Wait, so you're adopted too?" Felix's mind was struggling to catch up.

"No, my brother, Ian, is adopted. He's thirteen, and lives away at school."

"Holy shit, Shay. How have I lived next door to you for eight months and been your partner this whole time and not remember you had a brother? I can recall you mentioning him only once when I first arrived."

"Really, Felix? Why are you only taking unimportant facts away from this conversation?"

“I get it, Shay. Your dad is a world-class asshole. But my question is why? Why hide his lies?”

“Easy, because it’s the only thing I’ve ever done that’s pleased him. I know it sounds stupid, but it’s the truth. But my helping him lie killed Myra in the end. She couldn’t live with him not wanting her, and she couldn’t bear for me to look at her. I love the twins. I would do anything for them, including keep them safe from my parents. I wish I could have done more for Ian, but I figure him being away at school is enough to buffer him from them.”

Felix was quiet for a long time, and both of them watched the scenery pass them by on their way home. They were almost to the estate when Felix asked, “Seamus, are you gay?”

Seamus almost didn’t answer. “Bisexual, I think. I just hope enough to pass the test.”

Felix was going to answer, but they were passed by several other police transports. Seamus worried, and thinking they could be of assistance followed them, surprised when they all bottlenecked at the gate of the Breckenridge estate. Flashing the lights of their transport, they were able to weave through so they could access the controls of the gate. The procession then sped around them once again, all of them ending up in front of the main house.

Seamus’s mother stood on the steps looking far more grim than usual, which should have been impossible. Even more surprising, his father exited the door of the house as well. This was the first time since Felix had been there that the elder Breckenridge had darkened the doors of the estate.

Seamus immediately bolted for the main house, gesturing for Felix to find the twins. Felix was reluctant to leave Seamus amid all the chaos, but he knew the twins would need someone to keep them busy and calm. Besides, Seamus would come to him when it was time. When he was ready.

Seamus

His mother’s face was closed down cold, and his father seemed far too at ease. Seamus looked at each of them trying to read the situation. “Would someone inform me what is going on?”

Ice dripped from his mother’s words, and she pointedly didn’t look towards his father, “Apparently Ian tested homo-positive yesterday. Today, he was abducted from his boarding school.”

Seamus felt his heart stop in his chest, and then begin to beat painfully hard. "Ian was abducted?"

His father started muttering about God's law under his breath, and Seamus cut his words off with a sharp look.

The hours of interrogation by the police were tiresome, and no one in the family or staff claimed to know anything. Hell, the kid was thirteen years old; he may not even realize he was gay. Seamus, refusing to trust the other officers to follow through, tried to collect as much information as he could without drawing any attention to himself. Most of the other officers were only taking interest because this was a government official's son, and the brother of a fellow officer. Otherwise, Seamus doubted they'd give fuck-all about some homo kid being snatched.

The explosions came when all the officers had left, and the heavy wrought iron clanged behind them.

Fiona Breckenridge stood staring into the fireplace watching the gas flame. Her eyes were a little vacant, but she was still dressed impeccably in her green linen pantsuit. There wasn't a wrinkle in it. There wasn't a hair out of place on her perfect head. Her voice was quiet and deadly when it whipped through the room. "Fergus Breckenridge, not on my watch. You'll not throw away another child. I never wanted Ian. I never wanted him in my home. You begat him on some whore, betraying your faith and your vows. You will locate the son you forced me to adopt. The one we paid millions to keep his origin a secret. If you don't do everything in your power to ensure this child is found..." She trailed off, finally turning to face them. She stared into Fergus's eyes, her own filled with tears Seamus would have sworn she wasn't capable of producing. "I'll ruin you. I will spare no dirty laundry. Not even the secrets you thought you hid so well by forcing your oldest son into a false marriage." She never raised her voice, and by the time she was finished speaking, any trace of tears was long gone. Replacing it was a cold hatred which made Seamus shiver.

Fiona Breckenridge had been born to money and power. Whatever station Fergus enjoyed now, it had come to him because Fiona had the connections to make it happen. Although Fergus occupied the government seat, it was widely known Fiona's word was law. She didn't make threats lightly, and a smart person never took them as such.

Fergus Breckenridge paled. His hands shook. "I'm not certain I can un-ring this bell, Fiona."

Fiona took a step towards him. "You had our daughter taken when she was an infant because she had the misfortune to be born a girl, and you had no use for a girl. Not ever again Fergus. You made a promise to me, and I'm holding you to it. You've broken every other oath you've taken, but it will be over my corpse, you'll break this one." She turned to look at Seamus. "She was your twin. It pains me to see Brynna because I imagine that is what Soarcha would have looked like. Seamus, I'm charging you with not letting your father get away with this."

Fergus practically ran from the room after Fiona swept past them. She held herself so stiffly, Seamus felt the first bit of compassion he'd ever felt for her. It was foreign, because Fiona had let him know at an early age she needed nothing and no one. It was heartbreaking to think Fergus had broken her so thoroughly.

Seamus lingered, looking around the formal parlor in all its decadence and wondering where the debris was, because it felt as if his entire life had just detonated around him. Soon everything started to blur together, and he made his way home, hoping for a hot meal and the comfort of his friend. He felt as if he were barely holding it together at the seams, sure that if he stepped too hard or moved too quickly his insides would come spilling out at his feet.

Felix

He'd become bored waiting for Seamus to return. Felix had already played with the twins and fed them dinner, and they'd been full of questions about all the cars and where their daddy was. He'd tried to keep them busy by telling silly stories until they'd both fallen asleep. Felix had tucked their blankets around them, content to look at their angelic faces. Somehow this little family had gotten under his skin. There was such a pain in his heart over the thought of leaving them soon to go back home. Back to barracks living and working all the time. Back to a life filled with lonely nights lacking laughter and... family.

He was sitting at Seamus's dining room table, the remains of dinner pushed to the side and case files piled all around him, when Seamus came through the front door. Each step was slow and measured. Felix looked up, a pen dangling out of his mouth, when Seamus came to the entranceway between the living room and dining room. Seamus looked waxy-pale, and he shook. Without a thought, Felix stood up, letting the case files scatter, and wrapped Seamus in a tight hug. It was the first time their bodies had been so close, and despite being

worried about his friend, he couldn't help but notice how good the other man felt against him.

As soon as Felix's arms closed about him, it was as if Seamus split wide open. He was wracked with harsh, broken sobs, which shook his whole body. Both men sank to their knees, Felix guiding Seamus to the floor so he wouldn't fall, and then held on and rode out the storm. What seemed like hours later, their knees numb from kneeling on the hardwood floor, finally Seamus went limp, just resting against Felix. "Shay, are you ready to talk to me now?"

Seamus shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, "Not tonight. Help me up?"

Felix pulled away and got to his feet, then helped Seamus. Seamus took a step toward his bedroom, but almost fell back to his knees. Felix caught him under his arm and slung him over his shoulder. Seamus started to protest, but he just didn't seem to have the energy. He was wrung out. Something was wrong, and it was killing Felix not to know. Felix wanted to fix it. He didn't like seeing Seamus so defeated.

Felix dropped Seamus on his wide king-sized bed. The man bounced but remained unmoving otherwise. "Shay, can you undress yourself?"

Seamus grunted. Taking that as a no, Felix bent and untied the man's police-issue boots. He pulled them off, followed by the socks. He took the time to place the boots neatly next to the bed. When he moved up to Seamus's belt he hesitated. It was everything he'd dreamed of doing, but in the worst situation. His hands shook as he wrestled the pants off Seamus's limp form. Unfortunately, Seamus had decided to forgo underwear, and Felix groaned when he saw that. He tugged Seamus by his hands, causing him to sit up, with a dazed look on his face. Frustrated, Felix snapped. "Dammit, Shay, help with your shirt at least." After several minutes of fumbling, he finally got the other man settled under the covers. He was almost to the door, planning on going for a run or something to relieve the tension, when he heard Seamus's quiet voice, "Don't go. Just stay tonight."

Felix closed his eyes. He didn't *even* want to torture himself this way. He cleared his throat. "Sure, Shay. Let me just put dinner away."

"No! Just leave it, Felix. Please. I know I'm asking for a lot. More than a man should ask another man. But can you just stay with me for a while. There is plenty of room here. I just want to not be alone for a little while." A shiver racked Seamus's body, even though he was buried under layers of blankets.

Felix sighed, knowing he couldn't leave his friend, but not looking forward to being so close to everything he couldn't have. "Let me at least lock the doors and turn out the lights, Shay. I'll be right back."

Felix walked through the house turning off lights and scanning his thumb to lock the door. When he got back to Seamus's doorway, he felt like his world was being upended. If he walked through the door, nothing would be the same ever again. He shook his head, unwilling to let his friend suffer alone with whatever burden he was carrying. He quietly undressed down to his shorts, and slid into the large bed, making sure to keep distance between himself and the other man. He stared at the ceiling for a long time before sleep came.

Seamus

Seamus startled, suddenly awake. He felt too warm, like he was in bed with a furnace. He tried to move, but arms tightened around him. He stilled, trying to figure out who might be in bed with him, and then the previous day's events came crashing back. He sagged back against Felix. He shivered at feeling the other man's warm breath upon his neck. How long had it been since someone had held him? Had anyone ever? It felt good to have another human being care about him. He would bet money, though, Felix hadn't intended to get this close. After all, Felix was straight. This could get awkward quickly. He struggled a little bit, his naked ass pressing into Felix's boxer-covered erection. Felix groaned and Seamus froze, only to wiggle a little more to try and get loose.

Felix's arms tightened, and a hand moved onto his hip to still him. Felix's voice was deeper than Seamus had ever heard it, making Seamus think of every dirty, secret thought he'd harbored in his heart. "Shay, if you wiggle much more, I'm going to come all over you."

It was Seamus's turn to groan. The thought that he could cause Felix to spill all over them was enough to have him harder than steel, a state he hadn't reached in quite some time. Felix's arms relaxed, and Seamus turned over. Looking the other man in the eye before taking a risk that could have them both in prison. He leaned forward and captured Felix's lips with his own. At first there was no reaction, but then Felix kissed him back. They both gasped, their erections pressing together through the thin material of Felix's boxers. Seamus had just rolled on top of Felix, settling his knees on either side of the dark-haired man's hips when the front doorbell chimed. They looked at each other and cursed.

Seamus scrambled to get out of bed and yank open the dresser drawer to fling sweats at Felix. Grabbing a pair for himself, along with briefs, he tried to struggle into them. He glared when a dressed Felix laughed at him and walked past him to let the nanny in.

Seamus was close behind him. Close enough he had seen the look of disapproval on the nanny's face. He sighed inwardly. Sometimes he wondered why he hadn't fled for the West when the borders opened. He glanced toward Felix, who was standing behind the nanny. He winked at Seamus, a twinkle in his amber eyes. Seamus glanced away quickly, sure his erection was going to make a reappearance. He ran a hand through his hair, causing it to stand on end.

"Sorry, Ms. Randall." He gestured toward the piles of case files. "As you can see, we've spent much of the night working. We are trying to find leads on who might have abducted my brother." Seamus kept his voice just on the edge of being harsh. He saw Felix raise an eyebrow, and he knew he owed the other man an explanation.

Her cheeks got a little pink with, what Seamus assumed, was embarrassment for thinking the worst. "Of course, Mr. Breckenridge. I just came to ready the children for the day."

Seamus nodded at the plainly dressed woman and gestured for her to do her job.

He felt the warmth of his ebony-haired partner before the other man spoke softly behind him. "You play Lord of the Manor quite convincingly, Mr. Breckenridge." And before Seamus could get offended, he added, "It's sexy as hell."

Seamus shot forward, putting space between them, and he glared at Felix, but quickly grinned when he realized his glare had no effect on the easygoing westerner.

Felix cleared his throat, and said, "I guess we need to get to work and take our blood test."

Seamus was worried, and he didn't even try to hide it from Felix. He really wasn't sure that he'd be a free man after the test.

Felix patted him on the shoulder and said quietly, "Don't worry. I have a plan. I need to run over to the carriage house and get dressed for work."

For a moment, Seamus thought the other man was going to kiss him, but he just smiled and slipped out the door. Seamus was left staring after Felix's flexing ass in those too-tight sweats. Seamus had Felix beat in height, but Felix

had a broader physique. He heard the kids stirring and set himself towards the task of making breakfast.

Once breakfast was ready, Seamus started cleaning the dinner mess they'd left from the night before. The monotonous tasks calmed him, and by the time Felix returned, he was hand washing the few dishes. He turned and smiled at the dark-haired man leaning on the doorway, arms crossed. Pink stole into his cheeks as he thought back to how they'd awakened. As if Felix could read his mind, a devilish smile stole over his face. Seamus hurried to finish the dishes and dry his hands on the towel Felix suddenly had waiting for him. Feeling shy, he edged around the other man and took off for his bedroom with Felix laughing softly behind him.

Inside his room, Seamus dressed quickly in his uniform. If he didn't get a move on, Adams would have their heads on pikes in front of the station. When he stepped back into the living room, his heart stopped in his chest. His father sat on his couch, with the twins eating breakfast only a room away. Felix stood glaring at the man, with his arms crossed over his chest. His father was looking at Felix as if he were less than the dirt under his shoe.

Seamus cleared his throat, and both men looked at him. "Felix, could you go in the dining room and help Ms. Randall with Bryan and Brynna, please." Even though his voice was quiet, there was steel in it.

Felix nodded reluctantly, shooting Fergus one last glare.

"Well, to what do I owe the... honor of a visit, sir?" Seamus spat out the last word, feeling as though he'd swallowed something bad. He still couldn't believe what a coldhearted monster this man was. A murderer.

Fergus looked old all of a sudden, and sad. His voice went quiet, and Seamus had to lean forward to hear him. "Seamus, I've made mistakes. More than my fair share, but there are much bigger powers out there than me, or even your mother. Bigger and more deeply entrenched than you can imagine. You cannot fathom what will happen to all of us if you cross them with this missing kids thing."

Seamus started to open his mouth, but Fergus waved it closed.

"I know about the files you and Walker have had access to. I know a lot about your boy, there," he said, gesturing towards the kitchen. "Hopefully he'll trust you enough to tell you soon. Your lives could depend on it. I'm so closely watched these days. I will try to get information to you about Ian. But Seamus,

go into this with your eyes open.” Fergus got choked up, tears in his eyes. “I know you’re confused right now, but don’t trust anyone. No one, except for Walker. Do you understand?”

Seamus nodded slowly, unsure what his father was rambling on about. Fergus stood, and stepped close, his body almost touching his son’s. He held out his hand as if to shake, and Seamus, acting on instinct, clasped it in his own. There was a small vial in between their hands. “You won’t pass the test today, Seamus. Take this as soon as you can, and you should test clear. Watch your back, kid.”

Seamus watched dumbly as his father left. *What the fuck was that about? Maybe Felix could help figure it out.* He quickly shoved the vial in his pocket and hollered for Felix to get into the transport so they wouldn’t be late.

Felix

Felix walked to the transport feeling confused as hell. He’d been surprised when Fergus had come in, and had desperately wanted to rip the man a new asshole, just because of the position he’d put Seamus in over the twins. Felix knew more had occurred the night before, and he could barely contain himself with wanting to know every single detail. He was a “fixer” by nature, and wanted to eliminate all obstacles for those he cared about. By this point, there was no doubt in his mind he’d fallen in love with his adorably sexy partner, not that he planned on sharing that conclusion out loud anytime soon.

The silence in the transport became tense after they passed through the gates of the estate. “Seamus,” Felix growled, to warn Seamus his patience was wearing thin.

Seamus looked over, feeling guilty. “My brother, Ian, was abducted from his school yesterday. Same as the others. For the same reason. My mother thinks my father is behind it. My father is... Hell, Felix, I’m not even sure what side he’s on. But apparently he either killed or shipped off my twin sister when we were babies. I just don’t fucking know what to think.”

Felix lay a comforting hand on the back of the other man’s neck. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll find Ian, Shay. I promise we’ll find him.”

Seamus nodded sharply. “My fath... Fergus said I shouldn’t trust anyone except for you. I do trust you Felix, but he also said he hoped you’d trust me soon because our lives might depend on it. Any clue what the hell that’s all about?”

Felix froze. How did Fergus get that information? “Shay, I do trust you. More than you can believe, but I’m a little nervous about how your father came across the information.”

“What information, Felix? It’s not like you are a spy for the West or something.” Seamus’s snapping voice sounded impatient.

Felix silently counted to ten, giving Seamus time to put it together. He only got to five before it clicked. “Shit! Are you kidding me? You’re a spy? For the West? Really?”

Felix nodded, afraid the man who had become the center of his universe would reject him.

Seamus stared out of the transport for several minutes before smiling. “Spies are sorta hot Felix. Besides, I think maybe your skill set might be the only thing to help get my brother back. My father said the powers that be are bigger than we can imagine, and once we cross this line there would be no going back. He also said I wouldn’t pass the test today, and he gave me this.”

Felix watched nervously as Seamus dug the black vial out of his pocket and tossed it to him. Felix turned it over and saw the mark on the bottom that looked a lot like the mark on the bottles he’d brought with him. This was from the Agency lab. He’d almost bet his life on it. He reached into his own pocket and pulled out an identical vial. “This came from my lab in the West, Seamus. It’s a compound to make Homo-positives come up negative.”

Seamus swallowed past the lump in his throat. “So does this mean my dad is on *your* side?”

“I’m not sure, Shay, I’ll have to try my contact later, when it’s safe. For now, just take the liquid compound, and let’s get this test over with. Then we’ll try to make some sort of excuse to Adams so we can work out of the house for the rest of the day. We have to start thinking about the next step, though. What happens when we find these teens? We’re going to have to figure something out.”

Seamus looked out the window again. “If I can secure us passage on a sea transport ship, do you think you could get all of us out of the country before the government comes crashing down on our heads? Including the twins?”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? Starting in the West with almost nothing? Don’t get me wrong, Shay, I want you to come with me. I want to explore this thing between us, but I don’t want to be something you regret. If

you can get us on a ship, I can make sure the teens get to the West. If you don't want to come, then you don't have to."

Seamus was pulling the transport into the lot at work. "Felix, I want this. Besides, how am I going to live here if they keep testing for this gene, and what the hell happens if one of the twins tests positive? No, we need to get out of the East. All of us."

Felix knew he needed to make contact with Director Smith and make him aware of the new situation. His heart was soaring, though. He was going to take Seamus home to the West. Now he just had to find the missing kids and avoid being detected by the government. Simple. Right?

"If this is what you want, Shay, then I want you with me. Now take your meds." Felix tossed a vial in Seamus's lap and watched him as he took it. He hoped that the line was long enough for it to kick in before the test.

Seamus

He almost couldn't believe the words that had spilled out of his own mouth, but after he spoke them, Seamus knew deep in his soul he was doing the right thing. Whatever life he'd tried to make here in the East, it had all been built on a lie. He could take the kids to the West and make a real life. One, which he hoped, included the man next to him.

He and Felix didn't speak as they walked into the precinct and joined the line of men and women waiting to have the blood test administered. All his fellow officers were joking around. None of them were nervous about it, most of them having passed it multiple times since it came out a few years ago. Seamus couldn't help but feel a cold ball of dread settle in the pit of his stomach. He wished he could latch onto Felix's hand for support, but obviously the option was out of the question. They wouldn't even need to give him the test.

He tried to pass his nervousness off as a fear of needles, which had the other guys snickering at him. It's amazing how something that could change your life so drastically, took only a few seconds. Just a small prick, and it was over. Felix was waiting for him when he exited the room. They looked at each other and nodded. No words needed to be spoken. They had barely made it to their desks when Adams bellowed for them to get in his office.

"He wouldn't have the results yet, would he?" Seamus hissed.

Felix shook his head slightly. "Probably about your brother."

When they reached Adams's office, they took a seat in the wooden chairs in front of his desk. Adams didn't give them even a few seconds before he started in on them. "Breckenridge, why the hell are you here? Shouldn't you be home with your mother? And Walker, why did you let him come to work today? He's going to be useless. I also called you both in here to remind you that this is not your case. You need to let the assigned officers work the case. Is that clear?"

Seamus, relieved it wasn't about the blood test results, gave a rather enthusiastic, "Yes, sir!" which had the other two men looking at him like he'd lost his mind.

Felix quietly said something to Adams he couldn't quite make out, and shook the man's hand. Then he smacked Seamus on the shoulder. "C'mon, lost boy. He's right, you are worthless today. Let's head back to the estate."

They'd almost cleared the office door, when Adams said, "I hope you get your brother back, Breckenridge. Send him to one of those camps sponsored by the church. He'll be right as rain then. Won't ever test negative but maybe keep him out of prison."

Seamus clenched his jaw and forced himself to say something that sounded polite. He was never more grateful for Felix being there to pull him away from the situation. Now they just needed to find out what happened to the kids, so they could help them escape people like Adams.

They hadn't had time to do more than shed their jackets, so it only took a moment to gather them before they were back in the transport and headed back to the Breckenridge Estate.

Felix rubbed a hand down his arm. His voice was quiet but serious. "Shay, you have to keep your cool better than that. It's the same shit you've been told your whole life. Don't let it bother you."

"I know, but he's talking about a thirteen-year-old kid."

"It's always been about a thirteen-year-old kid, or a twelve-year-old. Hell there've been cases of parents giving up their kids at birth, if they test positive."

"That's just sick."

"Yeah, that's why I started working for the Agency. I couldn't stomach all the atrocities being waged against innocent people who had the misfortune to be born a certain way. Who I have the potential to love shouldn't make me less of a person in the eyes of the law."

Seamus nodded, agreeing. "It's sad how it's easy to turn a blind eye to things that you think don't affect you."

"Yes it is. Shay, can you pull over in a wooded area so I can make contact with my boss in the West?"

Seamus complied, pulling into a heavily wooded area, so that Felix could get out of the transport. He watched Felix pace back and forth. Felix was obviously arguing with his handler, and Seamus couldn't help but feel guilty for causing trouble.

Felix got back in the transport, seething. "They want me to pull out now. They say the situation's getting too unstable."

Seamus thought his heart was going to break. His voice wavered and cracked, but he had to make himself ask. "And what are you going to do?"

Felix raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth, then launched himself towards Seamus. Seamus gasped and moaned under the heated assault of Felix's lips. The kiss ended as abruptly as it started. "I'm not going without you and Ian and the twins. Okay?"

Seamus liked the ferocity he saw in Felix's eyes. He wasn't sure that he loved Felix, but he sure as hell liked him. That the other man wouldn't leave without them was something Seamus clutched to his heart like a security blanket. Seamus needed to believe that Felix wouldn't let him down.

Felix

The phone call with Director Smith left Felix feeling cold and not a little uncertain. He had just told his boss, more or less, to fuck off. The director wanted to pull him out. He'd refused to listen to what Felix had to say until Felix had told him he was refusing a direct order. He'd never heard his boss that angry. Director Smith had threatened to rescind the program and force him home early. Felix had countered with a threat to go underground. Eventually, the director saw reason and agreed to let him ride the situation out. He did insist that if anything felt off, Felix was to pull out, extra cargo or not. Felix had reluctantly agreed to play it the director's way as much as possible. However, there was no way he'd be leaving Seamus and his family behind, even if he hadn't been head over heels for the man.

He was aware that Seamus's feelings weren't quite there yet, and that he may be sticking his neck out only to have Seamus go his separate way once he got them to safety. Felix sure hoped not. When he looked at Seamus, he saw his

own past and his future rolled into one. There wasn't anything he wouldn't be willing to do to keep the man safe and happy.

Felix had become so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice Seamus had entered the Breckenridge Estate until he was parking the transport in front of the cottage. Felix smiled at the twins when they came barreling out of the cottage door and into Seamus's arms, like they did every day. It amazed him that they were always so excited to see their daddy, even when they weren't happy with him. He loved watching the way Seamus's eyes lit up when he saw their faces, as if in that moment, no matter how trying their day had been, all was right in the world. Felix felt lucky that for the last eight months he'd gotten to share in their lives.

Ready to stop dwelling in his own head, Felix slid out of the transport and snuck around the other side, growling like a bear, and rushing the twins to scoop Brynna up and start tickling her. She erupted into giggles, and her brother was soon tugging on him for his turn. Soon, he and Seamus were chasing them about the yard, under the swing set and over the back porch. It was one of those idyllic afternoons filled with sunlight and laughter that freezes in your mind for eternity, a prized memory to pull out on days when hope was needed.

Throughout dinner and the bedtime ritual, he and Seamus couldn't stop looking at each other. They couldn't stop smiling and enjoying the casual touching that had become part of the routine. Something they hadn't, before the last few days, given themselves the chance to fully enjoy. Despite their aborted attempt at sex that morning, Felix felt no real sense of urgency, and that surprised him. He was content to let the attraction build. He was afraid that if he rushed it would ruin the possibility of a future he wanted more than anything, so for the first time in his experience, he looked forward to taking things slow.

When they were finally alone in a quiet house, they turned their attention once again to work. They had put everything on hold to snatch happy moments out of the dark, but now they had to focus on finding Ian and the other missing children. He knew that their best bet was in waiting for the other officers to work the case. He hated the thought of getting secondary information, but he knew that they wouldn't be allowed anywhere near the crime scene.

The thought of the vastness of the task that they were undertaking was enough to make Felix a little queasy, so he didn't allow himself to dwell on it. He was a soldier, he could adapt and overcome. He'd do the job in front of him to the best of his ability, and no one could ask more of him than that. He also

counted on Fergus Breckenridge to help aid their escape. Felix didn't share that last part with Seamus, who was still caught between hating and resenting his father—sentiments that had no place in their investigation. As much as possible, they had to put personal feelings to the side so they could ensure everyone's safety.

Felix had been going over the files extensively for the past few months. Some of the earlier cases he knew front-to-back without needing to look through the files. He'd been secreting away copies of the information, scanning it, and sending it to Director Smith via his communicator, because Felix knew that Adams would soon cave to pressure and kick them completely off the case. No one here really wanted the kids found, because then they would have to deal with all the implications of the fact that people who tested positive were indeed born that way, not created by a debauched society. Scientists with their blood-tests and procedures had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that sexuality was a genetic trait, and no amount of social or religious teachings could change that. It didn't matter how puritan the East became, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, and all those in between, would not go away—in spite of how much the religious zealots clung to their faith.

They sat side by side at the kitchen table going over the newest information from Ian's case file, and then looking at security footage of the last three abductions. The same man appeared in the footage of all three abduction sites approximately twenty-four hours before the abductions. Felix grinned at Seamus, relieved to finally have some sort of lead to go on.

"Now we only have to figure out who this man is, Shay, and it will be the first solid lead we've gotten."

Seamus

Seamus looked closer at the man in the footage. He was abnormally tall, with steel-grey hair, slicked back. His suit was immaculate, and he carried himself like one of the socially elite that Seamus had spent his entire life rubbing elbows with. When the man turned, and Seamus got a clear look at the man's face, his stomach clenched, and he felt sure he was about to lose the contents of his stomach. What he saw wasn't possible. That man was supposed to be dead.

Seamus looked at Felix, and said softly, "That man is a ghost. We've got three crime scenes with images of a ghost on them."

Felix scoffed. "He looks real enough to me, Shay. I don't think we are dealing with anything of the supernatural variety."

Seamus shook his head when Felix missed his point entirely. "Not what I meant. He was presumed dead about five years ago after a horrible incident involving him experimenting on homosexuals. He was supposed to be leading a study to try and eradicate homosexual genes altogether, but all he ended up doing was disfiguring his own son, who he'd kept in captivity for years. It was a nasty business, and quite obviously, he faked his own death and is still working. His name is Doctor Christopher Anton. He is evil."

Seamus stopped talking and sat staring into space, horrible thoughts going through his head about what his little brother might be enduring at the hands of that madman. It made him want to leap from his chair and run to his rescue, in superhero fashion. He knew they didn't yet have enough information to act, though. He feared tracking down Anton may be more difficult than he hoped.

Felix

He wasn't sure what he could say that might make the situation any better, so he opted not to say anything at all. Instead, Felix wrapped his arms around Seamus and pulled him close, burying his nose in sweet-smelling blond hair. At first Seamus stiffened, but soon he relaxed into the embrace. Felix reveled in the feel of Seamus's arms wrapping around him.

Seamus soon tipped up his head, and he sought Felix's lips. Felix loved the slick slide of Seamus's lips against his own. He licked into Seamus's mouth, groaning low, as the other man tried to climb into his lap.

"Seamus, we need to move out of the kitchen."

Fumbling, stumbling, they stood. Still kissing, they bumped their way out of the kitchen and down the hallway to Seamus's room. They paused in their hunger for only a moment, to shut and lock the door, and then Felix was pushing Seamus down onto the firm mattress. He bounced once before scrambling back to settle in the middle. Felix stood at the side of the bed, looking at the man he'd been admiring for so long. He started undressing, and his voice dropped to a low growl when he spoke to Seamus.

"Strip. Now."

Both men scrambled to divest themselves of their clothes, not caring where the pieces landed. Seamus took the time, though, to push the bed coverings to the foot of the bed where they wouldn't be in the way.

Felix couldn't believe the perfection that was Seamus's body. He wasn't ripped, but he was solid, with a flat stomach and toned chest and arms. He could see in Seamus's eyes, as Seamus knelt on the bed looking at him, that he was self-conscious or uncertain. He caught Seamus's face between his hands, knelt in front of him on the bed, and whispered, "You are beautiful."

Seamus's smile was slight. "I'm nowhere near as ripped as you."

"Does it really matter? I like you the way you are. You are one of the most confident men I know, Shay. Why this attack of nerves?" Felix moved his hands to caress down Seamus's shoulders, their fully aroused cocks kissing between them. Seamus bit his lip and moaned low, flexing his hips involuntarily, trying to increase the friction.

"I've never..." Seamus looked at Felix, expecting him to fill in the blanks.

"Never?"

Seamus huffed out a breath. "I've never had sex with a man, but I want this, Felix. With you."

Felix sucked in a breath, that proverbial light bulb flickering on. He leaned in, capturing Seamus's lips with his own in a slow, lingering kiss. "We'll take it slow. I can't wait to feel you inside me."

Seamus looked at Felix in surprise. "You'd let me?"

Felix's face stretched wide in a grin, and he nodded. "We can switch when, and if, you are ready. Someday. We have all the time in the world, Shay."

Seamus seemed to swell with confidence as he watched. Felix took the opportunity to force him from his knees to his back. Seamus landed with a huffing laugh which quickly died when Felix's body pressed him down into the mattress, their weeping cocks sliding together, eliciting groans from both men. Felix straddled Seamus to gain greater friction, working their cocks together until Seamus gripped his hips hard and rolled them. Seamus's tongue swiped along the shell of Felix's ear, causing him to shiver and buck up against Seamus. Then, Seamus nipped along his neck, pausing to suck up a mark on his collarbone. "Fuck, Seamus. I need you in me soon, or I'm not going to last. Do you have lube or something?"

Seamus grinned. He stretched across Felix to fumble in the nightstand drawer for what Felix assumed was lube or possibly lotion. Felix couldn't resist latching onto Seamus's nipple when it hovered over his face. Tossing the tube of lotion on the bed, Seamus swore, still fumbling in the drawer. After a

moment, Felix twisted, trying to peer into the drawer as well. "Seamus, what are you looking for?"

"Condoms, I don't think I have any." Seamus sounded so sad, it was all Felix could do not to laugh and make the situation even worse.

"Shay, I trust you. I know you're clean, and I'm clean. We've both been tested, and we've both been alone for the entire eight months we've known each other. I trust you." Felix's eyes bored into his lover's, full of the trust and love he couldn't put into words. Not yet. Seamus's eyes were wide, but they filled with something Felix chose to believe was at least affection.

With a reverence markedly different from their earlier pace, Seamus ran his fingers through the hair on Felix's chest, taking the time to pluck at the raspberry-colored nubs hidden in the crisp, ebony curls. He traced the muscles and lines of Felix's stomach with his tongue, as if he could learn to read the ridges. Felix tried to hold himself still, both enjoying and agonizing over the suddenly slow pace. Time no longer held any meaning.

Seamus continued worshipping Felix's body until one sensation seemed to bleed into the next, and he was whimpering with need. He did well keeping relatively still, until Seamus's mouth bypassed his weeping cock and was lapping at his entrance. He couldn't help but jerk then, surprised at the expert move from his novice lover. And then he began begging. "Please, Shay, I need you."

Seamus sat up and fumbled with the lotion, ending up with far too much on his hand. He smoothed some down his own cock then used his fingers on Felix's already soft hole. Felix and Seamus locked eyes as Seamus's wide head was pushing gently against his entrance. With far more care than Felix himself would have been able to use in the moment, Seamus entered him. Felix loved the burn which quickly morphed into pleasure. It felt different, as he'd never let anyone inside him bare, but nothing had ever felt more right.

When Seamus began to move, Felix rose to meet him, and together they glided into a dance older than time, both of them racing towards the finish. Felix felt as if all of his reserves of patience had been used up. The pace was hard and fast, with Felix whispering hoarse encouragement for Seamus to fuck him harder and faster. Seamus's rhythm began to falter when Felix spilled hot between them. Seamus followed suit, emptying his seed deep inside Felix. For several long moments neither man moved, until Seamus captured Felix's lips in a sweet kiss. Reluctantly, the men separated, both groaning in disappointment when Seamus slipped out of Felix's body.

Seamus stood and smiled down at his lover before he went to the bathroom. Felix lay there, drifting in a postcoital haze, unable to form coherent thought yet, until he felt Seamus's cum trickling out of his ass. Grimacing, he was preparing to make himself rise, when Seamus returned with a wet cloth and began the process of cleaning him. He seemed to take particular care with his ass.

Seamus's face was a study of concentration, and Felix couldn't help but grin. "You didn't hurt me, Shay."

Seamus looked up and smiled softly. "I just feel honored you trust me that much."

Felix grabbed Seamus's hand and took the cloth, tossing it toward the bathroom. "The truth is Seamus, I'm falling in love with you."

Seamus never answered, but he captured Felix's lips and then reached down to pull the forgotten blankets over them. He settled behind Felix and wrapped his body around him. His hand ended up buried in Felix's chest hair. Felix had never been happier. In this moment, everything was perfect, but he knew in the back of his mind they couldn't stay in this blissful state. Hell, if anyone caught them now, they'd probably be carted off to prison. It was with these thoughts that Felix drifted off to sleep.

Seamus

One moment he was asleep, dreaming dreams of hot, sweaty lovemaking with Felix, and the next there was a hand clamped over his mouth. Seamus's eyes flew open, and he was about to struggle when a voice whispered in his ear.

"Don't move. Don't struggle. Let's face it. You have a lot more to lose than I do, man."

Seamus froze, fear shooting through his entire body. Frantically, his mind went over the evening. He was sure he and Felix had triple-checked to make sure the doors were secured and the security system was engaged. Those facts left a very short list of people who could get in here undetected. The number one suspect was his father.

"I'm letting go of you. Don't make a sound." The hand unclamped from his mouth, and he worked his jaw. He slowly turned over to look at his late night intruder, feeling very vulnerable in his naked state. He felt Felix stiffen next to him. Knowing his lover was awake, Seamus smoothed a comforting hand down his side. He was trying to warn Felix to stay still. When Seamus turned over, he

was fully expecting to see his father. He was shocked to see a stranger dressed in a black tactical uniform. His skin was pale, and he had hard, piercing eyes which looked like shards of green glass. The intruder had auburn hair, the color of an old penny. He was tall too, although if he were taller than Seamus, it wasn't by much. Seamus couldn't help but catalogue these details as if he were going to file a police report, trying to find identifying traits. Seamus sat up and swung his legs over the side of his bed, reaching down to grab a discarded throw blanket to wrap around his hips. He kept his voice low. "Would you like to tell me who the fuck you are, and what the hell you are doing in my home?" Now he was more awake, and rage simmered below the surface, ready to erupt. This man had invaded his home, where his children were.

Seamus also noticed he didn't see a weapon in sight. *What was this man after?*

The man leveled an amused look at Seamus, complete with raised eyebrow, as if to say what are you going to do about it? "You've caused quite an uproar, Mr. Breckenridge. My... employer, suspected the nature of your relationship with your partner, but needed confirmation before he was willing to help you."

"Help me how?" Seamus clutched the throw blanket around his waist awkwardly. He didn't for one second trust this stranger. Hadn't his father warned him to trust no one? Seamus hated feeling trapped and vulnerable. He felt the bed shifting behind him, and then Felix's hand grazed his back, distracting him from the nameless man in front of him.

Felix snorted and sat up, not bothering to worry about the sheet or covering himself. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the Boy Scout. I didn't expect to see you here, Agent Donovan. Are you playing babysitter since I decided not to follow protocol?"

The agent gave up any pretense of threatening Felix and Seamus by plopping down in the wingback chair that was part of Seamus's reading nook. The man, much to Seamus's annoyance, picked up the book that had been lying on the arm of the chair and thumbed through it, then tossed it to the side.

Seamus ground his teeth together. "What is going on? Who are you? And can I put some damn pants on?" He directed the questions just as much at Felix as he did at the mysterious Agent Donovan.

Donovan laughed. "I am Skylar Donovan. I work for the Agency. I am not playing babysitter. I'm more deciding whether or not to help you obtain the information you need. The director was a little concerned about your situation,

and whether or not Sparky here was going to double-cross you. Suffice it to say, I'm convinced enough to pass on the location of one Dr. Christopher Anton."

Felix swore and stood up, stalking over to Seamus's dresser where he yanked the drawer open to grab two pair of what seemed like an endless supply of sweatpants. Seamus had to stretch to catch the pair that was flung at him, causing him to lose his blanket. He glared at Skylar. "Do you mind?"

"No, not at all. Please continue."

Seamus had a feeling he wouldn't be winning a verbal battle with the agent, no matter how angry he was. Rather than spar with Donovan, he pulled his sweats on, and turned to find Felix sliding his pair over his round, perfect ass. He might have whimpered a little. Felix turned to grin and wink at him. Both men settled side by side on the edge of the bed facing Skylar. They couldn't be too careful about alerting anyone on the estate they were up, or about Felix still being there in the cottage.

Felix pointed a glare at his coworker. "Keep talking, Skylar."

"Well, my impatient friend. It seems that Dr. Anton recently applied to enter the West under an alias. We found it a little strange, since he'd been declared dead by the Eastern government. Things are about to start getting really bad over here, Felix. Director Smith recommends that you abort the mission and return to the West."

Seamus couldn't believe the change that came over Felix's face. It became cold and hard, almost scary. Gone was the warm, sweet man that he had made love with only hours before. His voice was even colder than his face, and Seamus couldn't suppress a shiver. "Not without Seamus. Not without his brother. Do not push me on this, Donovan. Do not think for one second that I don't have my own resources and people I trust."

It both warmed and terrified Seamus that Felix so rabidly defended him and his family. The terror came from having that veil of denial he'd been looking through for so long ripped away from his eyes. That emotion that both men could see and neither would name out loud was love. Seamus was sure of it, and he was sure, finally, of his own feelings as well. He slipped a hand into Felix's, presenting Skylar with a united front. "I have resources as well. Not everyone over here in the East is our enemy."

Felix

He knew Director Smith had sent Skylar to needle him, and it was working. Part of him wanted to get up off the bed and plant his fist in the other man's smug face. Felix had meant everything he'd said. He wasn't going to give up Seamus so that he could get back to "safety". Sometimes he wondered if the world would ever be safe for people like them. Seamus slipping his hand into his only cemented what he already knew. He'd die to protect this man.

"If you are going to give us the information we need to find this bastard, then do it. If not, slip back into the dark and stay out of our way." Felix's voice had dropped into a deep growl. He had to stifle a smile, though, when he saw the way Seamus shivered.

Skylar laughed. "Felix, we never intended to hang you out to dry, we just needed to know that this was serious. You are one of our most valued agents. You can't go getting yourself killed. What you two are undertaking is undeniably dangerous. You may want to think of sending the twins on a holiday with their long lost uncle so they will be out of harm's way, and they can't be used as leverage against you two."

Felix looked at Seamus and could see the internal war being waged. He squeezed his hand, leaned in, and spoke softly enough that Skylar wouldn't be able to hear. "I hate to admit that he's right, Shay, but the kids could be in real danger here."

Seamus paled and looked a little like he was going to show them what the contents of his stomach held. Felix untangled their hands and rubbed circles on his back until Seamus's face firmed, and resolve entered his eyes. Felix couldn't help but be proud when Seamus nodded in Skylar's direction. "That's probably best. I hate the idea. I don't want the twins away from me, but I don't want them caught up in all this either. Besides, if they are already safe in the West, it will make running easier, if it comes to that."

Felix couldn't help but blurt out, "But you don't have to make a decision right now!"

Seamus was visibly relieved. "Let's keep it open as an option, but wait to make a decision until things are clearer."

It was disheartening when, a few days later, they got a message from Skylar saying Anton had changed locations—again. For the next several months, Felix and Seamus tracked the movement of Anton and his facilities.

Felix was thrilled when Skylar appeared in the living room late one night with the information that they needed about Anton's true location, finally. They lost track of time talking about logistics. They were at the kitchen table, deeply engrossed in maps and diagrams, when there was a sharp knock at the front door. All three men froze.

Then, Seamus eased out of the chair and went to the front door. Felix stayed rooted to his chair, terrified of yet another surprise this evening. Skylar had slipped away to melt into the shadows of the unlit living room.

Seamus

Seamus opened the door to find his mother looking back at him. For once, she wasn't dressed in one of her expensive suits, instead wearing a fluffy robe and hard-soled slippers; her hair was loose around her shoulders. He hadn't even realized she owned a robe. For the first time in Seamus's life, Fiona looked like a mother, instead of the cold, society wife that she had always been.

"Mother, what are you doing here at—" he looked at his watch "—three thirty in the morning?"

She looked at him sternly. "Are you going to invite me in?"

Seamus automatically moved back to let her in, glancing at Felix in a panic.

Fiona brushed him aside, and walked imperiously to the middle of his living room. "Hello, Mr. Walker. We need to talk. You may tell your guest he can stop hiding in the corner. Seamus, do get me some tea if you will."

Still looking panicked, Seamus scrambled into the kitchen to put on a kettle for tea. Felix was gaping a bit like a fish, and Skylar, wary and uncertain, came out of the shadows to seat himself at the table with Felix. Felix was trying to casually gather their plans and maps together into a pile so that Fiona didn't see them.

Waving her hand in a shooing motion, Fiona grabbed the stack of papers from Felix. She gave them a brief glance and tossed them back on the table. "Your plans are admirable, but they have holes. There is very little likelihood that a group of two or three men is going to successfully infiltrate a government facility and rescue an untold number of children. You have no idea what you are walking into. Absolutely none. These men are armed with some of the most advanced security technology available. They are ruthless and have killed before. Honestly, the idiots kidnapping Ian have just about demolished several years of undercover work. Not to mention that somehow Dr. Anton got

resurrected from the proverbial dead. I was fairly certain he was actually dead until the last six months or so.” Fiona ran a hand through her platinum hair, mussing it. “Now before I go any further, please introduce me to your friend.”

Seamus stood with his mouth open, and Felix looked much the same. The Fiona here at the kitchen table was completely unlike any version of her that Seamus had encountered in his entire life. He looked to Felix, hoping he would say something, but when Felix wasn't forthcoming, Skylar stuck out his hand to the older woman. “Skylar Donovan. I represent an interest in the West.”

Fiona let out a full-bodied laugh, sending unease sliding down Seamus's spine. “Cut the bullshit, Agent Donovan,” Fiona said. “You work for the Agency, helmed by one Mr. Smith, as does Mr. Walker here.” When both men tried to speak at once, she silenced them with a look. “I've always known your background, Mr. Walker. You were not placed here by accident, but by design. You were here under the guise of having an eye kept on you, but it was also for your protection. There are those of us here in the East who do not completely agree with the new religious order. Rather than escape to the West, when the reorder took place, some of us banded together to fight things from the inside. Your father thinks he's a double agent, working for both the West and the East. Truthfully, he's a carefully placed figurehead with no real power. We've attempted to keep most of the more heinous acts from being perpetrated, trying to remind these bigots that it would be as much against their religion as whatever nonsense they are trying to stop.”

Fiona paused while Seamus served her tea. “I was not a good mother, not to you, Seamus, and not to Ian. We had you both tested young and are not surprised by your... proclivities, however we hid the results, thinking that we were somewhat untouchable. Obviously, that has been proved wrong. It's time to start talking about exit strategies. First and foremost, we must get the children out of the country. They are no longer safe here. War is on the verge of breaking out.”

Seamus finally broke in, “We were planning on sending Bryan and Brynna with Skylar. He's tasked with getting them out of the country.”

Fiona shook her head. “You are being far too obvious. Their nanny is a spy. She will be suspicious of a sudden holiday with some person that we don't know.”

“Ms. Randall is a spy? But how, and why?” Seamus was coming undone. There was just too much. His whole life had unraveled in the last few days.

Without thinking, he reached out and twined his fingers with Felix's. He just felt better with Felix's wider hand around his own.

Fiona pursed her lips but didn't say anything about their open display of affection. "We are one of the most powerful and wealthy families involved in government. Do you really think they trust us? Of course they don't. They want to know our every move. Why else do you think I made you move out here to the cottage? I don't want them to know what occurs in the main house."

Seamus had always kept himself removed from the power games and intrigue that seemed to dog his family's footsteps. He couldn't care less about power or money, and often found himself the outcast growing up. It was difficult for him to wrap his mind around why someone would want to be involved with all of that stuff, but he was a much simpler man.

Fiona broke the silence by outlining an intricate plan, which involved faking her own death and those of Bryan and Brynna. By the time she finished, the sun was coming up, and Seamus's head pounded like he'd stayed up all night knocking back shots. Skylar had slipped out just before dawn while the estate was still bathed in darkness. Even knowing he was there, it had been almost impossible to see him as he bled into the shadows. And then Felix left to slip back to the carriage house, and Seamus and Fiona were left alone.

Seamus felt awkward. He sensed that he was in the midst of a pivotal moment and he feared screwing it up. He worried at his bottom lip with his teeth, a habit from his teen years which—to Fiona's disgust—he hadn't broken. Her eyes were luminous with what he thought were unshed tears as she looked at him. It seemed she was trying to catalogue all of Seamus's features. Suddenly, as much as he'd always thought he hated her, he feared to the depths of his soul he would never see her again.

Over the last few months, he'd gained an understanding that while she wasn't the best mother, she was a strong woman who'd been asked to carry far more than her fair share. She wasn't the perfect society wife. She was broken just as much as any of the rest of them.

"Mother..." Seamus couldn't say anything more. He tried to express his feelings with his eyes, and he fancied that Fiona's eyes said everything she feared to voice out loud, too. There was just too much to say, and he had none of the words to tell her. She put her hand on his face for only a moment, and then she gathered her dressing gown around her and walked out his front door, her posture as rigid as it had ever been. The moment of softness had passed.

She called back over her shoulder. "Have the children ready to travel in one hour, Seamus. All of our lives depend on it."

They had so much to prepare before they'd be ready to take on Anton's compound, but Seamus had to get the children ready first. His heart ached at the thought of what was to come. They would be so confused, but in the end it would all be worth it. They'd all make it safe to the West, and they could finally have a life together. All of them.

Felix

Walking out and leaving Seamus alone with Fiona felt to Felix almost as if he were throwing his man to the wolves, but he knew it was necessary for them to have these last moments to bond or say goodbye or yell and cry. There were no guarantees any of them would make it through this. Their plan was risky and crazy as hell. Felix wasn't even sure they could pull it off. They could all end up dead, or worse, captured.

Felix looked around his bedroom back at the carriage house. It was the only room bearing evidence that he'd been there. He'd slowly been sending items back to the West ever since the unrest had started growing. Felix knew that when they left they'd probably be able to take very little with them. He'd never before been this scared going in to a mission, and he wished he could send Seamus ahead with the twins. Too much of him was caught up in the sexy, blond cop with a heart bigger than the ocean that separated their two continents.

No one had been more surprised than Felix when he'd found Fiona on their side the night before. He'd fully expected to have to battle her too, and there was no doubt she would have been a formidable obstacle. To know she was backing them eased some of his tension. She was an amazing strategist, something that wasn't a strong suit for either him or Seamus. Skylar could hold his own, but watching her obliterate their plan and rebuild it had been mesmerizing.

He checked the time, and then packed up the last of his belongings in a small duffle bag. Skylar would be meeting them that night so they could load up on weaponry. Making his way over to the cottage, Felix could see Seamus through the window feeding the children breakfast. The twins were squabbling over something insignificant, but rather than get irritated, Seamus just smoothed his hand over their ginger heads and pressed kisses into the silky locks. Almost like they were bound together, Seamus looked up as Felix walked through the door.

He pasted a smile on his face and made his voice sunshine bright. "So I hear my favorite little terrors are going on holiday with Grandma Fiona. Is this true? Are you leaving me?" Felix threw an arm over his forehead in a classic, dramatic heroine pose, and the twins erupted into giggles.

"Yes, yes, Felix! Grandma is taking us to the beach." The twins were jumping up and down, their breakfast and argument forgotten. Felix dropped his bag at his feet and knelt down to rummage in a pocket. He came up with shell necklaces, one pink and one blue. He fastened them around the twins' necks, kissing each one on their foreheads and extracting a promise that they wouldn't take them off "no matter what." Felix glanced up to see Seamus leaning against the doorway, a small smile on his face and fear in his eyes. Felix winked, and Seamus broke into a real smile.

They hurried to pack the children's bags, making sure to include anything deemed important. Seamus didn't argue as he would have at another time. Both men knew what the children took would be the only remnants of their previous life. All too soon, Fiona was at the door to gather them into an unmarked transport. Felix had never been prouder of Seamus as he held it together until the door closed, and the transport exited the estate. Then his man dissolved into a big sobbing mess; all Felix could think is that he wanted to cry too, but he stayed strong for his lover.

Felix then pulled out his com-device and, after tapping at the screen for a few moments, brought up a screen that had two dots, one pink and one blue, moving along the roadway side-by-side. Seamus smiled. "The necklaces?"

Felix smiled back and nodded. "Now we need to get our own shit together. We have a lot to do before we catch up with Skylar and the team your mother put in play. Seamus' smile dimmed, and he looked around his home.

He took a few moments to walk through and touch things, as if he could take the memories with him. Felix looked on, with a feeling of sadness for him. He knew what it was like to walk away from everything he'd ever known for the hope of something better. When he felt that Seamus had spent enough time brooding, he bullied him into packing his own duffle bag. They would be handing their own luggage off to Skylar's men and trusting that it would be waiting for them on the other side.

Felix started to get restless as the day went on. While Seamus took his trips down memory lane, Felix was uploading all the information off their tablets and wiping the drives, then loading ordinary police files on them. He doubted

anyone would look too much harder at the devices, but even if they did, he left nothing for them to find. He also took the time to wash their soiled sheets from the night before. It didn't really matter, but it gave him something to pass the time.

The day passed slowly with both men avoiding one another.

Seamus

No sooner had the sun set than Skylar appeared in the living room. "How the hell do you do that?" Seamus demanded, one hand pressed on his chest, as if it would keep his heart from beating out of his skin.

Skylar just grinned and winked. Seamus was almost certain the man was part ghost or something. It was creepy how he just appeared places. Felix didn't seem fazed at all, which irritated Seamus more than Skylar's ninja behavior.

Once Felix entered the room, Skylar ducked out the back door for a moment and came back in with the rest of the team, all of them dressed in the same black tactical gear that Skylar wore. Seamus was sure that he'd never seen that many people packed into his living room.

Skylar introduced them to all but two people in the room. All of the men introduced were the ones that his mother provided. They were all grim-faced, and had a battle-hardened look about them that made Seamus want to stay far away from them. Skylar turned to the man and woman who were left. "This is Robbie and Rose. They are two of what is usually a five person tactical team, including myself. Katie, another member of our team, will be handling any technical aspects of this endeavor. Our fifth member is with Director Smith, trying to coordinate our exit plan. I'm not going to lie, Seamus, this plan is damned complicated and even more risky. You and Felix are going to have to be where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there, or we all may be up shit creek without a paddle. I'm not too worried about Felix. He's gone on missions with us before, and he's a good operative. You are used to going in places backed up by a badge. This isn't going to be like that, at all. For one thing, we have no real idea, other than layout and location of the building, what we are walking into. We don't know where or how these kids are being kept, or what kind of security they're going to have."

Seamus felt a little dazed, but he firmed up his spine and blasted Skylar with the voice that Felix liked to call his "high society" voice. "I will do what needs

to be done. I have more at stake here than anyone else. My brother is in there. My kids are on their way to some unknown location where my mother is going to fake all of their deaths and smuggle them out of the country. I'm pretty fucking sure that I can handle following orders. I've been doing it my whole life; this just has more guns. I've met Anton. It was years ago, but I remember the man as being a complete control freak. He's also more than a little crazy, but he's not stupid. We're going to encounter a damn good security system but probably minimal guards, because he's going to be relying on the tech to keep people out. He's also got a huge ego, so I doubt that he believes anyone can or will track him, especially if he believes he has government backing." For the first time since the whole thing began, Seamus didn't feel like a useless ball of emotions.

Skylar nodded in approval. "That's good intel, Seamus, and should help us. It says that our biggest obstacle is going to be the tech, and with Katie behind the scenes, we should be able to handle that."

With nothing else to discuss, Skylar tossed Felix and Seamus black gear that matched what the others wore. Soon, Seamus stood in the doorway and said goodbye to everything, before heading out with the others to the large transport Skylar had somehow gotten onto the property through a seldom-used rear gate. They were packed into the transport like sardines, and Seamus ended up having to sit on Felix's lap. Felix's arms wrapped around him, like an anchor steadying him. He had never felt more bound to a person. Felix was risking everything for him. Seamus turned to look at his lover. He had a need to make sure Felix knew how he felt, at this moment. Heart thumping and palms sweating he opened his mouth to speak, but Felix placed a finger over his lips.

"Shhh. I know. Me too, Shay." Felix pulled him down by his vest and pressed a swift kiss to his lips.

Groans sounded around them, with some of the team calling "Get a room!" It lightened the tension when they all burst into laughter. The good-natured ribbing eased something inside Seamus. Like maybe he could hope for a life where being with a man wouldn't be something that was wrong. It was something that he'd never before allowed himself to actively hope for.

Felix

He would have had to be blind to not see how wound-up Seamus was. They had avoided each other much of the day. The mood was too fragile for much

interaction. Felix had been half-afraid that Seamus would call everything off when it all sank in, and the day seemed both too long and too short.

Seamus never backed down, though. He was the type of guy that would throw his all into everything he did. He was the type of guy Felix had been looking for his entire life, and he'd only had to go halfway around the world to find it.

Later, sitting in the transport when Seamus looked at him, his heart in his eyes, and appeared about to spill its contents in front of a bunch of strangers, Felix lay a finger on his lips and silenced him. He didn't want the first time they said "I love you" to be in front of others. He'd rather it be whispered in the dark, skin upon skin. He stole a swift kiss and laughed with joy when the others gave them shit, and Seamus relaxed against him. Headed into danger, they still had each other.

It was a strange, moonless night, the cloud cover too thick for stars to penetrate. The location where they expected to find Dr. Anton turned out to be a three-story, brick warehouse. There were a few security lights, though not many. It looked deserted, but thermal scans proved that there were at least twenty-five occupants, ten of whom were moving around.

Katie came over the coms. "You should be able to waltz through the back entrance. Take everything slow and easy."

They split into two teams, Skylar leading his team along with a few of the men Fiona provided. Felix took the rest of them. Skylar's team would breach from the front, Felix and Seamus from the rear. The two men had no more time to talk or think. They had to focus on the task at hand.

The initial breach was a flurry of activity. They breezed through the back door. No alarms sounded. At the front of the building, they could hear suppressed gun fire. Felix pursed his lips, hoping that none of their own were among the dead. The first occupied room was almost dungeon-like in appearance, as if someone had a medical fetish. Beds with scary leather straps hanging off them—some appeared to be tinged with blood. A man in a lab coat hunched over a desk. He looked up in annoyance when he saw the group of armed men enter the room. When he stood, his slender spider-like frame stood several inches over Seamus's six feet three inches.

Seamus briefly tightened his grip on his weapon, holding it steady on the other man. "Dr. Anton. We're here to shut you down for good. Where is my brother?"

Dr. Anton straightened his lab coat, appearing unaffected by the guns pointed at him. He laughed. "Young Seamus Breckenridge. I had always hoped that you would end up in my labs, but instead, I got your younger brother. He has made quite a specimen to begin tests on. I have not had him nearly long enough to complete them, though."

Felix had never wanted to kill someone more than he did Anton; his hand shook with rage. He took a deep breath and let the cool air calm him. Having regained his focus, he growled.

"Where is his brother, you sick fuck?"

Anton stared off into space. "He screams so pretty." He turned wide, crazed eyes back to the men. "I like to hear them scream. I only give the abominations what they crave. Pain and degradation. I'm trying to cure them of their sins." He laughed, and the sound sent a shiver through Felix. The man was obviously insane. Seamus looked as though he was going to puke, and it was everything Felix could do to not put a bullet into Anton's demented head.

Felix waved to one of the other men, who seized the crazy doctor. Anton didn't fight as they strapped him to one of the beds. "We'll grab him on the way out. This way, we know where he is." Felix told Seamus.

Seamus nodded. Felix led the team to the next room, and the next. They were finding boys and girls, filthy with urine and feces, chained to metal beds. The smell was overwhelming, leaving many men gagging and retching. Felix assumed the guards had physically abused their charges, since most of the children had deep bruising. All of the children had haunted eyes. They cleared the entire bottom floor, but still found no sign of Ian. They could only hope Skylar had retrieved him. They were waiting for Skylar's team to come down and join them when the alarm blared.

It sounded like an air raid siren and was accompanied by the sharp staccato of boots running down the stairs. Each of the booted figures carried blanket-wrapped bundles. Skylar yelled at Felix and his team to get out, and ordered one of his own team to hand over his blanket-wrapped bundle to Felix. He then gave orders for them to get as much information out of the computers as possible.

Rose dumped her armful of preteen into Felix's arms, and he grunted under the sudden weight. He took a moment to flip back the blanket and stare at a face that looked far too similar to Seamus not to be his brother. This boy had dried tears on his face, but his eyes were closed as if he were sleeping

peacefully. He held the boy to his chest, allowing the weapon he'd been clutching to bang uselessly against his thigh. He ran for the second transport, which had shown up while they'd been inside. He was unsure what to do with the kid, and somehow he and Seamus had been separated in the scramble to get out of the building.

"Shay!" He hollered. Seamus looked up from ushering the wounded children into the back of the transport. "Ian." Felix lifted his bundle a little.

Seamus's shoulders shook; he was openly sobbing. Felix rushed as fast as he could with the kid held against his chest. He pressed the boy into his brother's arms. Seamus held both of them for a moment before grabbing onto his brother and crying into his hair.

A female voice yelled from the front of the transport, "Let's get a move on guys, there are government operatives headed our way!" Felix pushed his lover up and into the back of the transport—the last to board—before slamming the double doors shut.

Running around the side of the transport, he climbed in and slipped into the copilot's seat. He looked over to say thanks, and the words froze in his throat. The woman driving had bright pink streaks running through sun-blond hair. She looked exactly like Fiona Breckenridge. There is no way that could be a coincidence. "Hey, I'm Katie, the tech girl from the Agency. We've never met in person, Agent Walker, but I've heard good things. You think you could press that button for me?" She pointed to a button on the transport's console, and Felix did as she asked, while the transports were pulling away. An explosion rocked the transport side to side as the facility went up in a cloud of fire and smoke—small debris rained down around them. Eyes wide, Felix looked up and grinned.

Seamus

The mission still had Seamus's heart thumping, even as he sat in the back of the transport cradling his brother's fragile, damaged body. He appeared to be drugged, and judging by the cuts and abrasions he'd seen when he pulled back the blanket, that was probably a good thing. He blinked back tears, and looked around at the dazed and confused faces of all the children who had the misfortune to have tested homo-positive. Children, just like he had been. Many of them were just barely entering puberty, and some probably hadn't even figured out that they were different. How could the government, the very

people he worked for, and his father worked for, think abusing children could make a difference in their sexuality? Seamus held onto the anger burning in his gut, knowing that he'd need it as fuel for what was to come. His com-device buzzed frantically. It was his supervisor, Adams. Each message was more frantic than the last. His mother and children were on the news as casualties in a boating accident. Seamus found a reason to smile. Fiona's plan seemed to be going well. He'd started to send a message back to Adams when the transport was rocked. The kids awoke from their stupors enough to cheer at the great cloud of fire and smoke that shattered the building where they had been tortured.

Seamus looked down to see his brother's blue eyes gazing up into his own. Ian smiled a sleepy smile. "I knew you'd come for me, Seamus. I knew, and I told them." Seamus felt his eyes fill again. He was leaking tears all down his face. "You've always been my hero, Seamus, I knew you wouldn't let me down."

Seamus clutched Ian close until the boy feebly pushed him back. "Love you, little brother." When Ian's eyes closed, it truly was a peaceful sleep, despite the discomfort he must have been feeling. He wished that Felix could be sitting back there with them, but the larger transports really needed two people up front. After they'd passed through the hail of debris, things quickly quieted. Most of the children fell asleep, obviously exhausted. Seamus's eyes fluttered, and then closed.

When Seamus awoke, hours later, the driver had parked near an empty pier. The kids had been taken to a nearby building which had restrooms and showers for swimmers who frequented the beaches. Felix came and led a shaky Ian over to a blonde with bright pink streaks in her hair. Seamus could barely see her in the distance. Everyone was safe, now they just had to make it to the West. Still, Seamus couldn't believe how much lighter his world was, all because Felix was a part of it.

He slipped off from the group, needing some time alone and maybe to cry again. He walked down the beach and out onto an outcropping of rocks. He stripped down to his skivvies and jumped off, plunging into the frigid water. *Shit that was cold!* He sucked in a deep breath, his teeth chattering. He swam for the rocks, only to be pushed back under by Felix, who was jumping in. Sputtering, he pushed the other man away from him and scrambled back up on the rocks. Felix laughed and followed him. They stood there, the air steaming around them, watching the sun peek up over the horizon.

Seamus reached out for Felix's larger hand and held tight. His whisper was rough and low. "I love you, Felix Walker. Take us home."

Felix

He'd thought he wanted skin to skin when their love was spoken aloud, but to have Seamus tell him when they were looking at the sunrise over the water was perfect. "I love you, too, Seamus Breckenridge."

Felix only wished that they had more time to bask in the moment, but the kids hollering down the beach interrupted them. They grabbed their clothing and shoes and took off up the beach. Katie had disappeared with the transport, leaving only the message their ride would be arriving shortly. Felix released a curse. He knew that Katie was Seamus's twin—he was positive of it. He wondered if she knew, and he found it damned inconvenient she'd disappeared.

Seamus had pulled his gear on over soggy underwear, and then got busy rounding up the twenty children who had survived the horror of Anton's facility. A care package had been left in the shower building with clothing and shoes for all the kids. Some of it was ill-fitting on their too-thin frames, but at least it was all clean. They were beginning to complain about being tired and hungry and wanting to go home.

Felix stepped in and raised his hand to get their attention. "There is no home, guys. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you can't go home. It's not safe. We just rescued you from a government-sanctioned facility. We are all wanted fugitives."

Kids calling out questions interrupted him. "Where are we going?" "What about our families?" Several of them just cried. Ian held onto his older brother.

"Hold on! One at a time. We're going to the Agency headquarters, and we'll go from there. Director Smith, my boss, will make sure that you all find a safe place. I promise. As far as your families, we will try to track them down when we get to the West, and we'll offer them passage if they wish to immigrate to be with you. But you are not safe here."

All of the children became quiet then, subdued. Many began to cry again. Felix felt as if he'd crushed the last of their hope. In turn, he wished that he could make it better, but he knew he was doing all he could.

A strange noise alerted them to the end of the pier where a black ship arose, water sheeting down the sides. They all huddled together, with nowhere to go

and no way to get there. Felix was pretty sure they had been found out, until a hatch popped open, and there was Skylar. "So I heard you guys needed a ride? No? Okay I'll just..."

Felix flipped him off and herded the fearful teens toward the submersible. He clasped arms with the man as they boarded, no words needing to be said. They were on the same team, and they were fighting the same fight. When Felix chose Seamus as his family, Skylar jumped in with both feet, willing to sacrifice his life to protect them. There were no words of thanks big enough to express his feelings.

Felix was exhausted, and it didn't take long for him to find an office chair to collapse in and sleep once they'd handed the kids off to Rose and Robbie. Felix meant to ask where Katie was, but sleep crept up on him too quickly. He felt like Rip Van Winkle when he awoke in a different place, still in the same chair he'd fallen asleep in. In fact, once he started moving around, he realized that he wasn't even on the same vessel. He stood in a hatchway, confused. Seamus's voice had him spinning around and narrowly missing shaving off the top of his head on the hatch.

Seamus laughed. "You were so passed out, that we just carried the chair aboard when we moved from the submersible to the big ship. I tried to hurry to the galley to get you something to eat, but I guess you woke before I could get back."

Felix then noticed that Seamus held two trays in his hands. He grabbed one, and they went back into the compartment that Seamus had come from. Felix couldn't even say what was on the tray. All he knew was that it was hot and it tasted good. He made quick work of it, and was already wiping his face when Seamus finished eating as well. "Where's Ian? Have you heard anything from Fiona? Did Anton get killed in the explosion?"

Seamus held his hands up in surrender. "Ian is with the other kids. Fiona and the twins are safely in the West. Anton escaped, but not unaided or uninjured. They're tracking him now."

Seamus moved until he was able to twist Felix's chair around, then proceeded to straddle him. Felix felt all the intensity and emotion between them in the kiss Seamus laid on him. It wasn't really meant to be arousing, he thought. Just a confirmation that they were there and together. That they'd made it through and remained on solid ground. Of course, that only lasted a few

moments before the men were grinding against each other, chasing release. It was quick, rough, and dirty.

They fumbled open the button flies of the tactical pants, and shoved down their boxer briefs. Felix thrilled at the sensation of their cocks rubbing together. Seamus's hand closed, mostly, around both of them as he jacked them together. There was no finesse, only the roughness of his hand over them. Felix groaned when Seamus's thumb swiped over the head. It didn't take long before both men were spilling over Seamus's hand. Felix couldn't help but shiver when Seamus brought his hand up to his mouth and licked their cum from it. He leaned forward and kissed him, tasting himself on his lover's tongue.

Seamus and Felix spent much of the next day or so in the compartment, only breaking to debrief with Skylar, eat, and spend time with Ian.

Seamus

The days aboard the ship were idyllic, and everyone decompressed a bit. The children had started to manifest nightmares, though, and their screams were chilling. Seamus had a feeling that the captain and crew would be glad to see them disembark. Seamus himself was anxious to see his children. He loved the time he had to bond with Ian and Felix, but he was more than ready to begin their new lives together.

He stood on the deck of the ship watching the shoreline get closer and closer. Apprehension shot through his limbs, forcing his knees to knock together just a little bit. Felix was in front of him, with one supporting arm around Ian, who was still a little weak. Seamus stretched his arms around both of them. He rested his chin on Felix's shoulder. There were people waiting for them on the dock. Seamus straightened when he realized that he could see the twins, holding a "Welcome Home Daddy, Felix, and Ian" sign. They were standing with an older gentleman with white hair.

Felix's voice was choked up when he said, "Director Smith. They're with my boss."

None of them had dry eyes as they disembarked where their future waited for them. Seamus had never been more certain everything was going to be okay than when he saw his family united. Felix was the anchor binding them all together.

Epilogue

Two years later

Felix sat at his overly large desk looking at the photo screen of his family. Pictures of his wedding to Seamus scrolled past. His favorite was the one where a ribbon wrapped about their hands, binding them together. Ian stood up for them as their best man, and the twins were in matching outfits. He could not believe Ian was fifteen already. *Where had the time gone?* The one person noticeably absent in all the photos was Fiona. She hadn't stayed with them long. She felt it was her duty to go back to the East and try to do what good she could.

She had stayed long enough to change tremendously, though, and Felix was sure Katie had something to do with that. The younger woman had become such an integral part of their lives, and she helped to soften their rough edges. Sadly, her relationship with Seamus was more tumultuous than with the rest of them, maybe because they were trying so hard to force a connection, or maybe because they were so much alike.

Felix got lost in his own little world, replaying the last two magic-imbued years of their lives. When the terminal on his desk squawked, he almost jumped out of his chair. "Director Walker, Agent Donovan and Mr. Smith are here to see you, as you requested."

Felix straightened his suit and stood as the men entered the room. Six months ago, Mr. Smith had stepped down as director of the Agency, and Felix had taken his place. Mr. Smith took over all the covert-operation teams, which included Skylar Donovan's team. Now, Felix broke the tension by coming out from around the desk and hugging both men.

"Take a seat guys. We've been chasing the ghost of Anton for years now, none of us certain that he actually lived through the explosion. At this time, I think we have confirmation that he is alive. After talking to Kelsey Sterling, the description of the man who took him from his home is too spot-on not to be Anton."

Skylar nodded, "I thought so too, but I was afraid to hope we'd gotten a line on him. Now that we know he is working in the West, we have to find him."

"I heard that Kelsey's going to start working towards his educational goals soon?" Felix directed the question towards Mr. Smith.

"Yes. He's eager to get back to school, despite his trauma. He's also working closely with counselors to get him mentally ready to rejoin the world."

Besides, young Skylar has been keeping Kelsey company. I'm very proud of how he's taken the young man under his wing."

Skylar glowered at Mr. Smith, mumbling something about feeling protective, while Felix fought off a grin. He'd seen how infatuated the young blond waif was with Skylar, and he had a feeling it was mutual. "Protective? Maybe, but I think there is a lot more to it than that. He *is* an adult, Skylar. He can make his own choices."

Skylar ran a frustrated hand through his artfully styled tresses. "Legally, he's an adult, but he's been through so much. I want to give him time to grow up a little bit."

"Don't wait too long Skylar, or he might not be waiting for you."

The End

Author Bio

Cam Kennedy is an award-winning poet who stumbled onto m/m romance accidentally in 2010. As a member of the LGBTQIA community herself, she had never realized that m/m existed outside her favorite fandoms, which she had been involved in since the late 90s. Impressed with the quality of writing in the m/m genre she began writing reviews, and never intended to share any of her own work. In her spare time, she is the mother of three, a dutiful (kinda) daughter and a rabid advocate on behalf of what she believes.

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TOO PRETTY

By Ren Stjerne

Photo Description

A young man stands with his eyes closed. He looks calm but confident. His long red hair is tousled by the breeze. His chest is thin and hairless over his jeans, where his thumbs are hooked in his pockets.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I hate it. I hated when this happened with strangers, but when it was someone I thought knew me it was even worse. I liked to wear my hair long, so what? Okay, my features are a little feminine and that green of my eyes is a bit intense, but I am way taller than most guys. I am 1.96m (that's six feet, five inches) for God's sake, how anyone can think I am a girl? I never thought of myself as a girl, I don't wear female clothes, do I? How could have B thought me a girl? And we have been friends for weeks... I thought that I had finally found him, the perfect guy for me. How could I have been so wrong? Oh, I know how—these perfect, stormy grey eyes of him enchanted me, that perfect black hair made me forget my mind, and that body... oh, don't he have the perfect body—so tall and muscular. Who could have thought that I will ever meet a guy taller than me? I have been used to being the tallest guy in class, always. 'Til I came here and met B. How could I have fallen for him so hard and so fast? It was not supposed to happen, because at the end of the day I have only one purpose—to kill.

So, basically, I want some sort of a paranormal romance. Yes, I am thinking that the MCs are still students (seniors in High school or they might be in college, authors choice). "B" is a replacement for a name. He is taller, black-haired, grey eyes and straight—can be human or not.

The MC is androgynous; a redheaded beauty with emerald-green eyes (pretty much got him from the picture, yes). He is NOT human but what he is is author's choice—alien, cyborg, vampire, shifter (doubt that a werewolf will fit but maybe some feline shifter), angel, cambion, nephilim, some ancient god, you name it... Even though he is so tall, he is often mistaken for a girl; he is way stronger than a normal human and trained to kill. What powers he is supposed to have is also author's choice (I guess that will depend on what he

actually is). He is new in town and B makes a move on him, mistaking him for a girl. What happens after? The POV can be first- or third-person and it can follow any of the MCs or switch.

I think I forgot to mention that we need some bad guys. Who they will be and what they want I will leave to the author's imagination. Only thing I DON'T want in the story is sexual abuse, past or present, pretty please. Everything else is okay.

I am sorry the letter became so long, I really hope that's not a big problem.

Thank you so very much!

Sincerely,

Desislava

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: paranormal/fire being, college, first time, friends to lovers, double gay for you, humorous, PTSD, depression

Content Warnings: violence/death of unnamed characters, alcohol: because no great story ever started with someone eating a salad.

Word Count: 31,076

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Acknowledgement

For Beulah Mae—you taught me so much about life.

TOO PRETTY

By Ren Stjerne

Chapter 1

Barbie

Bright lights. Burned into my brain. Pierced through my eyelids.

What had I done to deserve this agony?

Oh yeah, I forgot to close the curtains last night. I was still getting used to sleeping under an east facing window, with its daily unwelcome intruder.

The delights that came with being mostly human.

A tall, rail-thin human. I may have looked like a pushover, but I was the wolf in sheep's clothing.

On that note, this wolf mustn't forget to eat, so I grabbed an apple as I headed out the door to my first day at Auburn University.

Luckily, I already knew someone in my first class.

When I was lugging my stuff into my new apartment, a beautiful blonde bombshell lurked in the hallway. When she saw me, she walked over to me, reached up, and grabbed my hair. Well, maybe not grabbed, more like stroked and fondled. If hair could be sexually harassed, mine would have been calling for a lawyer.

"You have such beautiful hair. I just want to pet it and play with it," she said, disregarding the fact that she already was petting it. Her face showed how much she coveted my hair. I started to worry that I'd never be able to get free before she stroked me bald.

"Thank you, I think." I tried to get my hair loose, but she had unexpectedly fast hands. "Have we met?" I was sure I'd never seen her before. It was impossible to forget someone who wouldn't release my hair. Her stylish jeans and cute fitted shirt indicated she probably wasn't a squatter. Everything else faded away when I saw her blue eyes. Big, fake-contact-blue, eyes.

"We just did. I'm Crissy."

Blink, blink. She considered invading my personal space and molesting my hair as "meeting"?

"I'm Barbarossa Atar, but everyone calls me Barbie." I couldn't help introducing myself. I was raised to be polite.

“Barbie, huh? You’re too pretty to be a Barbarossa, for sure.”

Not that again. “I’m not pretty, damn it.” I finally grabbed my hair at the base of my skull, and just pulled it from her greedy, grasping hands, then comfortably held it over my shoulder.

“Keep telling yourself that, hon.”

It was hard not to like her, and I didn’t even try. Her open and innocent smile hid the downfall of worlds. It wasn’t long before she invited herself over to my apartment and took over my unpacking. It was slightly disconcerting how fast she had control of where I put my boxers. *A man should never give up control of his boxers.*

As she put away my stuff, she told me all about color and fabric and texture. I, in turn, tuned the finer points out. Actually, all the points. What use would I have in knowing that a chocolate suede would go with a beige corduroy?

I needed furniture, and once she found out my budget was a bit bigger than most incoming students, she dragged me shopping. Almost against my will.

My place soon reeked of domesticity. From the modern cream couch to the dainty little end tables. I even had drapes over my venetian blinds. She made me realize that I would have been living in a college bachelor pad if she hadn’t interfered. That would have been a bad thing, at least from her perspective. From my perspective, having my own place was all that mattered.

Within a week, we were almost inseparable.

Monday morning, bright and early, I tried to find the safest parking spot for my baby while I was on campus. My baby was my candy-apple-red Chevelle. No way was I trying to get the closest space. That was a sure way to have some idiot scrape her. I found a nice outside corner spot, no cars in front or to the right.

I parked a little further away than I anticipated so I hurried across the acres of blacktop so I wouldn’t be late.

I rushed up the stairs to the second floor of the liberal arts center to find my classroom. I had a few minutes to spare. Even then, most of the seats in the front were already taken. Some sorority girls giggled and talked about some frat party they got wasted at. The frat boys were all wearing their letters, making them easy to spot. Spread through the room were the regular students; the ones that didn’t have to buy their friends.

Near the back, Crissy waved at me and pointed to the open seat behind her. I squeezed her shoulder as I sat down, grateful that she'd kept a spot for me.

This was Great Books I. A freshman literature class, full of, well, freshmen. When we talked about our schedules just after meeting, I saw that we both needed this class. I lucked out because Crissy kept putting it off. I just hadn't gotten around to it while I was at junior college. I grabbed the last empty space in the class that she was already registered for.

"At least this class won't be all freshmen. Glad you switched into this class with me." She smiled at me with the radiance of a nuclear explosion. Damn, she was such a little bonfire of good cheer.

"Yeah, I got the last spot." I grinned back. Once she made sure I was where she wanted me, she kept glancing at the door every so often. I wondered who she was waiting on. It didn't take long to find out.

"Hey, Steven!" Crissy waved at the last man to walk in the room. Crissy was so excited, I was worried she would wet herself. I certainly didn't get that kind of reaction out of her.

When he'd first walked in, I'd thought he might be the professor. He looked a lot more mature than the rest of our classmates. He didn't have the fresh fruit aura that everyone else had.

I was freakishly tall at six five, but he could be even taller with the way his big body filled the doorway. His soft gray eyes swept over to where Crissy was gesticulating madly. I watched as he lost the stern expression on his face upon seeing her. He gave a small wave and made his way through the sea of desks to take the one to the right of me.

"Crissy, how are you? I haven't seen you in so long. How're your folks?" he asked her quietly as he leaned across me so he didn't have to raise his voice to talk to her. I caught a whiff of his deodorant. Somebody liked Old Spice. I normally didn't, but it fit him. He had that hyper masculine look to him.

"I'm great! My folks are fine. They moved to a new house after I left. They didn't need all that room," Crissy said, almost in one breath. Then she waved towards me. "I want you to meet my friend, Barbie. Barbie, this is my cousin, Steven." Her hands continued to flutter like trapped birds as she waited for me.

"Hi, Steven," I managed to say. Being the recipient of that smoky gaze was enough to put me off my game. *What? Hang on a minute. What game? Why in the world would I think that?* I felt my heart rate pick up. *Be cool, be cool.* No

need to make a fool of myself. This was really quite alarming. I had never noticed anyone like I was noticing Steven. The way his eyes were the color of the smoke from burning tires, blacks and grays swirled together. How his shoulders were broad enough to shoulder any weight.

“Nice to meet you, Barbie. Crissy used to be a bit of trouble,” he said, as he smiled at me with his slightly crooked smile. “I can tell she still is.”

Just then, the professor walked up to his lectern, two minutes late. He dropped his case on the top of it. “If I can have your attention, this is Great Books I. If this is not where you should be, please leave now.” No one left.

This guy definitely looked like a professor, maybe early middle-age, black hair, and tweed jacket included. “Some of you will hate me and curse my name for this semester, so please make sure you pronounce it correctly when you do. I am Dr. Dvorak. Remember the v is soft as silk and smooth as a whisper in church,” he said.

He pulled a stack of papers from his case and started passing them to the folks at the front of the rows. “You may have heard about me from others, but I assure you that the rumors are false. The only way to pass this class is to study the books and think about how they relate to their time and culture. Remember to come see me if you have any questions; my office hours are listed on your syllabus.”

Class continued, but most of my attention kept wandering over to the man beside me. I wondered if Steven would be taller than I was. Then I wondered why I was even paying attention to things like that. Steven was paying attention to the professor, not to me. It shouldn't have mattered, but I was a bit irked by it anyway.

I never had been interested in men like that, or women for that matter. Sex was on my list of things to try, but it was never at the top. At least, sex with women was never at the top. Sex with men hadn't even made it into the same room that the list was in. Was that even an option?

Chapter 2

Steven

The nightmares kept me company and, like all unwelcome visitors, they wouldn't leave. After fighting most of the night, I finally surrendered to the lure of sleep. The only thing to wake me was a call from my mother. Apparently, I'd slept through my alarm.

Sometimes it felt like my mother was smothering me. She called almost every day. I was only a couple hours away; it wasn't like I was across the country.

When I went off to war, she cried. After I was in an IED attack in Afghanistan, she put on a strong front for me while I was recovering and all through rehab. She hadn't thought it was a fair trade; her only child going to war in order to pay for college. She had tried, but there just wasn't spare cash for tuition. That didn't leave a lot of options for me.

When I was registering for classes, my mother told me my cousin was going to the same university. There was even a class that we could share. Just to help me adjust, of course. Not to interfere or keep an eye on me.

My first class was in a small classroom on the second floor. There were maybe thirty folks in the class. It didn't take long to scan all the faces. At least there was one other older guy in with all of the young folks.

Then I saw her. She waved at me and called my name.

Crissy was the same heartbreaker that I last saw as a bubbly teenager learning to drive her dad's old Honda. Even then, no one could be mad at her when she drove into the picnic tables at the family reunion. That was way back when I was on one of my first leaves. I hadn't been home since.

The years had been incredibly kind to her, filling her out into a stunning woman.

As beautiful as she was, her friend Barbie put her to shame. Barbie had the biggest green eyes I'd ever seen and long red hair that reached down to her ass. Since she was seated, I couldn't tell exactly how tall she was. Her legs were folded up and promised to unfold into miles and miles of perfection.

What was I doing? I needed to pay attention to the professor, not let my mind wander. *Eyes front and center, soldier.* Even if the territory to the side was pretty nice to wander into.

What the hell? I hadn't been this affected by a woman in years. Out of the corner of my eye, I could just see her. She was model skinny. I couldn't tell much about her chest under the loose shirt when she was leaning forward like that. Which was perfectly fine, because I was always a leg and ass man anyway. Her voice had been soft and, while not as deep as a man's, was not an annoying high pitch either. Was she single?

I could see her watching me all through class. I hoped she liked what she saw and wasn't staring because I'd put my shirt on backwards or something.

When we were released, Barbie rushed out of the classroom saying to Crissy that she had to get to her next class on the other side of campus. When I looked up from grabbing my books and notebook, I barely had enough time see more than long legs disappearing out the door.

Crissy grabbed my arm from behind. It was all I could do to keep from swinging at her in surprise. She didn't need to know how tightly I was wound. The war had changed me, I was no longer as trusting of people's motives.

Interacting with people as a civilian was still a challenge for me, but Crissy more than compensated for my failings by carrying most of the conversation. Once she had my attention, she told me all about how the family was doing. She wasn't in a hurry since she had nearly an hour to kill before her next class. I couldn't lie to her, so I told her I had about the same before my next class, too.

While I had been close to her before I left, since she was my only cousin, I could tell that now I was going to be one of her friends, whether I wanted to or not.

Tuesday, I headed for the Student Activity Center after my last class. On my way to the entrance, I ran into my cousin and her gaggle of girls. It was obvious that she was the ringleader with Barbie towering behind her and the others surrounding her.

Damn, Barbie was almost a head taller than my cousin. She was the high point of the group. When the girls saw me, they spread out, and I got my first chance to really look at Barbie. She was definitely all leg. Her hair was tied back in a sloppy bun with a few strands making a break for freedom.

“What are you ladies up to?”

“We’re just heading in to yoga. Why don’t you join us? It would be good for you,” Crissy said as she looked me up and further up.

That’s when I noticed the yoga mats all the girls carried. The thought of seeing Barbie bending and flexing and posing in those tight pants was an intriguing one. Too bad I couldn’t stand in the back and just spectate. I was sure that was frowned on.

“Sorry, can’t. I’ve got to,” I racked my brains for an excuse, “go lift some weights.”

“If you won’t join us now, why don’t you come out to the club tomorrow night? We’re going to the Blue Room I’ll even let you buy me a drink,” Crissy called with a wink as the pack headed inside and turned into one of the studios. I saw Barbie giving me a little extra eyeball before turning away.

Maybe, just maybe, I would check out the Blue Room. Just to see Barbie.

Chapter 3

Barbie

The Student Act housed the campus gym, pools, indoor courts, tracks and workout class studios. One of the teachers from the college of agriculture taught yoga on Tuesdays, once classes were in session.

Crissy made sure all of her friends were going. We all trooped towards the entrance, some more enthusiastically than others. When Crissy caught sight of her cousin, we stopped for them to talk for a minute. He didn't seem too excited about the prospect of joining us for yoga or going to the club. Too bad. I wasn't going to let that ruin what I hoped to be a good class.

Our group claimed quite a large space in the back. We rolled out our mats and faced the teacher.

Dr. Susan McCall was a tiny, vivacious woman with short brown hair and laughing brown eyes. Her mat was already laid out in front of the wall of mirrors.

At 5:01, some latecomers caused a bit of a ruckus. They set up right beside me while continuing their friendly argument. I snuck a glance and saw our Great Books professor and a student with shaggy blond hair and brown eyes. I hadn't expected to see my professor outside of class and certainly not doing yoga.

"Not manly, my ass. Are you trying to say something about me? Are you saying that I'm not manly? I'll kick your ass," the little blond said. He barely looked old enough to shave, much less be attending college.

"Nice of you guys to join us," said the instructor. "It's good to see some men taking an interest in their bodies."

"I'm just here to keep him company," Professor Dvorak said dryly.

"No matter why, at least you're here. Maybe you'll learn something that will keep your body flexible as you start to age," she said.

I admit that in loose shorts and a henley, Dr. Dvorak looked a lot younger. He could almost pass as an older student.

"Yeah bro, you don't want to lose any flexibility as you age," Blondie snickered. Dr. Dvorak flipped the blond off as we assumed our first positions.

“Remember to breathe as you stretch each muscle,” she said loudly as she demonstrated while rolling her back until she had her hands on the mat in front of her. “Inhale as you reach down, now exhale and stack your spine back up. Feel your body growing taller.” She reversed the process until she was standing straight with her shoulders back.

From our place in the back of the room, I covertly watched Dr. Dvorak struggle to finish. His fingers didn't make it to his mat before he rolled back up.

I didn't have that much trouble when I started. I tried to focus on the instructor, but this wasn't an advanced class, and I could practically do these forms in my sleep. I couldn't help eavesdropping and sneaking the occasional peek out the corner of my eye.

“We can't all be as flexible as your little, twinkly ass, Sam,” Dr. Dvorak whispered to him. “You know it's not fair to show off when you have no intention of following through with anyone here.”

If I hadn't been right beside them, I doubt I would have heard, even with my better than human hearing. I wondered just what the connection was between them. It seemed strange for a student and a professor to be just hanging out.

“How do you know I'm not looking to get it on with someone here?” Sam grinned and winked over to Dr. Dvorak.

“Because no one, other than me, has anything below the waist that would interest you, and you know I'm not into dick.” He paused while he took a big breath, stretched his right arm over his head, and tried to bend his body. “Haven't you been looking? This is a good sized campus. There is bound to be at least one guy interested in your type.”

I was surprised by how casual Sam was about his sexuality. Dr. Dvorak was joking like it was something completely normal to be bantering back and forth about. I hadn't really thought about how life would be different for a gay person. Actually, I didn't think there should be any difference either.

I had never been around any gay folks. At least, I didn't think I had. Small town Alabama was not the most open and accepting place to come out. With all the different folks, this probably was the best place around to be gay.

After yoga, Crissy came over to my place for dinner. In honor of working out, I'd made a light meal for us. This was also a celebration of having had all our first sessions of every class. We didn't really need a reason. We gossiped about the different professors and the occasional strange student.

Over dessert, I brought up something that had been on my mind. "Your cousin seems interesting, but isn't he a bit old to be starting college?"

"He was in the Army for a while. He's on the GI bill or something. Mom thought it would be nice for him to have a class with me for his first semester." She paused. "Not like I'm supposed to babysit him or anything. He's four years older than I am, but when my aunt and my mom got it into their heads, there was no stopping them."

I just appeared in a hospital as a newborn, so I didn't have any experience with overprotective parents. Sometimes I wondered about other people's relationships. "I can see you are all broken up over the hardship."

"Just wait till I can get him to open up, and then I'll set him up with one of my friends. It'll be great." Then she looked at me harder. "Megan thinks you're cute. Why don't you ask her out sometime?"

The quick change of topic nearly caught me off guard. "Is she the short brunette that was wearing that bright purple dress at your place last Saturday?" I had noticed and might have stared a bit too much. It was only because I didn't see why someone would voluntarily wear something like that.

"Yes, that's her. I saw you noticing her at the party."

"Umm, she's not really my type." I squirmed a little bit. I had no intention of asking her out. I thought fast. "She's too short for me."

"She's not that short with heels on." Crissy was sealing up all the exits for me.

She wasn't going to buy that excuse. I had to admit it was a lame one. Time to fess up.

"Okay, I noticed her because that dress was hideous. I couldn't believe she wasn't blind." I hoped that would be the end of her pushing to hook me up with someone.

She thought about it for a second, then nodded. "That dress was pretty bad. I didn't think you were interested in fashion."

"I'm not. That's how bad it was."

Crissy burst out laughing. "Okay, then. Not Megan."

Time to change the subject, before she thought of someone else. "What about you? Why don't you have someone special, if you're so determined to throw your friends to the wolves?"

She looked me over. "You're really not my type." Crissy wasn't my type either, so there was no conflict there.

"I know that. But what is yours then?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but if I wasn't related to Steven, he'd be mine."

I thought about it. I was nowhere near being that bulky. There was a time when I was a mass of muscles. Again I was grateful that I was no longer bound to that life.

"So you like 'em big and beefy? Or just tall and dark?" I asked. If she could meddle, I could be on the lookout for her too.

"All of it, and older too. I want a man, not a little boy."

"So what am I? Chopped liver?" I faked a bit of indignation.

"You're a man, but you aren't that masculine." She said it without a hint of remorse.

"Fair enough." I had to agree with her there. Even though I kept my body in shape, I just seemed to burn through the calories leaving me stick thin. I had never been corporeal long enough to grow out my hair before, so, after centuries of short or shaved hair, I was not going to cut it now. Trim the split ends, add a little conditioner, and I had better hair than a lot of women. I knew that well-taken-care-of long hair wasn't considered manly. Sometimes strangers mistook me for a really tall girl. Not that often, but sometimes.

Chapter 4

Steven

Our second meeting of the Great Books class started to sound interesting. Dr. Dvorak assigned *Dracula* as our first book.

“Now, for your first writing assignment. Most mythical or paranormal beings are created by man’s needs. I want you each to pick a creature or being and explain why it would have been imagined, why each particular weakness, and a description of the society that needed it.”

He continued, “You have two days to figure out which one you want. No duplicates, so everyone will need to sign up with which creature they picked on Friday.”

“What do you mean ‘why it was imagined’? Don’t you think there might be some truth to the legends?” said a goth-looking girl dressed in black with dyed black hair. “There are too many accounts for things like vampires to be fake”

“I’ll give you that there are a lot of vampire stories, but have you noticed that they mostly seem to describe different creatures? From huge monstrosities that can be killed with garlic or holy items to sparkles in the sun. We have them turning to mist, to bats, to one giant bat. Each of these descriptions served a purpose. The sparkly vampire is to teach you to accept others. While the big scary monster vampire is to show that if you face your fear, you can overcome it. Any other questions?” Dr. Dvorak looked around the room. The goth chick was silent.

Everyone seemed to be thinking hard about what they would do. Crissy looked lost in thought, but somehow I thought she might pick fairies. For myself, I was going to go with zombies. Some days I felt just like that, all hollow inside.

Crissy’s invitation to go to the club ran around my brain all day. I hadn’t been to a bar or club in a long time. The crowds never appealed to me, and lately, they flat out made me uncomfortable. All those people in a tight space just screamed at my instinct to search for the threat. It was a difficult decision. On the one hand, there would be lots of people and noise. On the other hand, Barbie might dance.

The Blue Room seemed pretty full for a weeknight. I walked through the door and was hit with the heat. August in the south, with this many people, made most air conditioning systems raise the white flag. It wasn't standing room only, but more than I was okay being around. Most of the folks were out on the dance floor. Only a few were at the bar.

Pulsing through the steamy air, the music thrummed my ears. I didn't recognize what was playing, just that it was a lot of bass with some kind of electronic shrieking over the top. Typical dance club music.

I pushed on through. Finally, gleaming in the multicolor lights, I saw Barbie's brilliant red hair over everyone else. Just seeing someone I knew in the crowd did a lot to calm me. I hadn't realized how worked up I was until it just flowed away like the spring rains.

I tried to avoid touching the folks on the dance floor. Most of them let me pass, but someone grabbed my ass. That made me push through harder. When I got closer, I saw all of the ladies from yoga dancing and grinding on each other. My eyes immediately tracked to Barbie, who had one of Crissy's friends wrapped around her front. That was fucking hot, I had to admit. The way Barbie was wiggling and thrusting with the music was way too captivating.

Barbie was the first to notice me. She turned around and looked straight at me. Those sparkling eyes seemed to see right through to me. She stopped dancing and tapped Crissy to get her to look over and see me.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" Crissy shouted over the noisy club when I got closer. She grabbed Barbie and me by the elbow. Crissy was a fierce little bulldozer as she shoved through the crowd. Somehow, she managed to keep a hand on both of us. I pitied any girl that got in her way. I think she was using her heels as weapons.

She shoved us onto bar stools before climbing up on hers. "Now you can buy me that drink. Get me a Cosmopolitan."

What could I say besides, "Yes, Ma'am."

When the bartender arrived, I ordered Crissy's Cosmo and a Sam Adams for myself. I was about to ask Barbie what she wanted, but she had already caught the other bartender's eye and ordered an Old Fashioned. She whipped out the cash and paid for her drink before I could even think to offer to pay. I was glad to see that she didn't expect to be waited on, but I wasn't so glad to lose a chance to be a gentleman.

I leaned over to ask Barbie. "What's your major?"

“Building Science. I’ve always wanted to leave something that could stay for centuries.” Barbie grinned at me. “But it will probably get bulldozed to put in a shopping mall.” She paused. “What about you? What’s your major?”

“I’m in Mechanical Engineering. I think I want to do something with cars.” I tried to keep my explanation simple. No use boring her to tears.

“Oh yeah? What kind of cars?”

“Old school muscle, like 60s or 70s era big block Chevies. Restoring or modifying the ones that have been left to rust or seize up. I want to design mods and...” I stopped myself midsentence when I remembered I was talking to a woman, not one of the guys. I wanted to make a good impression, not bore her to tears.

“Very cool. It was hard to find a cowl induction system that fit my Chevelle. Don’t get me started on trying to find aftermarket parts and old original stock parts. And trying to get them all to work together... And god forbid you actually want to upgrade something.” Barbie leaned towards me, her eyes lighting up as she spoke.

Maybe talking about cars wouldn’t put her to sleep. “Exactly! Unless you can find all original parts, getting everything to work together is a nightmare. I want to be able to have my upgrades fit with new and aftermarket.” We kept talking, and I was surprised to find a kindred spirit in this woman. I would have talked to Barbie about cars all night, but Crissy thwarted that plan.

“Okay, boys. Let’s go dance for a bit before you disappear under the hood,” Crissy said as we finished our drinks. She grabbed both of us by the arm and dragged us back on the dance floor. Crissy sandwiched Barbie between us. I’d never been a fan of dancing, much preferring to stay at the bar and watch. Barbie rubbing her ass against me was changing my mind.

Chapter 5

Barbie

I was so thankful that Crissy had managed to slide me away from Amber when Steven showed up. Not that there was anything wrong with Amber, but she was way too friendly with my front and my back. There was no way to turn where she wasn't right up on me and trying to climb me like a stripper pole. I felt a little slimy after being practically dry humped on the dance floor.

I could feel the fire burning within me wanting to purify my skin. Ah, to be cleansed in flame again. I had left most of that previous lifestyle behind, but on occasion, nothing beat a good burn. I was overdue for one anyway, and it would get that icky feeling off me at least.

It was amazing how much Steven and I had in common once we started talking about cars. We even had similar views on full restoration versus mods and upgrades. I missed having someone to share this with since I moved here. Not that Crissy and company couldn't talk my ear off, but none of them were the least bit interested in discussing the merits of fuel injection versus carburetors. Hell, I don't know if they could spot the difference between a Mustang and a Challenger.

Crissy wasn't fond of our topic of conversation as she gulped down her drink. I allowed myself to be dragged back on the dance floor. This time at least, Crissy and Steven protected me from Amber. I guess she had followed behind us, but I hadn't even noticed her. I could see her back at the bar, still eyeballing me. Crissy was a good friend for finally getting me away from her.

It was so freeing to be able to just feel the music and move my body with the rhythm. Like battle, there was an ebb and flow to the music and the crowd. It wasn't long before Steven and Crissy went back to the bar.

When I noticed that the crowd was thinning out, I joined Steven and Crissy for last call. The rest of Crissy's friends had left already.

"It was great talking to you, Barbie. Here, give me a call sometime. I'd love to see your car," Steven said, as he handed me a folded napkin. I glanced at the message and number written inside and had to smile. Now I had a friend I could share my hobby with. It was a good night.

First thing when I got home, I had to shower off the feel of the club. I could smell the smoke clinging to my hair, and my arm felt sticky from where someone had spilled some beer on me.

It was after two a.m. by the time I was ready to go to bed. I had just slipped under my big feather comforter when my cell rang with a blocked number. I groaned as I sat up and the comforter fell away from my chest. I knew I had to take the call. Just because it was part of the deal, didn't mean I had to like it.

"Hello, Trillian," I said when I connected to the almost eerie silence on the other end. I was never quite sure where she patched in to the transmission, but Trillian's calls always bypassed the actual cell towers. No one could listen in on her calls. Fuck the NSA.

"Barbarossa, you're needed for a quick job in Beijing. I'll text you the address. The head of the Xian Hua syndicate and his top enforcers will all be there. This needs to look like an accident, but no one gets out alive." There was no click, but the quality of silence changed from someone on the other end to the lack of connection. I looked down to see that the phone had recognized this too and closed my end of the call.

One beep and I had the address.

I sighed. My bed was going to have to wait. I threw on a T-shirt and shorts. I could feel the tension creeping back into my body as I went outside and around to a blind alley behind my apartment. A nice, concealed little hideaway with no windows looking into it was the real reason I had picked this apartment. I took off my clothes and stashed them between the wall and a drain pipe. Then I centered myself and reached out for that cleansing flame. It started at my feet and poured over my body like napalm to my outstretched hands, turning my body to flame.

No one noticed the speck of light that raced across the sky.

Two hours later, I was standing, naked, in an alley across from a small, three-story office building on the outskirts of Beijing. No one was outside. The neighborhood was so poor and rundown, it was almost surprising an office building was still standing. The ramshackle dwellings gave the building a wide berth. The locals knew what lurked in their midst.

It was just after dark, a perfect time to catch all the rats at once. I felt no remorse. Trillian would have done all the research, and she had never been wrong. Sometimes she was a bit bloodthirsty. But then, who wasn't? We can't all be sweetness and light.

I summoned the flame and used the intense spark to weld the doors and windows shut. No one would be leaving. I worked in perfect silence, making sure the building was completely sealed. They were trapped like rats and didn't even know it yet.

There was no grandstanding or evil villain monologue. These people had committed multiple crimes, multiple times. They ruled their territory with a bloody fist and dirty money. No corrupt judge in this city would find them guilty, so I was called in. There were no innocents here.

I reached out through the heat in the air and could feel the fuel for an inferno in the gas lines to the heating system. It was quite old and in bad shape. Searching a little more, I found where the lines had a little extra stress from being bent around a corner. Someone hadn't studied fuel line safety, not that it would have mattered against me. I always find a way. A little nudge and a little spark and the fireball engulfed the basement. My fire burned away everything.

It didn't take long before the smoke billowed up onto the first floor, rolling up the stairs, creeping through the vents. When the people realized there was a fire, they tried to flee. They scurried around, trying to escape. Faces pressed against the windows and then fell back. The cries of those trapped were silenced by the clouds of noxious smoke.

Once the first floor was burning nicely, I unsealed the windows. The fire sucked in the night air and fed the flames into a roaring inferno. Even then, I gave it more energy to burn even hotter. Within minutes, there was nothing left but ashes.

I flared bright and was on my way home.

Chapter 6

Steven

I was amazed at how much fun I had at the club with Crissy and Barbie. It was so rare to find a woman who shared my love of classic cars. I couldn't wait to find out what else we had in common. Hopefully Barbie would call me so I could see her again.

When I got a text from her two days later, I jumped at the chance to invite her to come over on Saturday. She said she would come over around noon to look at my project car and watch some NFL preseason football that afternoon. After so many years of hanging out with the other grunts, I was glad that adjusting to civilian life was not as overwhelming as I had anticipated. I could do this.

After the IED, I knew that I was not going to be a career soldier. During my recovery, I had a lot of time to think about my life and how to start living it. I was ready to think of my future.

I put my affairs in order and found a house for sale. Actually, it was my mom that found it and took video of it for me. It had potential, if I could fix it up while I went to school. After I got out of rehab, I was finally able to behold the mess in all its glory. It was a single story brick house. The hedges were above the front windows. The drive was cracked. It would need a new roof soon. The inside reeked of piss and pot. And it was all mine.

It took me the whole week before classes started to chop the hedges into manageable stumps. At least I didn't have to commit crape murder; they were just boxwoods, according to my mom.

I ripped out the nasty carpeting. The rough hardwoods under the area rugs would just have to wait to be refinished. I didn't even bother trying to sort out the second bathroom. I didn't know what color to paint everything, so I just left that, too.

Saturday morning, I woke up anticipating someone coming to my house. My mother raised me that you didn't have company over to a messy house. I took one trip around collecting the random dirty laundry that, somehow, managed to escape the confines of the laundry hamper. Or had never made it that far, like my socks under the coffee table and my boxers under the pedestal sink in the bathroom. Or the towels on the floor beside my dresser.

I straightened the cushions on the couch. I washed the few dishes in the sink, drying and then putting them away. Once it was as presentable as I could make it, I couldn't stay inside and wait quietly. I'd just wait for her outside.

I was working on tuning the carburetor for my '67 Corvette Stingray when I heard the muted roar of hundreds of horses rearing to go. That sound spoke to my love of muscle, drawing my eyes to try to see what it was. A beautiful candy-apple-red Chevelle turned slowly onto my street. I straightened up in surprise as it pulled to a stop on the street in front of my house.

I had to keep my chin up so I wouldn't drool over the sight of that long leg stepping out onto the curb. Barbie was wearing tight jeans and a baggy Auburn jersey. When she turned to shut the door, she bent just enough for the jersey to cling to her ass. I could stare at that ass all day.

"Hey, I brought some drinks for me and some beer for you. Sam Adams, right?" Barbie said as she went to the passenger side of the car and pulled out two six packs. "Where's your fridge?"

"Follow me, and I'll show you." I led her inside and to the left to the small kitchen. I couldn't help watching her ass as she leaned over a bit to put the beer and her hard cider into my barren fridge. There was plenty of room for the alcohol. I still hadn't learned how to cook, so there was no point in stocking up on stuff I would never use.

When she closed the door on my fridge, she turned to face me. "So how close to running is that Stingray you were working on?"

I cleared my throat. "Pretty close. It dies after turning over. I just replaced the carburetor. I need someone to give me a hand tuning it. After that, I still have the interior and a bit of body work to do."

"Okay, let's see about that carb. Is the key in the ignition?"

"Yeah, it's there," I said as Barbie turned around and was out the door.

She was in the driver's seat in seconds. "Tell me how much gas it needs as we go."

I was surprised at how willing Barbie was to actually work on my car. I assumed that she'd had help on her Chevelle, but it looked like she was completely honest about cars being a hobby.

Twenty minutes later, the Stingray was purring right along. After Barbie helped put the cover back over it, she showed me all the mods and restoration

she had done to her Chevelle. My admiration for her dedication to her car just kept rising.

We ordered a large pepperoni pizza for lunch and settled on the couch to catch the kickoff. By half time, we both had our shoes and socks off and feet propped up on the coffee table. I noticed that Barbie had long, elegant feet that weren't out of proportion for her height. I'd always thought foot fetishists were a weird group of people, but after seeing her feet, I got it. The way the curve of her arch echoes the curve of her backside. Each toe almost dainty and topped with a perfectly trimmed little nail. I had to get my eyes and my mind off her feet before I did something that would embarrass us both, like licking her ankle.

I forced my attention back to the screen. When the quarterback got chop blocked and it wasn't flagged, Barbie yelled at the refs and the teams just as much as I did. It was amazingly comfortable just spending time with Barbie. To think, I had been worried about relating to civilians again.

I enjoyed Barbie's company so much on Saturday, when she invited me over for dinner on Monday, I didn't even hesitate. Barbie's place was filled with the aroma of spices. The small table near her kitchen area was loaded down with chicken tagine and couscous. I'd expected take out or something really simple, but she definitely showed off her skills as a chef.

We talked about everything, from politics to what movies we liked. By the time I left, I felt like I knew a lot more about who Barbie was. I had to wonder though, was there anything she wasn't good at? She was way too amazing not to have guys lined up to go out with her.

On Tuesday, I decided to call my mother. A preemptive attack as it were. I had a better chance of catching her when she didn't have enough time to talk my ear off if she didn't know I was going to call. Not that I didn't enjoy talking to her, just she would go on and on about my health.

I grabbed a beer and settled onto my couch. I had splurged to make sure that I had a great couch. It was butter-soft, brown leather that felt great to slouch against, and it was long enough for me to lie down on and use the armrests as pillows. It was perfect for relaxing after class or sharing with a friend.

My mother picked up on the third ring.

"Hey, Mom, how are you?" I hoped I sounded cheerful.

"Steven? Why, I wasn't expecting you to call." She paused. "I'm doing good. Just got home from work about an hour ago. Is anything wrong?"

This time I did smile. It wasn't often that I called instead of the other way around. "No, nothing's wrong. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute, since I haven't spoken to you in a couple days. Classes are going pretty good, but I can hardly understand a word my calculus teacher says."

"Are you taking notes in that class? Are you doing some extra studying for him?" Even though she had never been to college, she researched it just to talk to me about it.

"Yeah, I'm taking notes on everything he puts up. I keep up with the bookwork, too." I took a sip of my beer.

"That's good. Have you had any more pain from all the walking around campus? You told me you walked a long way around campus each day." She couldn't hide the worry in her voice. Sometimes I forgot just how much she cared.

"My legs are fine, Mom. They haven't hurt me in months," I said. I knew what she was going to ask next, so I went ahead and brought it up. "My head is fine, too. I haven't had any more headaches, and my vision is clear. I barely even remember the blast now." Okay, so I stretched the truth a little bit.

"Why don't you talk to that therapist that your doctor recommended for you? I think it would help you feel better."

I rubbed my eyes. "Mom, I told you, I'm fine."

She paused, and I could almost hear her mental cannon realigning on a new topic. "Do you like having a class with Crissy? She said that she likes having her favorite big cousin around again. Are you making any new friends? Crissy said she'd introduced you to her friends already."

"I better be her favorite; I'm her only cousin. I've hung out with one of her friends a couple times. Barbie knows a lot about cars, too. She's just so warm and funny and I feel like I've known her forever already, but I can't wait to learn more about her." Shit, I hadn't meant to say that.

My mom's mental compass pointed due girlfriend. "Barbie, is it? Do you think there could be something with her? You have so much to offer a nice girl. Why don't you take her out on a date?" She always insisted on seeing things in the best possible light when it came to me.

"No, Mom, I'm not asking her out. She's way too pretty to be interested in me like that. She's just a friend." Maybe I could convince myself of that, because I don't think my mom bought it.

“Don’t be putting yourself down. Any girl would be lucky to have you.” She paused. “As long as you’re okay. Your Aunt Hannah and I are going out to dinner tonight, so I’m going to have to run.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Steven.”

I hung up. Sometimes I thought my mom might still see me as I was before I enlisted. I wished I was that boy, but that ship had sailed.

Chapter 7

Barbie

I probably needed to start researching that paper for class. It was due on Friday, and it was already Wednesday. I'd been distracted by hanging out with Steven and the homework for other classes. I really couldn't put it off any longer.

Most of my research consisted of finding accounts of the ancient folks that saw me on the field of battle. Before, when I was assigned to a fight, I would stay until it was done. Mostly that only took a few days. The folks that wrote about me were always the ones on my side. The other side of the battle never drew another breath to tell the tale.

I found Tissaphernes' story of the Ionian War in 413 BC. He recounted a tale of a large man that he referred to as a djinn that stood to the side of Agis II, wielding a lash of flame that mowed down the troops it struck. He gestured and the enemy ships burst into flame. I remembered that I controlled the fire that destroyed the Athenian ships. After all these years, I couldn't remember why I was there. Something to do with a Persian king.

How to come up with a reason for the myth? Old Tissaphernes gave it to me with his prayers that the gods would not blame the Spartans for the workings of the alchemists.

This myth was invented so the atrocities that the Spartans committed would not fall on their shoulders with their gods. The Spartans could not admit that they used rudimentary bombs when Aries was clear that the only honor in battle was strength against strength.

I found a couple other examples of genies and attributed it to people not wanting to take responsibility for the results of their wishes. There was no known way to defeat a genie, just that people would get what they deserved and then it would vanish.

I just had to string that together and I'd be done.

When I finally finished the damn paper, I had a newfound respect for fiction writers. It was hard to talk about things that had happened while limiting myself to only what I could find documentation on. Then misinterpret it creatively.

I wondered if Steven had his paper done yet? Only one way to find out. I got out my phone and called him. Eleven p.m. is not too late to call.

He picked up on the second ring. "What's up, Barbie?" His voice certainly sounded alert enough.

"Just checking in to see if you got that lit paper done. I did mine tonight."

"Yeah, what did you do it on?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"I picked genies. They are everywhere throughout history when you start to look. A lot of the ancient battles were said to have a genie on the winning side. In Islam, they are believed to be made of smokeless fire." Might as well find out what he thought about paranormal stuff.

Since I was paranormal stuff.

"I didn't know any of that, but they sound pretty cool. All this supernatural stuff is really interesting. Going to battle with a genie on our side wasn't something we had to learn in basic." He gave a soft laugh. "I wish they would have. Might have broken up the boring drills."

I gave him a basic description of what I "found" about them, mostly talking about things that I'd actually done or seen.

"Now what do you think of them?" I probably shouldn't have pushed, but I was curious.

"They sound pretty cool. Too bad they aren't real." At least he wasn't against differently inclined pseudo-humans. It's not like I was a real genie anyway.

He paused. "I did mine on zombies."

I could see that. "Why did you pick them?"

"I thought they were interesting, always following the one directive, not having to worry about anything else. There's nothing left of their brain for morality or restraint or fear. They don't have to worry about the future or remember the past."

I wondered if Steven knew he was telling me more about himself than he was about the zombies.

Chapter 8

Steven

NCAA football season started on the second Saturday after classes started. I decided to use my student ticket to go to the first game.

I wasn't going to commit to tailgating since I really didn't know anyone. It seemed like an awful lot of work just to hang out outside of a stadium.

Crissy talked me into going with her and her friends. Crissy made sure we were there about an hour before kickoff. She said we had to get in early to get better seats since we wanted to be together. Turned out that the student section is not numbered or linked to any ticket. It's standing room only. I hadn't been to a college football game before, so I wasn't sure what it would be like.

The stadium was already half full when we got through security and the ticket scanners. There were just people everywhere, flooding the concourse and jostling for space to get to a seat. I swear every other person was shrieking for someone else in their party to either hurry up or to go find someone else. The acoustics of the concourse just reflected all that sound and bounced it around to join with the sounds of the fans on the bleachers above to create a roaring cacophony.

Crissy dragged me over to the concessions. She didn't even bat an eye when she made me carry her sausage dog and large Coke.

I started to doubt the wisdom of this venture.

Above the smell of people, were the aromas of grilled hot dogs, hamburgers and chicken. The smell of roasted flesh. I tried to keep my mind from running back to other times where I had heard screams and smelled scorched flesh.

"Hey Crissy!" I had to practically yell in her ear to be heard. "Are you ready to go get a seat?"

"Not yet, Amber and Megan said they'd meet us on the concourse under the student section."

I couldn't stay there much longer. Already the noise and smell were getting to me. "We need to grab our seats before there aren't any left. We can hold them, and you can text Amber and Megan where to meet us."

It took a long minute for her to think about it and agree with me. "Yeah, I thought we were early enough that there would still be lots of room, but I think getting the food took a bit too long."

I nearly sighed in relief as we started pushing through the sea of humanity. I held Crissy's food up and over most folks' heads and just bodily started to move forward. She ducked in behind me, and I felt a small hand grab my belt.

Once we got out to the aisle, I could see that I had been right. Most of the seats were taken, but I could see four seats in the middle that were together. Again, I had to push through groups of students that were just standing and talking to each other in clusters that blocked the rows. Some people just had no home training.

Crissy had her phone out and was texting away as soon as we sat down. Making me have to keep holding her loot. Finally she put it away and took her food. The smell was starting to turn my stomach. I could see all of the people just keep packing in and around us.

Eventually, Amber and Megan made it through and Crissy slid over beside me.

They were just in time for kickoff. Everyone stood up, yelling their little asses off. Some folks were jumping up and down in time with the band.

I could tell that the Greek boys beside me were all wasted with the way they were acting all loud and obnoxious. The sorority girls behind us were screeching like banshees, laughing and screaming and cheering.

In the stands, it was almost as bad. The cigarette smoke coming from the redneck boys in front of us mingled with the smells from the concourse. Now I had a full nasal compliment of smoke, charred flesh and sour body odor.

Damn, the day just kept getting worse. *How could anyone enjoy this?* Packed together, practically leaning against strangers. I tried to focus on the game, but the student section was under the Jumbotron, and the line of scrimmage was all the way on the other end of the field. Only the announcer over the loudspeaker gave any hint of what was going on.

Crissy, Megan and Amber were just as into it as everyone else. They were shrieking and waving and dancing around. Ten minutes in and I was ready to leave. This had been a mistake. Why did I think this would be better than watching from the comfort of my home, on my own TV? There were people packed everywhere, standing on stairs, blocking the aisles. Trapping me.

Trapping me with all the people. Trapping me with the noise. Trapping me with the stench.

It was too much. It was way beyond too much. I couldn't distinguish between screams of joy and screams of fear. Screams of pain. Pain ripping into me. The smell of the smoke and dust. The smell of flesh lacerated with burning metal. The smell of my flesh.

I could feel my skin shiver and my stomach clench. I started to sweat from the cold.

There wasn't enough air. Enough air for all of these lungs. I was suffocating.

I had to leave. I had to retreat. I had to get out.

I tried to sound as calm as I could.

"Crissy." No answer. "Crissy!" I screamed at her and grabbed her shoulder.

She couldn't be still. Her eyes were gleaming and her teeth flashed and reflected the light on her brilliant smile.

"Isn't this great!" She screamed back. I couldn't take it.

I bent down to her ear and said, "I'm going to go. I'll see you later."

Her eyes dimmed a bit and she looked a little closer at me, but I turned away to fight my way to freedom from this throng.

The people pushed back. I tried to be polite, but the panic had its grip thoroughly wrapped around me. I pushed and shoved until I was free, the wake of my passing sealing behind me.

After my near panic attack in the stadium, I spent most of Saturday night recovering with a case of my closest friends.

By the time Sunday morning rolled around, I was as ready as I could be to go back home and visit the family for the Labor Day festivities. My family always turned it into a reunion, with all the relatives that could make it for the barbecue on the lake.

Crissy talked me into driving her there in her little car since the Stingray needed a lot of cosmetic work. Sometimes she could be a bit of a mooch, but to get me to fold up into her little Civic, she had to promise that we could leave whenever I'd had enough, and pay for the gas.

I hadn't been back home in six years. As the miles passed, it was almost like going back in time. The buildings and roads were all vaguely familiar. A few more winding roads and we could see Lake Martin. The narrow road was made even narrower by all the cars parked on the side. I parked just beyond my grandparents' lake house.

All of the family saw us walk up. My mom came right over and gave me a hug.

Once everyone got there, we loaded up the pontoon boat and headed out onto the lake.

After Saturday's panic, floating around on the water with family was what I needed to put that incident behind me. The sun kept beating down and Crissy stripped down to her bikini before diving off the boat. I wasn't so sure about everyone seeing my scars, but everyone was family.

When I stripped down to my shorts, I tried not to listen to my aunt's gasp. That was about what I'd expected. My legs and back were laced with scars. I knew I wasn't pretty.

I dove in after Crissy, hiding the mess of my skin below the water's surface.

Chapter 9

Barbie

After a few weeks, I was feeling a bit guilty and a lot like I was abandoning Crissy. On Friday night, I invited her to come hang out at my apartment and have dinner. Just the two of us. I made stuffed grape leaves with tzatziki as a peace offering. Crissy would forgive anything for good Mediterranean food.

I was surprised at how much I wanted to keep Crissy in my life. People had always come and gone from my life, sometimes gone in a ball of flame. There was always something that drew them away from me, or I never made the effort to hang on.

Why hadn't I reached out to people before this? Crissy was even closer to me than my foster sibling James.

James was a few years older and had been with my second foster parents much longer. After a couple years, the husband hit James, and I found out it wasn't the first time he'd been hit.

I took care of the problem.

The fire started in the master bedroom. The smoke confused my foster parents, and they suffocated before the fire crew found them.

Even after we were both sent together to the new foster family, we weren't close like I'd seen with other brothers.

Now I had to learn how to maintain a friendship with the first true friend I'd ever had.

Right on time, Crissy breezed into my apartment trailing smiles and a bottle of wine. She brought such joy to the room, I could almost feel her energy brushing against me. She helped herself to a beer from my fridge, as I put the finishing touches on dinner.

"I suppose you have a reason for buttering me up with my favorite meal?" She asked, as she pulled up a chair.

"Yeah, I've been spending so much time with Steven that I was missing hanging out with you. I wanted some time with my favorite lady, too."

"Well, as long as you're cooking, I'll come over and eat," she said as she grabbed a couple of the grape leaves.

“Of course you will.”

“So you’re spending a lot of time with Steven, huh? He hasn’t mentioned it to me. If my mom and his mom hadn’t conspired for us to have a class together, I don’t know if he even would have known I was here.” She paused and looked harder at me, her eyes searching for some answers to questions she didn’t know to ask.

Finally she said, “It’s good for him to have a friend to talk that guy shit with. I don’t think he has any other friends here. Has he had anyone else around or talked about anyone else?”

“No, he hasn’t mentioned anyone. I haven’t seen any pictures of friends on the walls or anything. His house is pretty tidy every time I’ve been there.”

“You’ve been to his house? He still hasn’t told me where he lives.” She looked a bit put out with him.

“Have you asked him?”

“Well, now that you mention it, no, I haven’t asked. I just thought he would have invited me is all.”

“Since when do you wait for an invite? I remember you practically mauling me without even knowing my name.”

“He’s just so... you know, distant and older. After he got back from Afghanistan, Mom told me he was injured over there and that he’d be different. And he is different. I just don’t want to push, you know? I want him to be comfortable enough with me that he isn’t hiding,” Crissy said thoughtfully.

I could see that she was puzzled over the way her cousin was now. I wondered about the Steven that she remembered. He hadn’t mentioned anything about going to war, or anything about his past, to me. I knew that war could change a person. Hell, it had changed me.

“Why don’t you just ask to come over?”

“I guess I’ll have to. Can I wrangle you into going with me?” She still looked intimidated by her own cousin.

“Sure, no problem.” I didn’t think my voice gave away how enthusiastic I was to see Steven again.

“So you guys are getting pretty close then?” Crissy looked at me with calculating eyes.

“Yeah, we’re pretty good friends I guess.” I thought about it. I really enjoyed spending time with Steven and not just for his conversations about cars. Just being around him was calming. I didn’t feel the need to incinerate anything when I was around him. I especially liked the time he was working under his car and had to take his shirt off because he’d gotten oil all over it. Just the memory of that intrigued me.

The conversation turned to classes and then to plans for the weekend. Crissy was going to go to the club on Saturday night and invited me along. I had to decline since I had already made plans to spend it with Steven.

On Saturday, Steven and I were watching football again. Both of us were sitting on the couch and yelling at that fucking quarterback who kept throwing interceptions. By halftime, we were down 21–3. After quite a few drinks, I thought I might as well give my friend a heads-up on his cousin.

“You know, Crissy wants to see your place. We had dinner last night, and she brought it up,” I said, as I pulled another cider from the fridge and drank half.

“I thought she was just going to come over. I was wondering why she hadn’t yet.”

“She doesn’t have your address.”

“You didn’t give it to her?”

“No, I figured if you hadn’t, then it wasn’t my place.” I didn’t mention that I felt a bit territorial about Steven’s house. Not that I had any claim to it, just that it was special, that I was the only one invited over, at least as far as I knew. I didn’t understand why I felt possessive. I hadn’t been that way over my foster family or any of my friends back in Shorter. Before that, I wasn’t somebody that anyone spent time with.

“I’ll invite her over and make dinner sometime this week. Do you want to come over then, too?” Steven got up from the couch and wandered in to his kitchen. When he opened the fridge to get a beer, I remembered he didn’t have any ingredients beyond condiments and drinks. He certainly couldn’t be trusted to do any cooking.

“Sure. But I’ve seen the way you cook. I can make dinner. That way no one will get food poisoning.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. How was I supposed to know that there was a reason chicken isn’t served medium rare?” That was the point exactly. “Will you be available Wednesday night? Or would a weekend be better?”

“Wednesday is fine. I’ll make something good,” I said. I had already learned that Steven was an adventurous eater.

“Here, have another drink,” Steven said, as he handed me another hard cider when I tossed my empty into the trash.

I liked the way cider tasted. It reminded me of the few times I’d had time in a body and found something to drink.

We spent the rest of the evening just talking and, well, we did quite a bit of drinking. So much so that I ended up asleep.

I woke up with an infomercial playing on the TV. The pillows I was laying against were awfully lumpy, and it felt like there was a spike being driven between my eyes, and I knew what I was talking about. Before I learned what overkill was, I had used too much power and blew up an abbey. A large nail had gotten me in the forehead. I knew that wasn’t what had me in its grip now. This felt like a hangover.

The heat from the pillows was a bit odd. I stretched my neck out and around. I was looking up at the sleeping face of Steven. *Shit. I’d fallen asleep against him. And he had let me.* He wasn’t holding me or anything. He was propped up on the pillows against the armrest.

I looked around. It had to be early morning, but what time, I wasn’t sure. The TV was the only source of light and cast a faint glow over the room. The empty pizza box was balanced on a host of empty bottles. We had cleaned out all the alcohol in his fridge.

I needed to get out of there before things got awkward. Awkward being if I started to touch him a bit more. Why was I having these urges?

I eased myself upright and slowly got up off of his couch, pausing when it creaked alarmingly. I made my way outside and slipped into my car. I put her in neutral and let her roll down the street away from Steven’s house. When I got to the corner, I cranked her up and headed home.

I don’t know why I felt the need to be so secretive. I could have woken up, slapped his feet, and left. But I had felt almost guilty for enjoying the feel of his body under mine.

Chapter 10

Steven

Last Saturday had been... interesting. We hung out, but ended up getting drunk. I thought I remembered her laughing and smiling at something, and the next thing I knew, she was laying against me. Her weight felt so comfortable that I just didn't want to disturb her. She must have snuck out sometime in the night, but I hadn't woken up. I hope she hadn't noticed how good I was feeling with her against me. I didn't want to lose her because of that.

On Wednesday, Barbie came over to my house at five and started cooking. She brought a full reusable grocery sack and cooler then disappeared into my kitchen. I offered to help, but she just looked at me and laughed. I left her to it. Instead, I made sure the house looked good and set the table.

I stood in the doorway watching Barbie cook. She was so assured and competent as she moved around, gathering ingredients together. Standing slightly bent over the cutting board next to the sink, the light from the window made a glow around her. I could smell the bacon cooking and hear a pot bubbling. She had said that she would make us a chicken and veg meal, but it certainly didn't smell like anything that simple.

She told me about growing up in foster care and cooking for the families as her chore of choice. I had heard horror stories about children in foster care, and I was so thankful that she hadn't encountered that.

But something was bothering me about her.

When Crissy came to the door, we had everything ready. She brought flowers for the table, so I handed them over to Barbie. She looked at the flowers, slightly surprised, then grabbed a tall glass, stuck them in it, and put them on the table. They flopped haphazardly out of the top. So Barbie wasn't a fan of flowers, either.

"About time you invited me over. I've been wanting to see your place." There was more than a hint of reproach in Crissy's voice.

"Barbie was the one that brought it up. I thought you would have invited yourself over long before now," I said.

"Well what are you waiting for? Show me around. I've already got some ideas for your place," she said as she pretty much led me through my own home. I knew better than to object.

She stared at my bedroom for a while. Her eyes were flicking around. I thought it looked fine, the top sheet matched the bottom sheet and there was a pillow and a blanket. The blinds were down, so that couldn't be a problem. I hadn't painted the walls yet, and they were kind of a mud tan. I did have an area rug by the bed so my feet wouldn't hit the rough floor first thing in the morning. Barbie stayed at the door and didn't even come into the room. I wished I hadn't either when Crissy turned back to me.

"I can't believe I'm the only one with any taste in this family. We are so going to have to fix this place up. I mean, really. Hobo Chic was just a joke, not meant to be taken seriously."

Was Barbie snickering at me? I heard what was definitely a snort. I looked at her. "It's not that funny, how would you like her to insult your place?"

"She wouldn't dare insult my place. She's the one that decorated it," she laughed. "I'm not that creative."

I'd only been over to Barbie's apartment a couple times for dinner. Her place looked so cozy and put together. It just screamed her personality so well that I didn't think anyone else did the decorating.

"Well, show me the rest of this place. It can't be any sadder than this," Crissy said as she headed out of my bedroom and on to the room where I had put my exercise equipment. I hadn't meant for anyone to see this room, so I tried not to cringe when Crissy let out a gasp. It wasn't that bad, not really. The weight machine was next to the window. I had some boxes that I hadn't unpacked in the corner. The problem was the shorts and towels piled haphazardly in the corner across from the door. Or maybe it was the graffiti on all the walls.

"What the hell is that smell! It's like something crawled in here and died." Crissy was holding her hand in front of her nose and mouth. Any good that would do was very minimal.

"It's not that bad, it's just unwashed sweat." Barbie was trying to defend my place? Even I had to admit that this wasn't the best room in the house, but the only one worse was the second bathroom.

I hadn't even attempted to do anything to that room since I moved in. Last I checked, the mold hadn't become sentient yet.

Crissy just closed the door with a shake of her head. I could tell I would have some cleaning to do before she would tackle that room.

“Maybe you don’t want to go in there,” I said as Crissy laid her hand on the door to the bathroom-of-doom. She stopped and looked at me.

“Is it that bad?”

“Yeah, it is.”

She took her hand off the doorknob and nodded at me. “If it’s so bad that you don’t want me to see, it’s probably something I can safely say I don’t want to see either.”

When we returned to the dining room, Barbie pulled pans out of the oven and plated up a delicious meal. Bacon wrapped, cheese stuffed chicken breasts and Parmesan roasted asparagus and rosemary roasted new potatoes. It was miles ahead of the promised chicken and veg. I wasn’t going to complain, just be grateful and enjoy. It was nice having someone who knew how to cook around.

Crissy kept looking between Barbie and I. It was almost disconcerting. She looked like she knew something and wasn’t going to tell anyone. All through dinner, she would tilt her head to the side or lean forward. I hoped she wasn’t planning anything too extravagant for my house. I had a limited budget and simple tastes. Really simple tastes. She wouldn’t fess up to what she had planned, even though I asked her several times.

After dinner, I cleared the table. It was the civilized thing to do since Barbie had cooked for me. When I walked past Barbie, I gave her shoulder a friendly squeeze. She startled and looked up at me with those big green eyes. “What’s up?” she said.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to cook, but I really appreciate it.”

Her smile was enough to melt me. Her lips weren’t excessively full, but just plump enough. I wished I had the nerve to lean in and kiss her, but Crissy was sitting right there. I didn’t want to have an audience when I made my move.

By the time the evening wore down, I agreed to Crissy doing the decorating as long as I cleaned up the exercise room and the unseen bathroom first. Which was entirely reasonable. I knew I needed to stop the mold from evolving into a toxic menace.

Chapter 11

Barbie

The dinner party had been a success. Steven's house was going to get the full makeover treatment from Crissy. I didn't envy him at all. Crissy could be quite domineering. But that was a good thing in a decorator, right?

I left Steven's a few minutes after Crissy because I had to grab a couple pans and put my cooler back in my car.

When I got to our apartment building, I felt something was off. The floodlight that normally illuminated the parking lot was dark. I could see Crissy's car parked near the stairs up to our floor, close to the alley. The driver's door was slightly open. When I got out of my car, I could hear a faint scuffling. Most humans would have missed it, but then, I'm not exactly human.

I raced around to the alley behind the building and saw three men trying to hang on to Crissy. She was fighting and kicking and clawing. One man had something pressed across her mouth. *Oh fuck no. No one was allowed to hurt my friend.*

"Hey, let her go!" I shouted. All three heads turned to me and the biggest man stepped away from Crissy. The other two kept a tight hold on her.

Big guy pulled a long knife from a sheath on his belt. "You didn't see anything. You're going to turn around and walk away," he snarled.

I wasn't going to argue or negotiate. I ran straight at him and slammed my fist into his jaw. He hadn't expected me to attack. He also hadn't counted on how strong or fast I was. He still managed to slice a small gash under my ribs before he went down. I barely even felt it, I was so angry.

When their spokesperson fell, the other two guys got a bit antsy. The one not keeping Crissy from screaming advanced on me. I wasn't going to play with this man either. He needed to go down, fast. I ran at him, swerved to the side, and swept my leg under him. He hit the ground on his back with an audible exhale. I followed up with a hammer fist to his forehead. I could see blood pooling out from behind his head.

That left the one holding Crissy. She was fighting harder now and threw a strong elbow into his solar plexus. As his breath gusted out of him, he lost his grip on her.

“Run Crissy. Go lock yourself in. I’ll be along shortly.” I tried to be as calm and commanding as possible, to make sure she listened and heard what I was saying. She took one last look at me and sprinted out of the alley. When she was gone, I didn’t even bother to attack the third man.

I backed to the alley’s entrance. No one was watching. I held my hands out and a basketball sized ball of flame appeared on each palm. I lobbed the one on my right hand into the guy that was still standing. The fire hit him and flowed around him like napalm. It engulfed him, and when he opened his mouth to scream, it flowed down his throat, searing away his vocal cords.

I threw the one on my left hand. The man with the knife arched up and the fire burned new eyes for him.

I summoned another orb of fire on my right. The other man didn’t flinch when the fire incinerated his body. He had already passed on.

I kept watch until there was nothing but ash left of all three. Then I hit the alley with a quick burst that lit all the air on fire. Flames danced like starry, starry nights creating a vicious updraft to clean up the ash. The alley was once again purified.

I went straight to Crissy’s apartment. It took a bit of convincing for her to come to the door. She was pretty traumatized, and I could understand why. I still needed to make sure she was alright. There were angry red marks on her face and neck. A sleeve had been torn off her shirt. The tears were what hit me the hardest. I wanted to go back and make them suffer more for making her cry. I wrapped my arms around her and just held on as she fell apart.

“I’m so proud of you. You’re so strong,” I said. I didn’t know how to deal with this. I had never had to deal with the aftermath of violence like this before. She just started sobbing harder, and I started to panic a bit myself. I needed help. Her tears were eating me alive. She wasn’t bleeding, and I didn’t think anything was broken.

“I’m going to call Steven. Is that okay?” I thought I felt a nod against my chest, but I wasn’t sure. Since it wasn’t a no, I gently slid my right arm from around her and pulled my phone out. I called him without letting Crissy go.

“Steven, I need you to come to Crissy’s apartment.”

“What? Right now?”

“Yes, right now,” I said and hung up. I put my arm back around Crissy.

Chapter 12

Steven

I didn't know what was wrong, but I thought I heard crying in the background. I needed to get there, fast. It felt like it took me forever to get to Crissy's apartment. I kept picturing the worst things that could have happened to her. The door was unlocked when I tried the knob. I knocked gently, but there was no answer so I let myself in. The lights were all on, but I couldn't see anyone.

I called out. "Barbie? Crissy?"

"We're over here, on the couch," Barbie said, "Crissy, Steven's here."

Barbie was sitting with Crissy curled up and sobbing in her lap. Crissy pulled her face off of Barbie's neck and looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. I could see red marks where bruises were forming on the side of Crissy's face. I didn't know how the rest of her looked since she was covered by a blanket. I felt the rage bubbling and boiling inside of me. Whoever had done this was going to pay.

"Honey, what happened?" I asked as softly and nonthreateningly as I could. I sat down next to Barbie and pulled Crissy gently to put her weight on both of us.

Crissy started sobbing harder and burrowed back behind Barbie's hair. Barbie rubbed her back and made a soft shushing sound.

"When I got back from your place, three men had her in the alley behind the apartments. She was fighting. She was fighting so hard. I distracted them, and Crissy ran here."

I felt the rage welling up inside me. I had to not show it though. Crissy didn't need to see that right now. What she needed was calm and safety.

Crissy raised her head off of Barbie's shoulder. "I... I'd just gotten out of my car and th-they grabbed me. I couldn't get away. I couldn't run. They just dragged me," she gulped, "but he saved me. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't been there."

Her words distracted me from what looked like blood on Barbie's shirt.

"Who else was there?"

“Barbie, he saved me.” She paused. “He’s more than fast, he took them all on. He got me free. I ran. I ran here.”

“What?” *Did she just say “he”?* “Barbie’s not a man.”

Her head snapped to me and she straightened up in Barbie’s lap. She wiped her eyes and looked at me like I was an idiot. “Of course, he’s a man.”

I was silent as I took a closer look. With her revelation that Barbie was a “he” instead of a “she,” I realized that I was incredibly stupid for not noticing. I had just assumed that long hair and a feminine name added up to a woman. I had ignored all of the evidence that I was mistaken. Now that I was corrected, I could see that Barbie was definitely all man.

Barbie’s eyes narrowed and his lips thinned as he clenched his jaw. Shit. And with Crissy not leaning full length against Barbie, I could see that was definitely blood on them.

“Who’s bleeding?” They looked at each other and then down between them.

“Barbie! Let me see.” Crissy scrambled off Barbie and started tugging at his shirt. There was a lot of blood oozing out of his side. “You need to go to the hospital.”

“It’s just a scratch,” he said, as he tried to push her hands away from him. Pulling the shirt up spread the blood all along his side. The gash was right under his left ribs. Fortunately, it wasn’t a puncture, just a long slice. “I won’t go to the hospital.”

I could see by the set of his jaw that he wouldn’t budge on that.

“You need some stitches, and this needs to be cleaned so it doesn’t get infected.” I pointed at the bloody mess. Crissy and I pulled him to his feet and led him to the bathroom. I stood in the doorway as Crissy helped him pull his shirt over his head. I saw him wince as he stretched his arms up. My eyes would not leave his chest. My mind was still trying to reconcile that Barbie was a man, and I shouldn’t expect to see tits. His naked chest had put paid to that line of thought. That was definitely the chest of a man.

The blood had gotten on his jeans too, but I didn’t think that there were any other injuries, just that slice. But we couldn’t be too careful. “Take off your pants.”

Crissy and Barbie’s heads whipped around to look at me.

I sighed. “We need to be sure there aren’t any more injuries.”

“It’s just this knife slice,” Barbie said. But when he saw all the blood on his pants, he frowned and took them off.

Once his pants came off, I couldn’t stop thinking about how he looked in just his boxers. I wasn’t looking at him like a friend should either. *How could I have thought he was a girl?* His chest was thin but very well defined. Once the blood was washed off, I could see his chest was lightly tanned. His legs were dusted with red and gold hairs. His boxers did nothing to conceal his large bulge. *Wait, did I just check out another man’s junk? What the hell?* Crissy was attacked, and Barbie was still bleeding. I shouldn’t have those kinds of thoughts.

I cleared my throat. “We need to call the police. They need to arrest those bastards.”

Barbie looked a little guilty. “They won’t be there. The police won’t have anything to go on. Don’t worry, they won’t be seen again.”

Barbie was cagey about calling the cops. He had such certainty that they wouldn’t bother Crissy again, I could tell that he wasn’t just trying to placate her. I wasn’t going to ask how permanently they wouldn’t be seen again.

“I just want to forget about it,” Crissy piped up.

She cleaned up his wound, disinfected it, slathered on the antibiotic ointment and put on the butterfly bandages to keep it closed.

I was less than useless. He was injured defending my cousin, and all I could do was stare at him. I wasn’t proud of myself.

I was still trying to come to terms with Barbie being a man instead of a woman. I tried to be upset with him, but he had never said he was a woman. I was the idiot that hadn’t caught on. And now he knew that I’d thought he was a woman. From the set of his jaw, I could tell he was pissed at me.

After getting hit with some shrapnel, I was warned to expect flashbacks at the sight of blood or any violence. But, when I saw Barbie’s side, I had no twinge of panic, just lust. Really confusing lust.

Chapter 13

Barbie

He fucking thought I was a girl. How could he think I was a girl? I didn't dress like a girl. I didn't talk like a girl. I sure as hell didn't act like a girl... did I? We watched football together; we worked on our cars together.

When I'd shown up for battle, no one had ever mistaken me for a girl. Most people who survived only remembered my blazing red beard and bald head. After centuries, everyone referred to me as the dread Redbeard, sometimes as a pirate, sometimes as a genie, sometimes as a devil, and sometimes as the arm of the emperor.

Since I had become human though, there had been a few people who had mistaken me for a girl. That hadn't happened in a while. At least, I thought it hadn't.

Okay, my hair was long, but there have always been men with long hair. So what if I didn't have a beard? My stubble, when it grew, was light red and didn't really show up. Thinking back, I hadn't introduced myself, Crissy had. She hadn't used my full name. I knew Barbie wasn't considered a man's name.

What I couldn't figure out was why I was so upset that he had thought I was a woman. It hadn't bothered me the times it had happened before. I tried to tell myself that it was a feeling of betrayal since we had become such close friends, but I knew it was more than that. I thought he had seen and accepted me.

My side really didn't bother me. I'd had worse in all my years as a soul of fire. Once Crissy had finished patching me up, we went back to the living room. Steven began to fuss over her as her adrenalin crashed and she was a weepy mess. I took advantage of their distraction to slip out the door. I managed to return to my apartment with no fuss.

A few hours later, I was trying to go to sleep when my phone rang with a blocked number. *What is with Trillian calling in the middle of the night?*

"Hello," I said.

"Some of the Xian Hua weren't in the building. I will send you the addresses. These don't need to look like accidents." She paused, like she was going to ask something. "Will you reconsider working in war zones?"

Oh hell no. I wasn't going to be dragged into anything like that again. That had been my existence before I rebelled. The agreement was no more wars; I would be human and only burn what needed killing.

"You think to ask me that? After atomic bombs were used? I will not be the flame for any country again. Have you seen what we did to those people? That was not clean, that was not pure. That was only abomination." I would no longer be the fuel for the fires of war.

"Modern freedom fighters don't use adulterated flames. It's just fire again." She was trying to be logical, but she was not talking to the being I used to be. Before my semiretirement and the start of my human life, I might have been persuaded. Now, I would not. Soldiers are not evil, so I would not be a part of war any more, and civilians had a right not to be incinerated.

"Suicide bombs and terrorist attacks are not pure. They do not cleanse anything, only breed more hatred." I paused. "I have no problems with our arrangement as it is. I will take care of the remaining Xian Hua."

Time to burn brightly.

Two hours later, I was again on the outskirts of Beijing. This time, I had a list of addresses. Since I was still in turmoil about the situation with Steven, the first house was taken out in a huge fireball that reduced the whole building to ash almost instantly.

As I worked my way down the list, the burning was bringing a peace back to my soul. There were eight houses in all, each one burned hot and fast. And they died, and they died, and they died. By the time I returned home to my apartment, I felt calm once again.

Maybe I could think rationally about Steven now.

I thought about him. I thought about him a lot. I thought about him more than I should have.

Chapter 14

Steven

Barbie was still avoiding me on Friday during class. He didn't waste any time heading out the door. Crissy caught me watching him leave. I hoped she wouldn't make a big deal out of it.

"Steven, I've been thinking about your place. I have some ideas on how we can update it and make it feel more like a home for you," she said, as she laid her hand on my shoulder.

I turned to her. I'd spoken to her on Thursday night as well, to make sure she was holding up okay. She sounded like her normal chipper self. At least, I couldn't spot any change.

"Sure, that'd be great. When do you want to work on it?" I asked.

"How about tomorrow? It's an away game anyway, so I won't be missing that. We can get started with the paint."

Ugh, painting. I'd hoped she'd just want to look at my place again, maybe take some measurements, maybe sketch it out. Maybe take a couple weeks just thinking about it. I hadn't painted anything since my mom had decided to repaint the whole house in earth tones. Dirt brown. Swamp green. Roadkill maggot cream. I vaguely remembered having to pull all the furniture out of each room. My mom had covered all the flooring in drop cloths and taped off all the trim. I know it took us two weeks to paint our small house. I wasn't sure I was ready to live in the middle of all the plastic and fumes.

"We could look at colors, I guess." I tried to sound enthusiastic, but I failed that miserably.

"Great, I'll see you at eight in the morning. Later, big cuz." She smiled and was out the door.

What the hell had I just agreed to? I hoped that I wouldn't regret letting her have free rein.

After finally falling asleep at one in the morning, I wasn't prepared for the banging. I slowly surfaced from my dreams, rolled over and looked at my alarm clock on the floor next to the bed. *Seven-fucking-thirty*. I remembered Crissy was going to come over, so I doubted she'd go away just because I yelled at

her. The pounding came again. I tossed back my blanket and sheet and flopped on my back to stare at the ceiling. *Was I ready to face her this morning? Hell no, but she wasn't going away.* I knew she meant well. Sometimes the best therapy after a traumatic event is to refocus on normal activities. *Why did she have to refocus so early?*

I yelled out, "I'm coming, just hold on a few would you? And knock that banging shit off."

Now to separate the men from the boys. I kicked my legs free of the blanket's embrace and sat up on the edge of the bed. If she was going to want to paint, I'd better dress accordingly. I dug out a pair of my oldest denim shorts, from when I was in high school, and a stained up wife beater that I wore to work on the Stingray. If she had any objections, she could keep them to herself. I danced around the room fishing the shorts on to my legs. My balance still hadn't compensated for being upright. After I put on my shirt, I rubbed my hair, but I knew that was a lost cause without water and a brush.

I was still trying to flatten it out when I opened the door for Crissy. She looked fresh and radiant in the early morning sunlight. She picked up two buckets and carried them to my coffee table. One was filled up with paint brushes, stirring sticks and who knew what else. The other...

"I thought we were going to discuss what I wanted before we made a decision on the color?"

"We were, but then I remembered the colors you painted Aunt Trisha's house. So I picked out the color you would have agreed to anyway and went ahead and got it. You're welcome," she said, as she started laying out all the painting paraphernalia.

I looked at the color swatch on top of the bucket. "Why would you pick brown? It's too dark."

"It's either the paint or I put up wallpaper." She held up a square with a fussy floral pattern in two shades of gray.

"Where do you want to start?" I said as I grabbed a brush.

She chuckled at me and rolled the sample up and stuck it back in the bucket.

"You don't get a brush. I'll go around and edge the trim and you can come behind and roll it on." She snatched the brush out of my hand and gave me a roller on a telescoping pole and a paint tray.

“Aren’t we going to tape stuff off or lay out drop cloths?” She was already pouring paint into a small pail.

She stopped pouring and looked at me. “Tape and drop cloths are for other people. You know, talentless hacks.”

Once I’d pulled the TV away from the wall, she started cutting in around the trim. I had to admit that she had an amazingly steady hand. The paint just flowed in a straight line.

When she had that area done, I got out the roller and started painting.

“No, no, no. You don’t go just up and down, you have to use an angle and then overlap in the opposite direction. You don’t want to see the roller strokes.” She put down her brush and came to show me how to roll paint on a wall.

“Fine, I’ll do it your way, but it’s still my wall. If it’s not perfect, that’s fine with me.”

She hmph’d at me, and went back to her brush. We were working on the second wall before I was ready to bring up Wednesday night. I couldn’t leave it alone. I had to make sure she was okay.

“Did your landlord get that light in the parking lot fixed?” I could be subtle if I had to.

“Yeah, Barbie put in a complaint Thursday morning and it was fixed by the time I got back from classes. All the other lights got checked too.” She just kept painting. She didn’t show any signs of distress.

“Are you okay going outside after dark?”

“I haven’t been out after dark yet. I don’t know how I’ll react. I want to say that it won’t bother me, but I don’t know for sure. Barbie offered to walk me to and from my car, but I told him that I couldn’t let fear run my life.” Her strokes slowed to a stop. “I keep worrying about it, but every time I picture what happened, I remember how easily he beat them off me.”

I hoped that she truly wouldn’t be bothered by it. I was living proof that you couldn’t always dictate how things would affect you.

“I’m just glad he was there. Who would decorate my house if you weren’t around?” I smiled at her, and after a minute, she smiled back.

Chapter 15

Barbie

Almost a week after the attack, Crissy invited herself over for dinner with a pepperoni pizza and sat me down.

“Why are you still avoiding Steven?” she asked as she opened the pizza box. She looked up and stared into my eyes.

“He thought I was a girl.”

“So? Now he knows. He says you haven’t been returning his calls or texts. I thought you guys were better friends than that.” She had me there. If it had just been a friend making a mistake, it wouldn’t have bothered me like this.

“Because he seemed like he was interested in me as more than friends. And I, well, I was kind of getting interested in him like that, too. Now when I look at him, I want to see where that would have lead.”

I thought about it and realized something. “You know what? I’ve never been attracted to anyone before.”

“What? No one? Ever?” She kept staring at me, and if anything, her eyes kept getting bigger.

“No, no one. Look, I just thought that I hadn’t met someone that was my type yet. Turns out, your cousin might be mine.” I thought about the implications and hoped that she was open-minded. I hadn’t thought of myself as gay before, but after admitting out loud to my friend that I found her cousin attractive, I probably was. I shrugged, “Anyway, we both know that he’s straight.”

“Well damn.”

Chapter 16

Steven

After the night that Crissy was attacked, Barbie stopped answering my calls. I texted a couple times to see if he would talk to me, but he didn't respond to those either. I told myself that I was disappointed because he had been a good friend. Honestly, it was more to do with him not being a woman.

We crossed paths in Great Books, but he wouldn't look at me. He would come in at the last minute and find the farthest seat from me. I felt like shit. I had been a blind idiot. After thinking it over, I decided that being a man instead of a woman shouldn't have any effect on our friendship. Now, if only he would get on board with it.

After a long week of not speaking to Barbie, Crissy barged into my house.

I had forgotten to lock my door after coming home from class. She came right up to where I was sitting at the counter eating the Chinese takeout I'd picked up. Damn, I missed Barbie's cooking.

"You need to fix this," she said. She didn't even have to explain what "this" was. I knew she meant the gulf that had opened up between Barbie and me.

"I'm trying. He won't talk to me. I've called and texted."

"Did you try going over to his place?"

"Not yet." I hadn't wanted to burn that bridge yet. As long as I hadn't tried to track him down, I could lie to myself that he would listen to me.

"Well, I'm not going to have my friend and my cousin avoiding each other. I don't like having to pick which one of you I want to hang out with."

I hadn't even thought about her being in the middle of this clusterfuck.

"I'm not sure why he's still pissed. I know, I fucked up by thinking he was a girl, but he won't give me a chance to apologize."

"He's pissed because he thought you were interested in him." She looked up and then stopped. "Oh, I shouldn't have said that."

But I had been interested in him. *Wait. I had been interested in Barbie the girl. He thought I knew he was a man. Why would he want me to be interested in him as a man? That would mean he wanted me to be into him. As a man, liking another man...* I choked on my Mongolian beef.

“He’s gay?” I almost shouted.

“I didn’t say that,” she said. “Besides, would it be such a big deal if he was? I mean he didn’t hit on you or anything, right?”

“No, he didn’t hit on me.” I thought about it some more. *Why hadn’t he hit on me?* I thought I had been subtle when I thought he was a girl, but he certainly hadn’t done anything more than be my friend. I already decided that I still wanted his friendship, and him being gay wouldn’t change that. Besides, it was oddly flattering to have a man interested in me. Not that I’d be interested in a man. I was straight.

I had always been the giant that the girls wanted to climb. I wasn’t handsome, but I was tall and in shape. As I thought back, that was pretty much how every woman started a conversation with me if they wanted sex. It was always “My, you’re a big boy,” “You’re so tall,” “What do they feed you?” or “I bet you could lift me with one hand.” No one had ever said they wanted to talk to me or wanted to know what I enjoyed doing. This was new for me.

“Well, would it bother you if he was gay?” Crissy prodded.

“No, it wouldn’t bother me. It doesn’t change anything; he still won’t talk to me.”

“Then you need to make him talk to you. We need a plan.” She paused in thought. “After class tomorrow, you need to see if he’ll talk to you. I’ll work on him tonight. I won’t let him leave the classroom until you guys get a chance to talk for a minute. Then tomorrow night, I’ll invite him over to dinner and then you can come over.”

“That might work.” I needed to apologize to Barbie and try to fix this.

I didn’t sleep much that night worrying that Barbie wouldn’t talk to me and the nightmares plagued the few hours I did. I hoped Crissy would be able to help like she said.

When I got to class, I sat by Crissy, near the door. Barbie sat on the other side of the room from us, but he kept looking over at me. I barely paid any attention to what Dr. Dvorak was saying about the Odyssey. I could borrow someone else’s notes later, Barbie was just too distracting. Today, he had his flaming hair tied into a low ponytail. Flaming, ha. Now that I was looking at him as a man, he really wasn’t flaming at all. I felt like a blind idiot.

As promised, after class, Crissy quickly got to the door and stood just inside. When Barbie tried to leave, she grabbed his arm and held on.

“Barbie, can I talk to you? I need to apologize,” I said. He stood still and watched me as we waited for the rest of the students to clear out.

“You know, it’s pretty insulting that you thought I was a girl. Hell, we’d been friends for weeks.” He ran his hand roughly over his head, dislodging some hair from his tail.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think you were feminine, really. When I first met you, your name threw me off, and I just thought you were an awesome chick. I didn’t question it. I miss hanging out with you and working on the cars. Can we get over this?”

After my short speech, he looked a bit disgruntled.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, and then broke free from Crissy.

At least he said he’d think about it. I guess that was the best I could get for now. I really hoped that Crissy knew what she was doing.

“Come over at six thirty,” she said before she slipped out the door. Nothing for it, I needed to go to my next class, too. All through the rest of my classes, my attention was just as shot as in my first.

When I got home after class, I took extra care in making sure that my clothes were clean and not wrinkled. I knew these had been washed recently and would pass the sniff test. I wanted Barbie to see that I was serious.

At exactly 6:30, I knocked gently on Crissy’s apartment door. I could hear faint voices.

Crissy greeted me at the door and invited me in. I could tell she had gotten Barbie to cook dinner.

It smelled like home cooking and also, faintly, like the bazaar near our base in Afghanistan. Barbie made a lot of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean dishes. He was sitting at the table, facing the door. The table was set for two and they hadn’t dished up the food yet.

“Hi, Barbie,” I said shyly. I didn’t want to offend him again.

“Hi, Steven. Crissy completely failed to mention that you were coming by.” He turned his glare on her. “And don’t think I don’t know this is a setup.”

I rushed to speak before Crissy could. “Don’t blame her. I needed to talk to you.”

“We talked after class. I’m still thinking about it,” he said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Would you look at the time? I forgot I was going to help Amber study tonight. Steven, why don’t you stay?” Crissy squeezed Barbie’s shoulder when he went to get up. “You, stay. Both of you. Sort this out by the time I get back.”

I was glad she hadn’t turned the force of her will on me like that. *Oops, she wasn’t done.* She whirled around to face me.

“And you. You talk to him.” Then she swirled out the door. So I hadn’t escaped her notice.

I looked back to Barbie. I could see he was trying to suppress a grin at the way she had just talked to both of us.

“I really am sorry. I hope I didn’t ruin our friendship.”

“You’re not the first person to make the mistake, but most people figure it out after the first time they meet me. I didn’t know you thought I was a girl the whole time, or I would have said something sooner.” He paused. “It might’ve helped if I was introduced by my real name and not my nickname. My name is actually Barbarossa.”

That would have been helpful to know before I made such a fool out of myself.

“Are we okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think we are. Let’s not mention this again though. It’s way too embarrassing.”

We fell back into our comfortable camaraderie once we had established that I was never going to think of him as a girl again. I didn’t bring up that Crissy had implied that he might be gay, and he didn’t either. By the end of the meal, we were laughing and joking just as we had before. When Crissy returned, she looked between us and just smiled.

Chapter 17

Barbie

After that dinner, Steven and I were back to being friends. By the following Saturday, we were watching football, drinking beer, and ordering pizza. This time, we were just a couple guys, hanging out.

Late in the fourth quarter, my cell rang. *Damn it, Trillian.*

“Hey, I need to take this. I’ll be right back,” I said, as I ducked into his kitchen.

“Hello, Trillian.” I greeted her. “This is not the time for you to be pulling my chain.”

“Settle down, we have an emergency. There’s a bombing at a planned parenthood in the capital—”

I jumped in, “I want no part of that.”

“If you would let me finish—you need to stop it from hurting anyone.”

“Why me? Don’t you have anyone else you can send? How about my replacement?” I asked.

“It has to be you. I’ll text you the address.” I looked at the screen. The address was less than an hour away by car. There was also a time. Fifteen minutes until the bomb detonated.

I leaned back into the living room. Steven was still on the couch, but his head was cranked around so he could watch the kitchen door. I quickly thought back over my side of the call for anything incriminating that he might have heard. Nothing too bad.

“I have to run an errand for my old boss. I need to go real quick. I’ll be back later,” I said as I walked across in front of him. He watched me go and didn’t say a thing.

There wasn’t much time. I drove to the end of the block and parked around a corner. I hoped my baby would be safe, though it wasn’t a bad neighborhood. I didn’t see anyone on the small side street. There was nowhere to hide. I would have to take the chance of being seen. I slid out of my car and walked casually down the sidewalk. When I was next to a large tree, I stripped quickly and put

my clothes on a branch. I had to make this fast. I released my flame and was engulfed in less than a second. I winked out to a small speck and winged through the air.

There was a cost for the speed of my change. When done slowly, the skin and nerves pull back as my body is turned to flame. When I do it fast, my nerves aren't prepared, and I feel my flesh char away. It only lasts a split second, but it is pure agony.

I touched down in an alley behind the office building next door to the target. There were only a few windows looking into the alley. Anyone that heard the racket would be looking out the windows in the front at the fire department, bomb squad, police and ambulances arrayed in front of the building.

The police had the protesters held back and were trying to get people out of the surrounding area. Through a small window in the door, I could see the bomber inside.

He had strapped on a vest of doom. I took a minute to figure out what exactly was going on. He didn't have a hostage in front of him, but the snipers hadn't taken him out. There. In his hand was a pressure switch. Shit, he'd rigged it to blow if he let go. I could feel the malevolent power in the bomb and knew it was built correctly. There wouldn't be a malfunction.

I hadn't seen this configuration before, but I could find where the ignition point would be. Now for the hard part. Not blowing everything to hell and back. This would take finesse and I could understand why Trillian had demanded my help on this. My replacement would still be in the "happy, happy, fire, fire" stage of his life. It had taken millennia for me to learn that there was also a flip side of the power, knowing when a bigger flame isn't better. And knowing that no flame may be best of all.

I tried to be inconspicuous as I stood between a dumpster and the wall. I couldn't pass for emergency personnel wearing nothing at all. I held my line of sight on the device and concentrated a pinpoint of extreme heat on the wire coming back from the switch. I melted through the coating and shielding to the copper wire in the middle. I had to hurry this up so I poured power into melting the copper. Finally, a few little drops sizzled free and fell to the floor with a hiss. The bomber looked down at the smoking drops on the floor and then to the wire. I was not going to give him a chance to figure out what was going on. It only took a few seconds to summon my ball of flame inside his skull. His eyes opened wide and his body went slack. He fell to the floor, the switch slipping from his hand.

When he fell, everyone ducked and covered. I didn't have that luxury. I kept my focus on the ignition point to make sure that my fix had worked. I had taken a risk in killing him, but I was confident there hadn't been any booby traps elsewhere to set it off. That and I was pretty sure it was stable enough to not detonate when it hit the floor. Still, it was hard to be sure with the volatile chemicals right next to each other.

I slipped away in the confusion, back to the alley. I zipped back to my car. I had to hang out as a spark in the branches of the oak tree while a little old lady and her little old dog slowly walked down the block. Then I slipped back into human form and put on my clothes. I checked the time. I'd only been gone twenty-five minutes.

I could head back over to Steven's and spend more time with him. I'd been at his place over three hours when Trillian called. *Was I really up to it after using that much concentrated energy?* I wasn't even sure if I was trying to talk myself into going back or not. If I went back, he might ask about my errand, but if I didn't go back, he'd still probably ask. Maybe I'd just go home and sleep on it.

Chapter 18

Steven

I knew he wasn't telling me everything. He took a call and said he had to run an errand for his old boss, but that really didn't make much sense. It sounded like he had to be talked into it over his initial objection. Why would he run an errand for a boss that he didn't work for any more?

The only other reason for Barbie to run would be me. Somehow, I must have made him uncomfortable. He must have caught me staring at him and trying to figure out what was going on with me. I didn't think he'd noticed, since I made sure to not stare when he was looking at me. Even after the revelation that he was a man, I still thought he was the prettiest person I'd ever seen.

I wasn't prepared for what that meant for me.

In Great Books on Monday, Dr. Dvorak had an announcement. "As you all know, there is a joint paper that you will have to write with a partner. Go ahead and pick that partner now."

The room erupted in chaos. I heard a squeal and saw Crissy grabbing Barbie. Damn that girl moved fast. I should have been faster. Shit, now I'd have to find someone else.

"Hi, do you have a partner?" said a voice from my other side.

I looked up and it was the older looking guy with the scar on his face. At least it wasn't one of the Greek crowd.

"Nope, I don't. I'm Steven."

"I'm Ben. Wanna knock this project out together?"

"That sounds like a plan to me. Here, let me give you my number. You can text me yours." I smiled, and he returned it before heading back to his desk in the other back corner.

Dr. Dvorak cleared his throat deliberately. "If you would return to your seats once you have a partner." He waited a few minutes as all the stragglers sat back down. "Good, now what I want is for you to share life experiences and then pick a novel or a story that you feel matches something about your partner. Then, using only those two works, write a paper on how they relate to all other

people. While you can use a book that we go over in class, it better fit your partner. So if you pick Dracula, your partner should have the fangs to prove it.”

After class, Ben texted his info to me and invited me to go out to dinner to talk about ourselves. Barbie and Crissy already told me they planned on knocking out the life story part. Perfect time to get this started for me too.

We met up at Niffer’s at seven. We ordered a beer to get us started while we waited for our meals.

“I need to tell you a couple of things about me first. If you have a problem with it, I’ll see if we can find new partners,” Ben said.

I motioned for him to continue. I couldn’t think of anything that would need that kind of warning, unless it involved necrobstantiality.

“I was a marine.” He pointed at his face. “They called it friendly fire, but my column got hit by an A-10.” He took another breath. “And I’m gay.”

I was stunned for a moment. Even though he was a different branch of service, I respected the hell out of marines. The friendly fire part struck a bit closer to home. I was surprised that he was brave enough to open a conversation with being gay.

I must have thought about it too long, because he straightened up and took a big gulp of his beer.

“I have no problem with any of that. I’m ex-army. An IED got me in the leg.” I paused before adding, “I’m not gay.”

“Well, looks like we can work together.” He smiled and the skin below his scar puckered a little bit.

Turned out we had a lot in common. If he hadn’t told me, I would have never guessed he was gay.

Chapter 19

Barbie

Friday, after class, Crissy came over. I was surprised to see her, since she was having a party in her apartment later. She barely made it into my apartment before she spun to face me.

“You need to make a move on Steven.”

What? Why would she think that? I thought I'd been subtle. I hadn't smacked his ass or anything. Just snuck a few more looks at it than a straight friend would probably approve of.

“The fuck are you talking about?” I demanded.

“I see you looking at him, and when you're not looking at him, he's looking at you. You boys are just being clueless.”

I thought about it. Didn't like where she was going with it though. I hated to say it, but I was slightly fixated on him. No one else turned my crank, but then, no one else had before. There were just a few problems to work out before I could get my crank turned.

“I've never tried to make a move before,” I admitted sheepishly. “And I wouldn't know what to do if he went for it.”

She looked at me, and I could see the wheels turning behind those eyes. I probably wasn't going to like whatever she came up with next.

“You know how guys have sex, right?”

Could this be any more embarrassing? I knew the basics. “Yeah, a dick and an ass meet. What else is there?”

I could tell I was blushing furiously. Even my arms and hands were getting in on the act by turning a bright red. I hadn't felt this close to spontaneous combustion before.

“Have you watched any porn? Read any blogs? Hell, read a book about it?” She kept asking as I shook my head no to each one. “Then you need to. Come on, get out your laptop.”

She flopped down on my couch when I brought my laptop to her. She commandeered it and started searching and pulling up all kinds of websites. She patted the seat for me to sit down, too.

“Okay, here’s a forum talking about it. You can ask questions if you need to.” Then she opened another tab.

“This is gay porn. Start with that one.” She pointed to a thumbnail of two men kissing. “It’s got a lot of info in there.”

I looked at her again. “How do you know what’s a good one or not?”

This time she blushed up to her hairline. “I... um... might have done a bit of research since you told me you might be gay. Turns out that guys together are hot.”

Oh. Shit.

“Have you been getting off on gay porn?” I asked her. She wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Maybe a little.” Her voice was so small, not anything like how she was normally. I felt a little bit bad for it, but she had brought this on herself.

I started up the video. It wasn’t doing anything for me. “Maybe I’m not gay, this isn’t sexy.”

“Um, try to imagine it’s you and Steven.”

I watched some more. The guys on screen were just kissing and rubbing each other. I thought about Steven doing that to me, touching me like that. *Whoops*, my pants got tight immediately. Now, I was the one embarrassed as Crissy watched me. I stopped the video.

“I, uh, I think that maybe you should have some privacy for a bit,” she said before standing up and heading for the door. “Don’t forget about my party tonight. Steven’s going to be there.”

I would have gotten up to show her out, but I had enough wood for a forest. Some things you don’t want a friend to see. Well, unless it was Steven. I wouldn’t mind him looking at my forest all day.

After she left, I read some of the forum and watched the rest of that movie. I learned quite a bit about my body that I wasn’t aware of. I learned a lot that I wanted to test out with Steven. I really wanted to see what the rest of him looked like. Only problem was, Steven was straight.

By the time I dragged myself away from the videos and pictures and threads, I could hear Crissy’s party across the hall. I quickly slipped into something a little more festive and crossed to her place.

She had some industrial mix playing in the living room. It sounded like a remix of Nine Inch Nails. All her furniture was pushed back to make a little dance floor. The lights were dim and the drinks were cold. As soon as Crissy spotted me, she pressed a drink into my hand.

“Try this, you’ll like it,” she said. I took a sip.

“What is it?” I asked. It was really good, didn’t taste too strong of alcohol, just a little like citrus.

“It’s a Grateful Dead.”

I finished that one off, and headed back to the bar area. In other words, her kitchen counter. Amber was making drinks for herself and a few others. I saw a few bottles tipped into my cup before she handed it back with a smile. I could really get used to a few more of these.

I saw Steven holding up the wall in between the kitchen and the living room. He had a fierce expression on his face. I had a feeling that he probably didn’t want to come out tonight. I’d learned that he wasn’t a big fan of crowds. Neither was I, just sometimes the energy was worth it. So far, it wasn’t. My drink and I joined him against the wall.

“So your boss still has you running errands?” he asked. He hadn’t brought that up all week, and I’d thought he’d forgotten about it. I guess I wasn’t that lucky.

“Yeah, she sometimes needs things done. When I moved away to college, I quit the full-time part of it. She pays well for the things that need a personal touch, since she doesn’t have an office here.” It was mostly true. I hadn’t mentioned what exactly I did, or where I did it. I felt bad about it, but not bad enough to tell him and have him run from me.

He nodded his head at my explanation. He looked like he bought it. We chatted about our classes and professors. He complained about the annoying freshmen in his classes. I told him it was because he was taking first year classes. He looked a bit disgruntled at that. I laughed.

We kept talking, and we kept drinking. Occasionally I’d get us a refill or four. We were both getting a bit tipsy, bordering on falling down drunk. Well, a bit closer to hammered.

Then somebody got a hold of the sound system and put on an eighty’s hairband playlist. My kryptonite. I had to dance. Steven refused to join me, saying he still preferred to watch.

I was really getting into it and letting myself go, when someone plastered themselves to my back. It was too short for Steven or Crissy. I looked over my shoulder. Amber looked wasted as she clung to me. She tried to sing along with “Pour Some Sugar on Me”, and ended up pouring regurgitated alcohol on my back.

That pulled me out of my good mood. Fast. Steven was already on us and trying to disentangle Amber as she kept trying to rub off on me. I was drunk, but there wasn't enough booze to make what she did attractive.

Chapter 20

Steven

Crissy's apartment filled with people. I stayed out of the crowd as best I could, just watching their antics as they drank away the week of classes. Barbie showed up and gave me something to focus on instead of counting down the minutes until I could leave without offending Crissy. He came over to talk to me instead of hanging with his female fan club. Of course, we had a few more drinks. Maybe a few too many drinks, but regret was not an option when the music changed from the industrial to classic rock.

Barbie was so hot when he danced. Like the music was liquid and he swam freely in it. *Shit, I needed to stop thinking about that.* Even though his hair was flying around his head like tongues of flame. Everyone else faded into the background as I watched him dance and pretended he was dancing for me.

I was having a good time, until Amber upchucked all down Barbie's back. *Why couldn't she have left him alone and just crashed out in a corner?*

Once my eye candy stopped dancing, I led him over to his place to get cleaned up. He was so drunk, I thought he was just going to collapse on the couch. It took a bit to convince him he needed to take a shower instead. Finally, he kicked his shoes off and went into the bathroom.

My ears heard the shower come on. The hot water had to be cascading down through his hair and across his perfect ass. I tried not to imagine him all wet, soaping himself down, rubbing and stroking himself until he was clean. *Stop it.* I didn't need to get excited by that image.

Pacing didn't seem like a good thing to do while he showered. My feet just might have me in his bathroom if I didn't control them. So I sat on his couch and looked around for something to take my mind off of hot, wet, naked Barbie. There was his laptop. Maybe something on there would keep me from picturing that red hair flowing in the water around Barbie's silky smooth tanned skin. I could log on to Facebook or find some online time-wasting game.

I tapped the touchpad, and when the screen turned on, my heart just about turned off. A video was paused on the screen. It was two guys. It was two guys kissing. It was two naked guys kissing while they fucked. I knew the basics of anal sex and had a few gay buddies try to squick me out with excessive sharing.

When they described it, it hadn't sounded fun at all. *Who would want to be forced down and have something shoved up their ass?* I didn't know it could look this, well, loving. The men touched each other like they were really in love, not just actors.

I had to see the rest of the video. I started it from the beginning and watched the bigger man dominate the little guy with his kisses. I watched them touch. I watched them prepare the little man to handle the huge dick the big guy was swinging. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I just kept thinking about Barbie sitting right here and watching this, maybe touching himself, maybe doing something like this with someone. The video kept playing and they kept holding each other, and touching each other. *How many times had he watched this? Did he want something like this?* There was no way I could tear my eyes away.

Until I noticed that the shower had stopped, and Barbie was standing in the doorway, a towel wrapped around his hips. Staring in horror at me with his laptop. Watching his porn. Knowing that he had watched this, too.

I had to touch him, had to feel his slick, wet skin, had to know if it would burn my hands from the fire of his body. I slowly walked over to him. The green fire in his eyes burned away all of my good sense. He didn't say anything as I gently brushed his wet hair back over his shoulder and slid my hands up his neck to bury my fingers in his scalp. He didn't resist me as I brought his lips to mine.

I had never known a kiss could be that mind-numbing. In fact, I couldn't even think anymore. The strands of his hair bunched around my fists as I held his head in place. My tongue ran along the seam of his lips until they unzipped and let me pass through. Our teeth clicked together when I coaxed him out to meet me. The minty tang to his tongue drew even more of my attention to how it felt, sliding between my mouth and his.

My hands knew what they wanted to do while I was occupied with his lips. They didn't need any input from my brain. One hand stroked up and down his back as the other stayed tangled in his hair, pressing our lips together so he couldn't retreat. My lips were content to rub along Barbie's, our tongues trying to move in together. He gasped and then pressed his body closer to mine.

His hands rose up to wrap around my chest and flex up and down my back, stroking and pulling the muscles. Kneading like he was a big cat. I was so relieved to know that he wasn't fighting me, was even encouraging me to take what I wanted.

Just standing in the doorway was not going to cut it. I guided us to his bed, with him stumbling along not releasing me.

We bumped into the edge then fell headlong onto his still unmade bed. I propped myself up and looked down at his lightly tanned body with the wet red hair and the hideous orange towel still wrapped around his hips. That had to go. I flicked the towel open to get my first full length view. I just stared. He was perfect, glowing skin covering small but defined muscles. The cut under his ribs had healed to a red streak.

There was his cock, relaxing against his hip. So soft. I wondered what it was like to have a foreskin like his. Was it something that he played with? *I could play with it. Would he let me play with it?*

His thighs made a shadowed cave. His sac had to be in there, under all that fiery, fluffy, fur. Would it be high and tight; or floppy and loose? My thoughts kept wandering around his crotch.

After who knows how long, Barbie started to twitch under my gaze. He looked me in the eye and ran his tongue over his lips. At least I think that's what he was doing.

"See something you like?" he said in a breathy voice.

Oh man, did I like. I liked it just the way it was. In front of me.

"Yeah, all of you," I said, as I was broken out of the spell his body had me under.

He brought a hand up to my shirt and started to push it up. I took the hint and ripped it off over my head. I tried not to think it, but I worried when he saw my scars, he might not want me. Luckily, it was still pretty dark in his bedroom, maybe he wouldn't notice them.

I went ahead and pulled my pants and boxers down to let him see the whole show. There was lots of scarring on my legs from the shrapnel and raised white stripes along my left side.

He pushed himself up on an elbow to get a better look. Then ghosted his free hand over my chest and up to a nipple. He gave it a little tweak. Wow, I didn't know my nipples were that sensitive. No one had paid them any attention before. I couldn't help but arch my back into his touch. He reached over and squeezed the other one, then gave it a pull before releasing it. His finger meandered along my shoulder and then down my side.

I knew he felt the occasional bump of scars. He wasn't freaking out, but then he was pretty drunk. My skin twitched as he came close to tickling me when his hand slid smoothly over my hip bone and around to slide down the crease of my thigh and cup my balls. The strangeness struck me then. Another man had his hand on my sac, and I had absolutely no panic about it, in fact wanted him to touch. Wanted him to do anything he liked to me.

He gave me a light squeeze then slid his hand up and over my begging cock. I stood at attention and saluted his efforts. He swayed unsteadily on his arm as he stroked from my balls to the head of my cock again.

"Ah, that feels nice," I whispered when he circled a finger around the head of my dick, just playing with it. I leaned over and licked his lips. I might have leaned a little more than I was expecting. He fell off of the arm that was keeping him propped up and landed flat on his back. His breath whooshed out, and he gave a little high pitched giggle. His cock cast a shadow from the light in the other room. Just like a sundial that said it was time to fuck.

I lunged up over him, sliding my body over his. He gasped softly, and I could still smell the mint and alcohol on his breath. I couldn't remember why we shouldn't be doing any of this, but, hell, we all do dumb things when we're drunk. He was so warm under me; I couldn't make myself get off.

Hmm. Maybe we could both get off. My leg slid in between his. His cock burning against my hip. I needed more of that contact. I had to have it. I slid my other leg in and spread his thighs so I could feel his legs surround me.

Ahh... much better. Then I caught sight of his lips above me and had to have those again. When I stretched against him, my cock pressed against his. He gasped against my lips as I deliberately pushed a little harder. This was way beyond anything I'd ever felt before. I tried to tell myself it was the booze talking, but I knew it was just Barbie that was overloading my circuits.

He thrust his cock hard under me, rubbing along mine. My brain melted out of my ears. I had to have more. I had to... I don't know. I had to do something. I pushed back and the friction between us was scorching.

"Yes, oh yes, do that again. Just do that again. That felt so good," Barbie babbled, "I'm on fire."

I followed his commands as best I could. Who knew that two cocks were so good together, so good rubbing together. I didn't know it before, but damn, I knew it now.

“This, baby? You like it when I do this to you? Does this make you hot?” Hell, I started babbling, too. I couldn’t make myself shut up. The feel of us rubbing together was lighting my fire. His hands pulled at my hips, grinding me harder against him.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop. Don’t you fucking dare stop.” His eyes were blazing green in the dim light. His still damp hair was practically steaming from the heat. Sweat glistened on his forehead. His lips were parted as he kept up a string of orders never to stop.

Then his body arched backward, his head thrown back to expose his long throat. He lifted us off the bed and then I felt it. I felt his cock jerking between us and his hot lava erupting and coating my cock and his.

I was so close that seeing him explode pushed me over the edge too. I came so damn hard I blacked out for a while.

When I came to, I was still partially on Barbie. He was breathing softly in his sleep. I didn’t have the strength to pull away, so I let myself slip into sleep as well.

Chapter 21

Barbie

Oh the agony! Oh the pain! My head wished it had been decapitated long before this. It took me a little while to realize that I was lying in my own bed, and the light from the window was responsible for stabbing out my eyes. *Damn burning day star.* I threw my arm over my face to block out the evil light.

When did my blankets get so heavy? And only on my left side? I tried to feel them with my left hand, but it was still asleep. Okay, something was going on here. I would have to do the unthinkable. Mustering up my courage, I peeled my eyes open to face the annoyingly bright light. When I turned my head, I was staring straight into a mess of black hair, just inches away.

The memory of last night came back to taunt me. Steven had seen the porn. I didn't know what came over him, but he kissed me, and all fuzzy thoughts had slipped away. I barely even noticed when I went from upright to laying down on my bed, staring up at him. When he took off his clothes, he was spectacular, and I couldn't help myself. I touched. I kissed. I rubbed off on him, or maybe he rubbed off on me.

Oh. Shit. Oh shit. Oh shit! We had been so drunk, I didn't even know if he knew what was going on. *Did I take advantage of him?* I couldn't be sure since I remembered feeling way too good to stop.

His head moved. I thought he was starting to wake up. His arm that was draped over me started to twitch. I prepared myself for what I would say to him. Then his legs joined in, spasming like a dog caught in a dream. His head jerked up.

"NO! Don't!" he screamed right in my face. Then his eyes snapped open, and I was looking into swirling pools of terror. I tried to scoot back, but I was under him, and he had me gripped tight in his arms.

The fear in him was the only thing that kept me from forcing my way free. What was I supposed to do? I could tell he had just woken from a nightmare, but my rational mind was still hammered, and that scream was like a spike through my ears all the way to my brain.

I'd never been the one to turn to for comfort. No one tried to cry on my shoulder, besides Crissy that one time, and even then, I hadn't been any help.

The only thing I could come up with was rubbing his shoulder with my free hand and pushing his head into my shoulder.

"It's okay. You're safe now. I've got you." I just kept repeating those words until his eyes cleared, and he relaxed out of the terror.

"What the hell happened?" Steven said in a confused tone. "Tell me we didn't..." His voice trailed off, shock taking over his features as he saw I was naked and holding him tight.

Yep, he had been too drunk to know better.

My door crashed open. We both jumped, and I nearly shrieked when it felt like my pubes were being yanked out by the roots when our crotches separated. I grabbed the sheets and pulled them over my body when Crissy came through my bedroom door, baseball bat up like she was going to hit something out of the park.

"What the hell is going on here?" She asked, looking from me to Steven, who had pulled the comforter up around him.

"What does it look like?" I shot back. I was hungover and pissed. I was not in the mood for this shit. My glowing clock on the nightstand read 9:42 a.m.

"I don't know. I heard screaming over here, and thought you were being murdered." Her eyes kept flicking around the room like she didn't know where to look. "I didn't know you still had company."

"Well I do. Would you leave now? No one is getting murdered. You've done your duty."

She took a second, then nodded her head and walked out.

Now that the distraction was gone, I had to figure this out. I wrapped my sheet tighter around me, up to my armpits, and sidled over to my dresser to get something to wear. Steven just kept staring at me. I slid the jeans on under my sheet and up over my ass. I grabbed a T-shirt to finish my armor and pulled the shirt over my head as I dropped the sheet.

"I'm going to make some coffee," I said and slipped out of the room. I had never felt this unsure of myself. I was always in control. Fire is not timid, it does not shy away from problems. That's what I kept telling myself, anyway.

While the coffee was brewing, Steven came out of my bedroom wearing his clothes from last night.

"So... Um... we um..."

“Yeah, we um’d.” I wasn’t sure where he was going with that. It had been the hottest experience of my life. I didn’t want to stand here in my kitchen and listen to him explain how much of a mistake it was.

He hesitated for a bit before continuing. “So now what?”

I didn’t know what he wanted. What I wanted was for him not to regret what we did, but that ship had already sailed out and been shot down in the harbor. I would settle for just being his friend, if we could still even manage that. Deep breath, pull in all my rampaging emotions.

“Now we pretend it didn’t happen and go back to the way we were. There’s no need for this to ruin our friendship.” I hoped he would go for it. I didn’t want to lose even that much of him.

“What if...” he paused and cleared his throat, “what if I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen?”

My breath caught in my throat. Could he mean what I thought he did? Did he want the same thing I did? To have a chance to find out what this thing was between us?

“What do you mean?” I hesitantly asked. “I thought you were straight.” Probably shouldn’t have reminded him of that.

“Maybe... maybe... God, why is this so hard. I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen. I just don’t know what it means for me.” He paused. “Hell, it could be just a drunken mistake. I know I was trashed off my ass, and you were right there with me.”

“Do you think it was just a drunk thing?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

He ran his hand through his hair. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. It kind of stabbed at me that he could think it was just the alcohol when it had felt so right. It wasn’t just the alcohol for me. That only let me show what I wanted from him. After seven weeks, thinking about him cranked my engine and drove me away. But to hear him say it could just be a drunk thing made me want to burn something and watch it explode.

“I don’t know. It might be just... I think... I need to think about it.” He cleared his throat. “I need some time. I can’t think with this hangover, and midterms are next week. Um, I’ll call you.” He was out of my apartment so fast, I almost looked for burned rubber on my floor.

Well. That didn't go as expected. What had I thought would happen? I still didn't know if he believed it was only because we were drunk.

After three cups of coffee and a healthy shot of bourbon, I felt a bit more human. I couldn't seem to make myself want to get up off the couch to do anything constructive. I didn't clean up anything, my sheet was still on the floor along with my orange towel, evidence of the night before.

The funk lingered with me for the rest of the weekend. I kept going over what he said and all the ways it could be interpreted. Was I turning into a teenage girl with all this turmoil? He didn't call, but I wasn't really ready for round two, yet.

I studied my ass off Sunday night for my midterms. That was just par for the course, since I always crammed before any test. It wasn't because I was avoiding thoughts of Steven. Not that it really helped. I couldn't concentrate on my notes, and when I tried to read my textbooks, the words blurred into things he had said.

Chapter 22

Steven

Oh my fucking god. I couldn't deal with how I felt waking up in a panic from one of my nightmares to have Barbie holding me till I calmed my ass down. I hadn't told anyone about the dreams, and now Crissy thought I was crazy after waking the whole complex. Then there was the... was it sex? I didn't remember anything going in anywhere, but it had sure felt like sex.

I couldn't accept Barbie's offer of just forgetting. Pretending it didn't happen was the coward's way out. Barbie's face when I said it might have happened because we were drunk was sticking to me. He looked so disappointed. But I'm straight. Or at least I always thought I was. As much as I enjoyed what we did, I didn't know if I would feel the same if we were both sober.

I fled Barbie's apartment like the demons of hell were on my tail. Things would probably have been better if I'd stayed and talked to Barbie about it, but I just couldn't. Not taking the easy way out that Barbie offered took all the courage I had left.

Sunday, I heard my doorbell followed by some furious knocking. I was sitting on my couch, watching NFL. On the coffee table, I had a beer waiting for me to kill and add it to a pile of dead soldiers on the floor. After not even trying to make it to my bed the night before, I knew that I looked pretty rough.

It had to be Crissy. I could hear when Barbie came over from several streets away. I didn't bother getting up for her. The door was unlocked, and she could damn well open it for herself.

She didn't bother knocking again, just stormed into my living room.

"What the hell is going on?" she said. "I gave you guys some privacy to sort this shit out, but seriously, what the hell? You look like you haven't moved in a week. You stink." She looked more closely at me. "And didn't you wear that to my party Friday? Have you even bathed since then?"

"You caught me. I haven't. So? What are you going to do about it?" I knew I sounded belligerent, but I couldn't find it in me to be polite. *How would she like it if her world got stood on end?*

"Have you even slept?"

I just stared at her.

"I thought you guys had gotten somewhere. Saturday morning, you guys were cuddled up in bed. Today, Barbie wouldn't talk to me. You're not answering calls, and you look like a hot mess." She sighed. "Have you eaten anything today?"

I shook my head no.

"I'll order us something, then you're going to talk to me."

She ordered a pepperoni pizza and a two-liter Pepsi. Barbie and I had eaten a lot of pepperoni pizzas on this couch. Crissy just wasn't the same. She sat down next to me with her slice on a paper plate. Barbie ate straight from the box like I did. Shit. *Why couldn't I stop thinking about him?*

After we ate, Crissy cleared her throat. "Now, spill. I want to know what happened Friday night and yesterday morning. Tell me what's going on."

I thought for a minute on how to answer her, but finally decided to tell her everything, from finding his porn until seeing him naked. I didn't tell her what we had done in bed, but I didn't need to. I could see her filling in the blanks. I didn't tell her what my nightmare was about. My aunt had told her what happened. Then I repeated our conversation from Saturday morning.

"You are a fucking jerk, Steven. Why the hell did you have to say that it was a drunken mistake?"

Ahh, now I'd pissed Crissy off. My life could be called complete.

"I had to be honest with him. I didn't want to lead him on if it was just the alcohol."

"Now that you're sober, what do you think? You are mostly sober, right? Does he still turn you on? Do you think of that red hair spread out so you can touch it all? Do you want to touch his smooth chest? Do you want to feel him wrapped around you?"

I could feel my face burst into flame. Did she really expect me to talk to her about that? I couldn't stop picturing the things she said either. Just the thought of his hair wrapped around my fist was getting me worked up again.

"I don't know, Crissy. I've never tried to date a guy before."

"So, you want to date him now?" Those blue eyes were boring into my skull, trying to see my thoughts. I had drill instructors that couldn't pin me down like she could.

“Crissy, I don’t know. I think about him, and I want him. I’ve never had a relationship with anyone. Maybe I’ll screw it up, and he’ll never speak to me again.” Damn it, why couldn’t I stop whining? She kept staring at me. I started to squirm.

“Well, you need to decide what you want. If you want him, you’re going to have to talk to him. If you don’t want him, you’re going to have to tell him that, too.”

My head was a mess. “I’m going to need a bit of time to think about this. I’ll take the week and sort through all this. I don’t want to make things worse.”

I knew what needed to be done. I just didn’t want to do it.

“Are you going to talk to Barbie about this?” I asked.

“No, I’ll let you do that. Now, I have to go study. Good grades don’t just happen.” She patted my thigh. “Now start taking care of yourself and think real hard about what you want.”

With that, she pushed up out of my couch that had tried valiantly to hang on to her. Much like how I wanted to hang onto a certain redhead.

I sat there just thinking about what she’d said about still wanting him. Barbie was certainly prettier than any girl I’d ever been with. We got along very well, when I wasn’t being a jerk. I hadn’t been turned off when I saw his cock. Thinking about that perfect pink dick now, I didn’t feel any disgust or revulsion, only an urge to see how it would feel in my hand. *Would it feel like mine? All bumpy and veiny and curving towards his belly button? Or would it be soft and smooth, the foreskin sliding around in my hand?*

In fact, I wanted to find out what it would taste like. *Would it taste like his mouth? Soft and wet? Or would it taste like his shoulder, salty and fresh?* Had anyone ever done that for him, gone down on him? He didn’t mention any other people he’d been with. Had he ever been with a guy?

It was curious to have this desire to be the first to try sucking his dick. Being someone’s first anything never appealed to me. I thought of that little bit of porn I saw on his laptop. *Did he want me to do that with him? Did he want to be the one getting a cock shoved up his ass, or was he the one that wanted to give it?*

The thought of shoving my dick up his ass didn’t turn me off at all. The thought of him taking my ass was something different entirely. That thought was scary as fuck, but at the same time, so much hotter than me doing him. *Would he want to do that? Could I ask him to? What would it even feel like? I’d*

never done more than wipe the backdoor. Never considered it to be part of having sex.

My cock was getting hard from the thought of Barbie having me like that. I shoved my hand down the front of my pants.

Wait. Why were my pubes crusty?

Oh yeah, cause I hadn't showered since Friday. My curly pubic hairs were stuck together in clumps. That was Barbie's semen crusting up my crotch. Which reminded me of how we'd gotten it there in the first place. Just the thought of Barbie under me, rubbing my cock on Barbie, got me to attention faster than anything before.

The need to touch myself was almost overpowering. I didn't want anyone to see this, so I locked my front door and went into my bedroom. I pulled off my shirt, then my pants hit the floor and I collapsed naked onto the bed.

Looking down my body, I could see where our semen had coated the black hairs on my treasure trail. Little white flakes lay against my skin like perfect little snowflakes. My hair was matted down all around the base of my painfully swollen cock. I couldn't help myself, I had to touch it. They were stuck tight together so that when I pushed my fingers through, they tugged my crotch before letting go. The slight pain from the hair pulling around my cock was so delicious. I'd heard that hair pulling could be fun, but I didn't think this is what was meant.

I had never even thought about adding a bit of pain to sex, but just that little bit put me on the edge. My other hand started to gently stroke across the skin of my cock. Up and down, back and forth. The dried cum let go and flaked away making such lovely tingles on my shaft. I needed more. I had to have more.

I pushed my cock down on my belly and ground it into the filthy hairs. I rubbed it on Barbie's semen, where his cock had rubbed against me Friday night. The rough texture of our dried cum pushed me over into an explosive orgasm. My back arched up. My knees fell open. I pulled the matted hair on my crotch and my balls kicked my cum out and onto my belly to join the mess from Friday night.

Once I calmed down from the best rub out I'd ever had, I felt so filthy. *Did I really just masturbate in two-day-old dried cum?* I shuddered in disgust. If Barbie knew what I'd just done while thinking about him, he'd run. It was time to get cleaned up. Hard to believe I hadn't been compelled to shower as soon as I got home Saturday.

I didn't think I could pass myself off as straight after being that turned on by another man's cum on my crotch.

Chapter 23

Barbie

Tuesday night, I found I had an odd feeling. I wanted to call my foster mother. I hadn't called her since I moved away to college.

"Hi Pamela."

"Barbie? Is this Barbie? Are you doing alright? Do you need help?"

"I'm fine. Just thought I'd call you and see how you're doing. I realized I hadn't spoken to you since I moved up here."

"That's right, we still haven't seen your apartment."

I thought about it. She was right. I'd packed up and moved away with everything that was mine in the trunk of my car. I was sure that she and Fred would like to see it, and they weren't all that far away.

"Would you guys like to come see my place?" I hesitantly asked.

"We would love to. We don't have any plans for tomorrow. Would that be okay?"

How fast she answered, and didn't even consult with Fred, let me know that they probably were waiting for me to invite them over. Growing up, they always respected my decisions and wouldn't push. I wondered if they would have wanted to be more of a part of my life growing up. I remembered a few times that Fred asked if I wanted to go camping or fishing with him. In fact, one of the few things I would interact with them on was when Pamela taught me to cook.

Back when I was ten and the social worker dropped James and me off at the Merrill's house, we were both very standoffish. James disappeared into his room and only came out to go to school. He grabbed his meals from the kitchen and ate in his room. Pamela and Fred tried to get us to talk, to tell them about the night of the fire.

Pamela and Fred were a middle-aged couple who didn't have any children of their own. They'd already raised three other foster children before James and I moved in. Those children grew up and moved away, but still came back every Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Then one day, Pamela made souvlaki. She told me that if I wanted any more, I would have to learn to make it myself. After that, she got me a couple Mediterranean cookbooks and taught me how to cook. It didn't take long before I was able to make foods from all over the world. I never told her that I already knew how they tasted when made by a native. Looking back, I realize that was her way of spending time and bonding with me.

While I was always a skinny bean pole, James was tall for his age and bulked up easily since he ate the same amount I did. But mine was burned away, while his went into muscle. When school started, James was encouraged to play junior varsity football. Fred finally broke through to James then. Turns out that if you want to play, you need at least one other person to practice with.

I wasn't interested in playing football. More accurately, I wasn't interested in accidentally drawing attention to my strength and speed if I slipped up. In school, the only physical thing I did, was yoga. I took a few art classes, learned to play classical piano, then disappeared into the garage to tinker and rebuild my Chevelle.

"Tomorrow would be fine. What time do you think y'all will come up?" I heard her put her hand over the phone and shout for Fred to tell her when.

I had to smile, Pamela didn't ask if he wanted to go. She just assumed he did.

"We can be there at six, is that okay?"

"That would be fine. I'll see you then," I said.

She hung up.

All night it rained, and in the morning it let up to a slow drizzle. My family was coming to visit. Huh. They were my family, and I hadn't even noticed.

At 5:56, they knocked on my door. Fred had started getting a bit of gray sprinkled through his dark hair and at the temples. His laugh lines were permanent and bracketed his eyes and lips. Pamela was aging gracefully as well. I could see a few more white hairs blending in with the blonde. Her smile was as serene as the first time I saw it.

When she held out her hand for me to shake, I don't know what came over me. I pulled her to me and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. I saw the surprise in Fred's eyes over the top of her head. I couldn't remember ever hugging either one of them. Had I really been that frigid?

When I gave Fred a one arm shoulder hug, I was afraid I might give him a heart attack from the shock. He cleared his throat. "How have you been, son?"

He always called James and me son. I finally recognized that was how he saw us. We weren't just the rejected kids; we were his kids. I took a second as I motioned for them to come on in. I needed a distraction to unclog my throat.

"I'm good. I'm learning a bit in class."

I showed them around my apartment. Pamela kept looking around then back to me. It took me a minute to figure out what had her puzzled.

Gesturing around the living room, I said, "My friend is working on her BFA in interior design. She wanted to practice on my place."

I wouldn't have even thought of having a bench height bookshelf running the length of the room under the windows. The ultra-modern, low, cream couch took a bit of getting used to. The enormous shiny-black on matte-black painting would not have been my first pick either. Somehow, Crissy tied it all together with what she called accent pieces. I called them lamps and end tables.

We talked about classes for a bit, then the conversation moved around until it came back to friends.

"This Crissy sounds like she's pretty great. Do you see her very often?" Pamela asked.

"Yeah, almost every day. She lives right across the hall, and we have a class together. She and Steven are my best friends." After it was out, I realized that I still thought of him as my best friend, even if he thought we'd made a mistake.

Pamela reached up to touch her hair, then said, "Could there be anything more between you?"

"No, very early on, we figured out that we weren't each other's type."

"Is there anyone else that you're interested in? Maybe a girl in one of your classes?"

I thought about how much strength it must have taken for Sam to be so open. I hadn't appreciated it, until I was getting ready to tell my foster mother.

"Pamela, Fred, I need to tell you something." I took a deep breath. Here goes. "I'm gay."

Fred dropped down on my couch. Pamela though, didn't react much at all. She said, "We've always had our suspicions. We're just surprised you're finally

telling us.” She paused for a second. “There for a while, we were worried that you wouldn’t tell anyone. You were just so closed off.” She stepped toward me and opened her arms. “Come here.”

I stepped forward, and she wrapped her arms around me for the second time that day. I felt my eyes start to prickle and tingle. Then I felt a cool streak of wetness down my cheek. *Was this what it felt like to cry? But why would I cry over something that made me happy?*

Over the top of her head, I saw Fred get back up from the couch and come towards us. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking until he reached his arms out to hold both his wife and me.

“I love you, son. I’m so proud for you being this strong,” he said as he kept us wrapped in his arms. “I’ve always thought of you as my son, and this won’t change that.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew he cared about me, but somehow I hadn’t wanted to see just how much these two loved me. And then I realized that I loved them back.

Chapter 24

Steven

I tried to study on Sunday, but I couldn't concentrate. Monday came too soon, bringing with it my first midterm, and I didn't feel prepared. Crissy and Barbie were already seated by the time I got to class. I could feel Crissy glaring at me, but I just ignored her. There were other things I'd rather look at. Barbie was so pretty with his hair tied back in a ponytail so I could see his face. Were his eyes a little baggy? Did he look tired?

Luckily, the test wasn't too hard. Even with my blown concentration, I was still able to get it done in time. My eyes kept wandering over to Barbie. At least we weren't sitting next to each other or we'd be busted for cheating, even though I never looked down to where he was writing. I couldn't help myself. He just pulled my eyes to him and held my attention until I could talk myself into doing a few more questions before allowing another glance.

He finished before me, so my distraction left, and I was able to concentrate on my own test. I didn't even notice when Crissy left. Of course, that also meant he wasn't waiting for me when I was done. Which was just as well, since I didn't know what I would say to him. I didn't want to screw up like I had last time. Then I realized that was exactly what happened. I'd screwed up by not jumping all over the chance to have Barbie. Being drunk was no excuse for not recognizing how much I wanted more with him.

I called Crissy on Wednesday to check on her. Really just to try to find out how Barbie was doing. She told me that Barbie wasn't sleeping much, but she couldn't tell if that was a midterms thing or because of me. I hoped it was just the midterms. I didn't want to be the cause of any problems for him.

I promised myself I'd wait until Friday night before trying to talk to Barbie. Just the thought of him led to many lonely whack off sessions. While picturing him with me was a big turn on, it had nothing on the time with his crusty cum. *Did that make me wrong?* Maybe I was gay. Was I ready to date a man? Did I have to tell anyone? What if Barbie turned out to be the one for me? Could I tell my mother? At least I didn't have to worry about telling the guys from my unit.

I spent more time thinking about what to say to Barbie than I did studying. I hoped that didn't affect my grades too much, but no matter how hard I tried, I

couldn't be too concerned. A new discovery of my sexuality at my age made my foundations shudder and was much more important than knowing how to calculate gross GDP.

By the time Friday rolled around, I'd practiced what I would say, how I would say it. I couldn't take how he looked at me in lit class. Like he couldn't decide if he should ignore me or give me a chance.

I called Crissy right after my last class. She confirmed that Barbie was still in his apartment. Now or never. The trip to his place flew by too quickly. I was so nervous, even though I knew there was no physical danger, just that he might never want to speak to me again.

His car was still in the parking lot. I had no excuses to delay. Don't be a coward, soldier!

Knocking on his door was harder than facing down enemy fire. I heard him shuffling to the door. It didn't open.

"What the fuck do you want?" Barbie snarled at me.

I deserved his anger. After all, I had been the one to run.

"I want to talk to you. I've done my thinking. Please, let me in." I would beg if that's what he needed to give me a chance. I heard the chain slide back, and then I was confronted with the man that made my heart stutter. He was in a T-shirt and jeans with his hair pulled back. His eyes were a little baggy, but they sparked with his own fire.

"You could have just called. I'm sure you didn't need to drive all the way over here."

He stepped back and motioned me inside. His apartment was a little disorganized but not like the disaster my place had become. I sat down on his couch like I normally did at his place. He didn't join me. Instead, he perched on the edge of his desk chair. This was the first time he'd sat on a separate piece of furniture just to avoid me. I could feel the distance between us growing.

"Yes, I did. I had to see you. Staying away from you was the hardest thing I've ever done, but I owed it to you to think this through completely." Deep breath. He was paying attention to me at least. "I thought about last Friday night. It wasn't just the alcohol."

"Then what was it?"

"I'd noticed that you were attractive, but I hadn't let myself follow through on that thought. Hell, I thought you were straight, too. When I saw your porn, I

knew you weren't." *Now for the hard part.* "I... I've never found another man attractive before. When I saw you in that damn orange towel, all I could think of was how damn hot you were. How I wanted to do things to you like in that movie. I just had to touch you."

"Crissy was the one to look up the porn." Barbie finally interrupted me. "I'd never seen any gay porn before that. I'd never done anything with a guy before." He stared straight at me, but I could see by the way he kept rubbing his pants that he wasn't that comfortable with the conversation.

What? Was Barbie not gay? I'd been so sure that it was just me that was uncomfortable with it. Had I totally misread what he'd said a week ago? Shit, was I screwing up everything? It was too late for that, I was already spilling more than a friend would want to know. Best to keep going and get it all out, then at least I would know.

I cleared my suddenly parched throat. "Well, since I took the time to think over everything, I know, without a doubt, that you turn me on. Once I allowed myself to think of you like that, I couldn't stop. I don't know what the hell is going to happen, but I'd like the chance to find out."

The ball was firmly in his court.

Chapter 25

Barbie

Was I dreaming? After a nightmare week of studying and missing my friend and worrying that I'd done something wrong, he offered everything I didn't know I was looking for. It seemed he actually was thinking about things, not pushing me away like I'd thought. Now the question was, did I believe him? All week I'd run over everything that we'd done and said from Friday night to Saturday morning.

I had never been with a man before, but I was pretty sure that blaming everything on the alcohol was not a good sign. And then I'd always heard that "give me time" was code for "fuck off and die." It was good to know that he actually just meant time to think.

Now he was asking for a chance. A chance for what, I wasn't sure. It sounded like a good thing.

"Are you sure you weren't thinking of me as a girl? I'm a man. You're a man. Two men doing stuff together is gay. Are you gay?" I had to know for sure.

"I'm gay. I want to try all that gay stuff with you."

Yeah, that was just about what I'd dreamed he would say.

"Do you even know what all that 'gay stuff' is? I looked it up last week. Are you sure you want that? Do you want me to stick my dick up your ass?"

His eyes got so big when I said that, I was afraid that I might have gone too far. From what I'd read, not all guys took it up the ass. I didn't expect to have his right away. Although, I admit that the thought of him bent over with his ass in the air was exceptionally hot. I could just picture him bent over for me, pants sagging around his thighs. My brain short-circuited.

His breath stuttered out and his cheeks went up in flame.

"I... I... um... I want to try that." He could barely get it out, but it set fire to my dick. I hadn't expected him to fucking agree to it, but damn if it wasn't hot as fuck.

"All of it?" I had to ask.

“Yeah, all of it. I think we could learn to do it together.” He paused. “I don’t know how to be gay.” Damn, that was a load of honesty. He rubbed his hand over his head. Those smoke-gray eyes never left my face. “How about we try it. Maybe go on a few dates. Maybe try some other stuff. Hell, I don’t know. The only thing I do know is that I want you. Please.”

“Okay.” I didn’t have it in me to be articulate after having Steven practically present himself on a silver platter for me.

My plan wasn’t fully formed, but I got up and went over to him. I put one leg on each side of him and leaned over, putting my hands on the back of the couch so I was hovering over him. His pupils dilated, but that was his only response as I lowered my face to his.

His lips parted and received my kiss as a benediction. Once we settled into a solid joining of mouths, his hands left the couch to loop around my back and pull me closer. He felt so good under me like that. I needed more. I lowered myself into his lap so I could free my hands. When I slid in close to his chest, I could feel his cock under me. He was gasping and moaning around my lips when I moved my hips a little bit, rubbing on him. That felt super good. Have to do that again! And again.

My hands rested briefly on his shoulders then I slid them down his chest. He felt so good. I couldn’t stop touching. He was right where I wanted him, and he wasn’t protesting.

The End

Author Bio

I'm a slightly interesting person of average intelligence living an average life in the middle of Alabama. I've worked as a claims adjuster and a riding instructor. I'm an artist and a musician. Occasionally, I'm an activist and protester.

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TORN

By Angela Maye

Photo Description

Two young men outside in a secluded location, both naked and totally lost in each other. One sitting and gazing up at his lover who bends down over him for a kiss, his hand lovingly trailing down his chest.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

That long hot summer we had run away together as often as we dared to the hidden gorge lake. After a swim, we would wrap ourselves in each other's arms, finally able to be with each other without the fear of discovery. Little did we know, that particular afternoon would be a last brief shining moment for us. As I bent down to kiss him, his tanned, lithe body so warm under my hand, we never knew that someone else had discovered our meeting place. Now we had to decide, lie about what we meant to each other and part ways forever or face down the coming storm together.

Thank you!

Sammy Goode

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: coming of age, friends to lovers, first time, coming out, homophobia, family issues

Word Count: 22,676

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TORN

By Angela Maye

Chapter 1

God, his life was shit. He stared around the field at the people he'd known practically his whole life. The same boys he'd hung with in kindergarten who acted now almost as they had back then. All playing football as if it was the most important thing in the universe. It wasn't, it was a game. A thought that if spoken aloud would have them looking at him in horror. Thank God there were only a few weeks left of school, then off to college.

His shoulders slumped even more. Not even that brightened his mood. No, he wouldn't be going *off* anywhere, his father had seen to that. He turned toward the changing rooms, his chest tightening. Air seemed very difficult to come by when he thought of his neatly set out future. All planned for him by his father, who of course was only doing it for his own good and the good of the family. Yeah right. He just wanted his family close by so he could keep controlling them, like he had his whole life.

Dane squeezed his eyes shut, it all playing out in front of him like a movie he'd seen a hundred times. College locally in Boulder so there was no need to leave home—of course. Working part time at the family printing business to learn the ropes, then coming in at management level when he got his business degree. He shuddered. He didn't want this, but he also didn't seem to have the strength to stand up to his father either.

His older brother had gone into the business quite happily with no complaint. He wasn't management material and had gone in at a lower level but appeared happy enough. Both he and his father were very alike, certainly coming from the same mold. Their likes, dislikes and extreme prejudices seemed to match perfectly. Something Dane had never been able to fit in with. His thought processes were often the polar opposites to the pair of them. This was one of the reasons why he thought his father tried to control him. He couldn't control his opinions or beliefs so he tried to control his life instead.

Dane had impulsively done one small act of rebellion earlier this year. He'd secretly applied to the University of San Francisco at the same time as applying to Boulder. Not that he truly thought he'd go there, but it had for a short time made him feel better. He'd been accepted too, depending on his grades, just like Boulder. It was that small, little possibility of escape that kept him going. But again he didn't really believe he'd take it. The pull that his father exerted was still too strong.

He glanced around looking toward the stands and saw that boy staring at him again. It was weird that he was there every day. His head stuck in a book most of the time. Dane hadn't failed to notice though that he stared at him a lot. Even though he tried to hide it like he was doing now, hiding behind that book of his. It was just him though. He didn't seem interested in the rest of the team. Good thing too, because if they'd caught him staring he'd have been sporting a black eye long ago—their mentality.

Dane didn't really mind the attention—the boy intrigued him. He knew they were in the same year, but they didn't share any of the same classes. He also didn't seem to have any friends, always sitting alone. Dane studied him for a moment. Dark hair falling in his eyes, a geeky look about him and innocence radiating off him in waves. What was his story and why was he so fixated on Dane? He was nothing special, looking like nearly every other member of the team. Blond, sporty, the typical jock.

Only he wasn't. Inside he was different. It was that difference that was strangling him from the inside, trying to get out. But he had to stick to a certain mold, a stereotype in order to fit in. For a quiet life, he stayed in this role, but slowly it was killing him and he didn't have a clue what to do about it. With a heavy sigh, he turned away from the stands and walked inside.

Oh God, he'd caught him looking. How mortifying was that. Sean's cheeks still felt heated. He really needed to stop staring at this guy. It was going to end up with him getting his face bashed in one of these days. He'd managed to get through the majority of the school year as planned, keeping his head down and focusing on his school work. In a couple of weeks, he'd be free of school, and as he was already eighteen he'd also be free of the dreaded foster care system. He could go out into the world and do whatever he wanted. He smiled—he would follow his plan. But he really needed to stay out of trouble until then. Maybe he should find somewhere else to sit. He liked it here though; people left him alone. He'd just have to stop staring at Dane—easier said than done.

He'd picked up on his name since he'd been spending time here, and for some reason the boy fascinated him. On the surface, he appeared like all the rest of them—a jock, for want of a better word. But there was a sadness to him at times, an uncomfortable set to his shoulders. It had been there when he looked at him just now. It was odd as he appeared to fit in with them all. But Sean couldn't help feeling it was a mask, a facade. He shook himself. Hell,

what did he know? He was no psychologist. It was probably just his imagination taking over again like it often did, with him living in his head most of the time.

He'd just have to focus on not staring before anyone else noticed. He obviously hadn't been as subtle as he thought he'd been. Good job he had no ambitions to be a spy. Anyway he needed to continue to keep a low profile. He may know he was gay, but he didn't want anyone here finding out. Not when every kid around here was either a jock or macho in some way. A rainbow-accepting school, this certainly wasn't. He gathered his things and slung his bag over his shoulder, then started the walk home to a place with equally narrow-minded people. He could never show the real him there either. No wonder he lived in his head.

A week later Dane was having a particularly irritating day with those around him, when after practice his common sense finally snapped. He found himself marching over to his audience of one and stopped in front of him. Wide eyes stared up at him. "Right, I've had a shit day and I feel the need to vent about it. You seem interested as you've been staring at me all year." His eyes sharpened. "And don't try and deny it." The boy's mouth opened and shut, but he wisely didn't argue. "So do you want to get out of here?"

The boy stared at him strangely for a second, then shrugged. "Okay." He gathered his things and stood.

"That's my car over there." He pointed it out. "Wait for me there and I'll just go and grab my stuff." He turned and marched across the now empty field towards the changing rooms. Not bothering to waste time with a shower, he just grabbed his bag and headed towards his car. As he neared his old Nissan, he noticed the guy waiting next to the passenger door, shuffling his feet. He hesitated. What was he doing? This was so not like him. He quickened his pace and gave a small smile. "Don't worry I don't bite. What's your name?"

"Sean." He gave a shy smile.

"I'm Dane." He smirked. "Though you probably already know that." Sean blushed, and Dane immediately felt like a right shit. "Sorry. I won't take my bad mood out on you anymore, promise. Let's get out of here." He unlocked the door and put his bag in the back as Sean got in. Shaking his head at himself, he got in and started the car.

"Where are we going?" There was a slightly anxious look in Sean's eyes.

Dane thought for a moment. He needed fresh air and space. His favorite place instantly came to mind. "There's a place I go to get away from everything. It's in the hills just outside town, about half an hours' drive, then a short walk to get there. It's really nice, there's a lake where I swim sometimes." God, he hoped Sean didn't think him weird, or some sort of axe-murderer wanting to take him into the mountains. But he just smiled.

"That sounds really nice. I haven't really got out of town since I got here a year ago. I'd love to see the mountains." He smiled again, his eyes bright.

Dane started to relax. Maybe he had judged this right after all. Without second guessing himself, he drove out of the school and headed towards the mountains. "Do you have a time you have to be home?" Dane thought he'd better check, didn't want to get the guy in trouble.

"No, they don't really notice if I'm there or not." A neutral tone to his voice.

Dane raised his eyebrows. "Your parents?"

"Foster parents." No further explanation was given so Dane dropped it.

"I've got to be back by seven. Family dinner time." He rolled his eyes. "We're supposed to bond and share our day. What a crock."

They stared at each other and smiled. He thought he saw understanding in Sean's eyes. Dane felt as if he could breathe at last. His chest had been tight all day, and now the fist that felt like it was gripping him started to loosen. Maybe he could talk to this guy. Release some of the tension that had been building for weeks.

They arrived at the clearing where he normally left the car and both got out. "It's so beautiful up here." Sean stared at the surrounding mountains, his voice full of wonder. He turned in circles taking it all in. His eyes had been glued to the window the whole way up here. "I can't believe I've never seen this before."

"I know, right. If you want to get away from it all, this is the place to come. You hardly ever bump into anyone else and I've never seen a soul in the place we're going. I think that's why I like it so much. I can pretend it's my own piece of paradise." He cringed. "God that sounded cheesy."

Sean laughed. "Yeah, but I get what you mean. If I had a car and I knew about this place, I'd be here all the time too."

“Come on I’ll show you the place I mean.” His eyes twinkled. “Though if you tell anyone, I’ll have to kill you.”

“Yeah, right.” Sean laughed and followed after him.

They walked for a while in silence. Sean couldn’t stop looking around him. He honestly didn’t think he’d seen anywhere so beautiful. He’d seen the mountains from a distance of course. But to actually be up in them, be part of them, was truly magical.

Dane stopped in front of him and turned slightly. “It’s down here.” He pointed to a narrow path leading downhill between some rocky cliffs set into the side of the hill. “Be careful, it’s a bit steep.”

Sean swallowed. He just hoped he didn’t break his legs. Giving a shaky laugh he slowly followed Dane, gripping tightly to the rocky edges either side of the path. He was focusing so hard on not breaking his neck, his eyes glued to the path in front of him, that he wasn’t paying attention to anything around him.

“So what do you think?”

He looked up, realizing that he’d reached the bottom. “Oh my God.” Momentarily stunned he couldn’t find any other words.

Dane laughed. “Nice right?”

“Nice? Nice doesn’t even begin to describe it.” He looked around at the pinkish-grey cliffs leading down to a beautiful tranquil lake, the color pure turquoise. It appeared to be an old quarry which had gone back to nature and been reclaimed by the mountain. There were plants and flowers growing everywhere, in every available crack and crevice. Also, the gravelly beach type area had patches of greenery. He heard trickling water and found streams going off in several different directions, creating a wonderful soundtrack to go with the spectacular surroundings. No wonder Dane called this his “piece of paradise”. It was. Sean just smiled at him, feeling so privileged to have this special place shared with him.

“Come on, let’s go and sit down.” Dane obviously was able to tell how overwhelmed Sean was. He followed him to the edge of the lake, his head constantly turning and taking everything in. Dane sat down and removed his shoes and socks, Sean doing the same. When they both placed their feet in the water and sighed almost simultaneously, Sean laughed. This situation was so bizarre. They sat in silence, both leaning back on their elbows. It was a

comfortable silence, companionable, which was strange considering they didn't really know each other.

Eventually, Sean bit the bullet and asked the question he hoped wouldn't spoil things. "So what did you want to vent about?" His voice sounded hesitant. "And why me?"

Dane gave a small laugh. "I'm sorry about that. You must have thought I was nuts storming over to you like that."

Sean laughed. "Well, it did shock me a bit, it was the last thing I expected. So what's wrong?" He forced himself to look Dane in the eye.

With a huge sigh, Dane closed his eyes. "You really don't want to hear about my problems."

"I might not have the answers you're looking for, but I can listen. If that's what you want?"

Dane opened his eyes and searched Sean's face for a second. "Yeah?" A hint of desperation in his eyes.

Sean felt a tug in his gut. "I won't judge you. My own life is screwed up enough so I'm in no position to judge yours."

After a moment's hesitation, Dane lay back and closed his eyes. "It's my father..."

Dane proceeded to explain about how trapped he felt and how impossible it always was to stand up to his father. How all he wanted was to make his own decisions about his future, but had no idea how to stand against him without causing a major family upset. He also told him about applying to San Francisco. Once he'd started talking, he found he couldn't stop and went on to open up about how frustrated he was that he couldn't be himself around his family and friends. That now that he'd taken on this role of the jock, he couldn't seem to find a way out of it. Throughout all this Sean just lay there with an open and understanding look in his eyes. It made Dane want to keep going. He couldn't remember ever being able to talk like this.

"You know, I hang around with those guys, guys I've known forever, and I feel like a total outsider. But you'd never know it to look at me. I play the role so well now that I even kid myself sometimes." He laughed, but there was no humor to it. "It's like with girls. I've been on some dates, hung out with them

and even done some stuff.” He blushed slightly. “But my reaction to it all is so different to the other guys.”

Sean spoke for the first time in what felt like forever. “What do you mean?” A small frown on his face.

“Well, they’re obsessed with girls. It’s all they talk about. Me?” He shrugged. “I find it all a bit... meh. I’m not interested in the obsession of getting off with as many girls as possible.”

“There’s nothing wrong in that. You obviously haven’t connected with the right person yet. There’s no rush, you’re only eighteen.”

Sean’s voice had a calming effect on him. He stretched out, finding himself relaxing. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Anyway let’s talk about something else, this is highly depressing.”

He received a smile. “Okay, but before we do can I ask you something?”

Dane looked at him curiously. “Sure.”

“It’s not really any of my business but...” He hesitated as if unsure whether or not to continue. After a breath, he went on. “It seems to me that you’re desperate to be free of this place and the constraints it puts on you. I really think you need to find a way of standing up to your dad and telling him what you want. Because if you stay here, by the sound of it, it’s going to eat you alive.”

Dane groaned. “I know.” He stared up at the sky knowing that every word that Sean spoke was true. “It shouldn’t be so hard. I mean it’s not like I have to rely on him financially. I’ve got a trust fund for college. My grandmother—on my mother’s side—set it up for me before she died.” He smiled. “Personally I think she did it to piss my dad off. To take away some of that famous control. She never did like him.” He laughed. “Good on her, she was the only one who ever stood up to him. My mother certainly never has. But like I said, it doesn’t make it any easier to confront him about all this. I know the way he’ll see it—me turning my back on the family. Rejecting the family business. He’ll take it as a personal insult.” He stared back up at the sky. “God, I don’t know. It seems impossible whichever way I look at it.” He felt a soft hand squeezing his arm. Stunned into silence, he turned to look at Sean.

“It’ll be all right. You’ll find a way to work it out. You have to.” He gave Dane a gentle smile and squeezed his arm again.

Both that look and the touch comforted him, infusing him with a strength he hadn't felt before. Maybe he could do it, take control of his life. His new friend seemed pretty confident that he could. "Thanks Sean." They stared at each other silently for a moment before Sean let go of his arm. "Now we'll change the subject, this has been way too intense."

Sean chuckled. "Yeah. So what sort of stuff do you like doing?"

"Much better." Dane laughed and with that the intensity dissolved into a quiet companionship where they slowly began to get to know each other.

Chapter 2

“Hey.”

Sean looked up from the notes he'd been reading and saw Dane coming down the corridor towards him. He smiled. “Hi.” Some of the shyness he'd initially felt yesterday returning. Would they still be friends today, back in school with everyone around them? He had a feeling Dane's friends wouldn't approve. Pushing that aside, he forced himself to relax as Dane reached him. “Feeling better today?”

Dane laughed. “Yeah, thanks to you. I haven't talked like that ever, I don't think. It felt good.”

A warm feeling spread through Sean. “Good, glad to help.”

“So what are you up to?”

Sean sighed. “Oh, just reading through some notes for my last exam tomorrow.”

“Need any help? I've finished all mine. I'm just killing time now being here. Gonna be home enough over the holidays.”

Sean smiled, immediately understanding. “Well, I could do with someone to test me. Though I'd understand if you changed your mind. The history of art doesn't strike me as your type of thing.” He smirked, relaxing properly as Dane seemed in no hurry to get away from him. He'd crossed his arms and was leaning against the wall next to him.

With his eyes twinkling, Dane shook his head slowly. “For all you know it might be my favorite subject.”

“Yeah right.” He found himself smiling widely. “Well, if you're sure. Do you mind if we go and get some coffee first? It stimulates my brain cells.”

“Sure, we'll get some food too. I'm starving.” He pushed himself away from the wall. “Where do you want to go?”

“The coffee shop I work at in town does good coffee and sandwiches. We could go there, then the park opposite?”

Dane nodded. “Sounds good.” He led the way with Sean following behind, unable to keep the smile from his face. Maybe he had made a friend after all.

After firing questions at Sean for what felt like hours, Dane finally leaned back against the tree they were sitting under. "I think we both deserve a break." He stared up through the branches above him.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I don't think I can absorb anything else anyway." He rested his head on his arms as he lay on the ground in front of Dane. "If I don't know it now, I don't think I'm going to." He looked up at Dane. "Thanks for helping me." He couldn't believe Dane had sat with him for the past two hours tirelessly asking question after question from the test papers he'd given him.

He received a lazy smile. "No probs. Figured I owed you after emotionally vomiting all over you yesterday."

Sean grimaced. "Nice visuals." That had Dane laughing. Sean found himself joining in. He liked seeing him laugh. It made him seem so carefree. So different from the stressed, uptight boy who'd accosted him yesterday. "Do you want another drink?" He wanted to prolong their time together.

"Yeah, come on then. We'll go to your coffee shop." Dane got to his feet and stretched. "It was cool, had a nice atmosphere."

Sean shoved his books and papers back in his bag and joined Dane on his feet. They both smiled at each other, their eyes holding for a moment before Sean quickly looked away. In his head, he chanted "Just friends, just friends, just friends," determined not to ruin this. It was the first real friendship he'd had in years, and he wasn't going to spoil it, no matter how hot the guy was. Pushing all thoughts in that direction out of his mind, he strode purposefully towards the coffee shop.

They pushed through the door, and Sean spied a free table in the window. He gestured for Dane to take it. "Another latte?" Dane nodded and turned to go claim their table. He gave Sean the sexiest smile imaginable as he sat down. It momentarily rooted Sean to the spot, his mouth going dry. He forced a smile to his face and turned towards the counter, trying desperately to steady his hands. "Hey May," he greeted his boss.

"Hi sweetie. Back again? And with your sexy friend still in tow."

"Hush." His face heating quickly.

"Sorry hun, didn't mean to embarrass you." Her smile said otherwise. "But he is *fine*."

"May, will you behave? He's just a friend." He pinned her with his eyes hoping to get his point across.

“Whatever you say, sweet cheeks.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

He huffed. “Oh, you’re impossible.” He couldn’t really be mad at her. She always brightened his day. She was only in her midtwenties but she gave off a mothering instinct that made him feel cared about. She was always using those silly terms of endearment when she spoke to him. He secretly liked them, though he’d never tell her.

She shook her hair out of her eyes, the sun catching the blonde highlights. Her face became serious. “You deserve to be happy Sean, let yourself be.” She reached over and squeezed his hand.

He swallowed and nodded. He’d opened up about his past when he first started working here, and she’d been his unofficial cheerleader ever since. A smile formed as he stared at her. “Two lattes please,” he finally managed to order.

“Sure thing hun.” She winked at him. He shook his head the smile still in place.

He sat down opposite Dane placing their coffees in front of them. When he looked up, he found himself being studied. He frowned. “What?”

“Relax.” Dane chuckled. “I was just wondering what your story was that’s all.”

“Oh.” Sean didn’t know whether to relax or not.

“Sorry, I’m sticking my nose in. You don’t have to tell me anything.” He smiled gently.

Sean found himself smiling back. “It’s okay. I just prefer focusing on the future rather than the past, but I don’t mind sharing. You told me your story after all.” He paused, wondering where to start. The beginning he supposed. He stared at his coffee, gaining courage from not staring directly into Dane’s eyes. After taking a deep breath, he forged ahead. “My mother died from cancer five years ago.”

“Oh God, Sean, I’m sorry. Look, you don’t need to tell me any of this.”

He glanced up at Dane and gave a half smile. “No, it’s okay. Talking helps, right?”

Dane’s posture relaxed slightly. “It can.” He still didn’t look convinced.

“Look it’s all right. If I didn’t want to talk to you about it, I wouldn’t, so relax.” Dane leaned further back in his chair and matched Sean’s smile.

He took a breath. "Okay... well, after that happened we struggled on for a bit, me and Dad. Then after about six months he just started to spiral. First it was the drink, then drugs." He shuddered as memories of that time assailed him. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing them to go away.

There was a light touch to the top of his hand as it rested on the table in front of him. He opened his eyes and looked down to see Dane's fingers stroking over his own. It gave him the strength to continue. Taking a deep breath, he looked back up at Dane. Those kind brown eyes just drew him in, encouraging him on.

"He got arrested a few times and just got cautioned, but then last year they finally threw the book at him. Landing Dad in jail and me in foster care. I was moved from Denver and placed here." He stared out of the window, becoming quiet. After a minute or so he continued, urged on by a squeeze to his hand. "I don't really mind it here, was never really that keen on Denver, especially after the trouble started with Dad. My so-called friends disappeared into the woodwork when gossip spread about the arrests. Their parents' influence no doubt." He shrugged. "I mean who wants their kid hanging out with a druggie's son." He felt his hand squeezed again and looked back at Dane.

"So, that is my sorry story. Thank God I'm eighteen, and after tomorrow, I'll finally be in charge of my own life." His face brightened. "No more school, and I can focus on my plan." His smile widened.

Dane tilted his head. "Plan?" He sat back in his chair, his hand going with him.

Sean pulled his own hand back, missing the comforting touch already. "Well, I can't afford to go to college properly so I've had to make a plan."

"And?" The word stretched out. Dane grinning back at him. "You gonna tell me or is it some big secret?"

Sean laughed. "It's a three point plan. One, move somewhere and rent my own place—no matter how small. Two, get a job, but that should probably be number one. Three, night classes in art or photography." He stretched his arms out. "Simple."

Dane laughed. "You've got it all planned."

"Yep. The only problem is... I have no idea where to go."

They both stared at each other then burst out laughing. "Yeah, that might be a bit of a problem," Dane sniggered.

“Yeah.” Sean grinned. “But I’ll figure it out. They said I could stay living with them over the summer, so I can work here and earn some extra money. May’s throwing as many shifts my way that she can.” He glanced over at her. “She knows about the plan. The foster parents could do with taking a leaf out of her book when it comes to being supportive. Indifference seems to be their motto. As long as they receive the money from the state they’re happy. I’m surprised they’re letting me stay as long as they are.”

He shrugged and looked back at Dane. “Maybe they’ve developed a conscience after all. Who knows?” He tilted his head. “You’re right you know, talking does help.” They held each other’s gaze, again for longer than necessary. This time it was Dane who looked away. Sean cleared his throat and decided he needed to get out of there before he did something stupid. He was starting to read more into things than he really should.

“I guess I should go home and do a bit more studying before tomorrow. No point planning a future in Art if I fail the exam.” He laughed nervously.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Dane couldn’t seem to meet his eyes.

Nerves crept over Sean. He hoped Dane hadn’t picked up on his stupid crush. That would be the fastest way to lose his friend. Straight guys weren’t known to appreciate gay guys mooning all over them. He stood and made his way towards the door, waving to May on the way out.

When they were both outside, he turned to smile at Dane. “Thanks again for helping me today.”

“I told you, it’s no problem.” His eyes now meeting Sean’s with no difficulty. “There is something you can do in return though.” A mischievous twinkle now stared back at him.

“What?” The hairs rising on his arms.

“Can you swim?” It was such an innocent question, but that twinkle brought wickedness to mind.

“Of course I can swim.” He frowned, then it hit him. “Oh no! You want me to swim in that lake, don’t you?” The question was greeted with a huge smile. Sean shook his head. “Dipping my toes is one thing, but dunking my whole body? Oh no. It’ll be freezing.” His head still shaking.

“You big wuss.” A look filled with amusement met his own horror-struck face.

He scrambled for an alternative. “What about the swimming pool?”

This suggestion was met with a slow shake of the head and twitching lips. "Nope, I've been craving a swim for days and I don't want to be surrounded by noise and kids."

"Oh Dane... man... I..." He stared helplessly back knowing he couldn't refuse him. "Oh okay." He pouted, shivering just thinking about it.

Dane laughed in triumph. "Yes! You'll love it."

"Yeah, if you say so," he grumbled.

"You liked it there, didn't you?" Dane's smug expression still in place.

"On dry land," he emphasized glaring back. "Are you sure you wouldn't prefer hanging with your other friends? You must be missing them a bit."

"No not at all." His face became serious. "I told you how I feel when I'm around them. The last two days have been a refreshing change. You're good company, Sean."

"Thanks." His cheeks reddened, but he couldn't stop the smile from forming. "Okay." His resistance gone. "I'll go swimming."

"Of course you will. Never doubted it for a second. Come on I'll give you a lift home." He started walking then turned back towards Sean and winked. "Don't forget your trunks tomorrow, will you? I wouldn't want to have to make you skinny dip."

Sean turned scarlet, and Dane cracked up, chuckling practically the whole way back to the car. He followed, shaking his head. What had he let himself in for?

Several hours later Dane sat at the dinner table finishing his dessert. He looked up when his father cleared his throat.

"So who was that boy you were with today? He's not one of the usual crowd."

Dane stiffened, placing his spoon down. "Have you been watching me?"

"No!" His father's voice was sharp. "I've got far more important things to do with my day. Your brother saw you. What are you hanging out with some geeky kid for? You've got friends, you don't need to stoop to picking up strays. This family's got standards."

Dane's fists clenched tightly, and he glared at his father. The room felt as if it were closing in on him. It was never going to stop, was it? His father's need for control was going to end up crippling him. In the end, it would destroy him, and the person he really was would disappear completely. Enough. No more. It stops now.

He took a breath, his eyes fixed on his father's, and he began to speak slowly and clearly. "Who I spend my time with is none of your business." He stood and stared down at his father, whose mouth was beginning to open as if to reply. Dane cut him off. "I control my own life and that includes choosing my own friends." He looked over at his brother with the same piercing look in his eye. "Stop following me." With that, he turned, and with his back straight and head held high, he walked to his room, shutting the door with a bang.

He couldn't help the slight smile as he thought of his father's gaping mouth as he'd walked away. His smile widened. Well, it was a start. All he had to do now was find the balls to tell him about San Francisco. There was no way he was going to stay here in Boulder. It would finish him. Sean was right. It had taken an outsider's objectivity to give him the kick in the ass he needed.

Thinking back on the last few days, he realized that he'd felt more himself and more relaxed than he had in years. He was convinced it was Sean's influence who had caused him to stand up to his father tonight. Releasing all his pent up frustrations the other day had somehow broken the vicious circle he'd found himself in.

There was going to be no more kowtowing to his father. This was the start of the real him making a stand. Though he wasn't about to kid himself it was going to be easy, his father was a very stubborn and determined man, after all. He smiled. Maybe it was in the genes, because he could feel the determination growing in him. A strength that until now he hadn't been able to grip onto. He would make the future he wanted happen. There was no going back now. He'd build on this and find some way of telling his father about his plans.

Dane spent the rest of the night in his room watching television and surfing the web. He was getting ready for bed when his phone beeped. He looked down to see it was a text from Sean. They'd swapped numbers when he'd dropped him off earlier. He smiled as he opened the text, his mood lightening.

Thanks for today. Feel much better about the exam now.

Dane lay on his bed and texted back.

Glad to help. Text me after the exam I'll pick you up. PS Don't forget your trunks LOL.

The phone beeped again.

Ha Ha.

Dane chuckled. He stared at the ceiling and pondered his reaction to Sean over the last few days. He was a genuinely nice guy with no artifice to him at all. He had a quiet manner but didn't seem afraid to speak his mind. There was also a deep-rooted determination to achieve the future he wanted, no matter how long it took or how hard he had to work for it. He wasn't going to let his past or present situation hold him back. Dane admired that.

With his mind still on Sean, he got ready for bed, laughing to himself at his reaction to swimming in the lake. He seemed to have a delicate precious side to him that vastly contrasted to the macho jocks he usually spent time with. They'd never admit to not liking cold water. He found himself smiling again. He'd certainly been doing a lot of that lately. Shaking his head, he walked into the bathroom.

The following afternoon Dane's phone beeped, informing him of a text from Sean.

Exam over. Yay! Ready for swimming. Not so yay.

Dane texted back, his lips twitching.

Be there in 20. You're such a baby—precious.

I am NOT precious.

Oh you soooo are! Be there soon.

Not funny jock boy.

I'll dunk you for that. I'm on my way.

Shaking in fear!!!

Dane laughed out loud. He grabbed his car keys and headed out. There was no one home so he didn't have to explain himself to anyone. It was a good day. He was off to his favorite place with someone who was fast becoming his favorite person. Strange considering he'd only really known the guy for three days. He shrugged, not prepared to analyze it too much. It felt good so he was going with it for once.

As he neared the corner where he was to pick Sean up, he felt butterflies in his stomach. What the hell? Rolling his eyes, he took a firmer hold of the wheel, telling himself to “get a grip”. He wasn’t nervous so what was with the butterflies? Man he was complex lately.

He pulled up in front of Sean, who gave a small wave and got in next to him. The fluttering in his stomach immediately began to ease, Sean’s smile settling him. He grinned back, the urge to tease overwhelming.

“So precious, ready for a dip?”

Sean crossed his arms and frowned at him. “You are not going to start calling me that.”

“Or what?” Dane tried hopelessly to keep a straight face.

“Or...” He floundered; the frown turning into a glare. “I’ll find something far worse than jock boy to call you.”

“Name calling?” He gave a mock frown. “Shocking.”

“Don’t test me.” His lips now twitching and those green eyes twinkling beneath the disapproving look. “Appearances can be deceptive.”

They both laughed after trying to out-stare each other. Dane pulled out into traffic, his heart light and a smile plastered over his face.

They arrived at the mountain and headed towards the lake, talking and joking around like old friends. Dane couldn’t believe how easy it was to just be himself. They clambered down into the gorge, Sean warily eyeing the water.

“It looks cold,” he grumbled. Dane laughed and pulled him along.

After laying their towels down near the water’s edge, Sean stood and looked around, appearing just as enamored with the place as last time. Dane decided he needed some friendly encouragement to get his mind back on the concept of swimming.

“Right, come on princess, you’re going in.”

Sean turned to him, his hands on his hips and eyebrows raised. “Precious? Now princess. Do I look like a girl?” He looked as if he was about to start tapping his foot.

Dane stood there grinning at him, totally unrepentant. He smirked. “No, you don’t *look* like a girl.”

Sean opened his mouth as if to argue, but then huffed loudly instead. “Fine, after you.” He gestured for Dane to go first.

Feeling smug, Dane pulled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes. He already wore his swim shorts, with a spare pair in the bag he'd brought. He stood there looking expectantly at Sean, who rolled his eyes and huffed again. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled off his shirt exposing his completely smooth and slightly pale chest.

Dane froze. His mouth went dry, a feeling of complete panic filling him. His dick was getting hard. What. The. Fuck?

Chapter 3

Sean frowned. Dane had gone still as a statue and was staring at him with an expression that could only be placed somewhere between shock and horror. He fidgeted in place, not really knowing what to do.

“Uh Dane, are you okay?”

His voice must have shocked him back to reality as he found himself staring at an obviously fake smile. “Yeah yeah... sure... come on, let's go in.” Without waiting for Sean to reply, he turned and ran into the lake.

Sean stood on the water's edge staring after Dane with his mind in a whirl. Had he done something to make him react like that? Oh God, maybe he'd finally noticed Sean's wholly inappropriate crush. Maybe his eyes had given him away when Dane had removed his top. His dick had definitely twitched. He'd been forcing himself to think of toilets and garbage cans to keep his erection at bay. It had worked too, so that couldn't be it. But his eyes could have given the game away. Perhaps they'd lingered too long on that muscular chest and damn, those nipples had been calling to him.

He felt his groin coming to life again and quickly forced his mind away from his fantasies. Being a virgin in all things sexual was not helping with his control. If he'd had some experience he probably wouldn't be acting like the horny, frustrated teen he was. Although maybe not. Dane was enough to challenge anyone's control.

He squared his shoulders and made his way into the water, determined not to screw this up. Pushing all horny thoughts to the back of his mind, he vowed to make up for his lapse in judgement and prove himself a worthy friend.

Dane swam out as far as he could, trying desperately to clear his mind. It wasn't working. All he could think about was his reaction when Sean had removed his shirt. He'd never responded that way to another guy before. He wasn't gay, was he? The girls he'd been with had never quite done it for him, he knew that. He'd never analyzed it too much, thinking they just hadn't been the right match.

Although he couldn't deny having the odd stray thought over the years, wondering if he were gay. His obvious lack of enthusiasm with girls was

something he couldn't really ignore. Not with everyone around him raving about girls and sex. Though his musings had never deepened due to the fact that he'd never had any sexual feelings towards any boys or men before.

Now he couldn't avoid thinking about it. You weren't supposed to get a hard-on for your friends. So was Sean a friend or something more? Was Sean even gay? He shook his head. This was all too much to think about at once. He needed to focus on his own feelings first before worrying about Sean's. Figure out which side of the fence he stood on.

He turned around and looked at Sean paddling at the water's edge, a smile formed naturally. He really did like this guy. He was comical even though he didn't really mean to be. Dane studied him. His hair was falling in his eyes, and he had a determined look on his face, obviously trying to prove he was man enough for the cold water. He chuckled—the guy was adorable.

Huh? That gave him pause. He'd never thought of any guy as adorable before. Okay time for a test. He let his eyes wander of their own accord, taking in Sean's delicate, slim frame. Despite the cold water, he felt movement in his shorts. A tingling in his groin spreading quickly. Yep, his dick was getting hard again. He looked away, taking deep breaths. Okay, so probably not totally straight then. If straight at all. He frowned. Shouldn't he be more traumatized by this revelation? His stomach was full of butterflies, but not in a particularly bad way.

Perhaps he'd always known but had never accepted the truth before. Something else about the real him that he'd kept hidden—even from himself. He looked back toward Sean, who was now in up to his waist. He smiled and shook his head. The guy really needed to be dunked. Right, enough analyzing. There'd be plenty of time for that later, when his brain could try to make sense of all this. He'd come here to have some fun and that's what he was going to do. The heavy stuff could wait.

What he did know though was that he was done hiding from himself. Having the freedom over the last few days to let the real him come out had released something in him. It was time to grow some balls and be the person he wanted to be. If that person happened to be gay... well, he'd find a way to deal. Who knew if anything would happen with Sean anyway? He wasn't going to push it. He'd just have to make his dick behave while he figured a few things out.

With his head a lot clearer and those butterflies settling, he swam towards Sean, making quick work of the distance between them.

“Come on Princess, time we got you wet.” Before Sean could say or do anything, Dane delivered a huge splash in his direction. With Sean standing there spluttering in outrage, Dane delivered two more splashes, leaving Sean soaked with water dripping down his face and body.

“You total shit.” His fists clenched at his sides.

“What? You looked like you needed a hand. It’s taken forever for you to get in this far, I’m just speeding up the process.”

“Oh really. Just providing a helpful service are you?”

Dane smirked. “Yep, free of charge.”

“Uh huh.” Sean’s eyes glinted, causing Dane to slowly back away.

“Now Sean...”

He lunged at Dane, pushing him over and under, leaving Dane gasping and laughing as he came to the surface. “Oh, you’re in for it now.” He lunged back at Sean, who leaped out of the way with an unmanly squeak. Dane laughed and lunged again.

They spent the next few hours alternately messing around in the water and lying on their towels getting their breath back and talking. It was the most fun Dane could remember having, and he was determined he wasn’t going to spoil this, no matter what crazy feelings were going through his mind and body.

They’d been lying there for a while, letting the sun dry them off, when Dane’s mind drifted to Sean’s plans for the future. He nudged him. “Had any more thoughts of where you’re going to go after the summer?”

“Yeah.” He smiled, turning onto his side and leaning up on an elbow. “You’ve given me a few ideas actually.”

“Me?” He frowned, not remembering saying anything that might have influenced him.

Sean stared back with a slightly sheepish expression. “Well, I’d been thinking about somewhere along the West Coast anyway.” He smiled. “I love the sea. Then you mentioned San Francisco. I’d been more focused in my mind on LA, but it got me thinking so I did a bit of research online.” His smile widened. “The college looks good, I can see why you chose it. They’ve got a big art department and you can do evening and online courses. They’ve also got a financial aid program, which is the best I’ve seen. The photography course I’ve found looks amazing.”

Dane laughed, loving Sean's enthusiasm. His whole face had lit up as he'd talked. "Take a breath. I'm glad I could help."

Sean beamed. "You have. I've already made inquiries about the finance side of things, just waiting to hear back. I think I've more or less decided now, so thanks. I meant to say it earlier, but I got distracted."

"Yeah, today's been fun," Dane laughed. "Your face when I splashed you." He sniggered. "Classic."

"Hmm, I'll get you back for that." His eyes calculating.

"Yeah right, course you will." Sean shoved his arm grinning good-naturedly. He shoved back grinning widely, thoroughly enjoying his time with Sean. "What are you up to this weekend?"

"I'm working eight to six both days." He lay back down and stretched, then twisted to face Dane. "May's giving me as many hours as she can. I'll be doing every weekend and about three days in the week."

Dane nodded. "Want to hang out in between?"

"Sure." His eyes twinkled. "You're not bad company... for a jock." He scrambled out of the way, giggling as Dane leaped at him. "Now now, pick on someone your own size." The giggles increasing as he tried to dodge Dane's attempts to grab him.

Dane quickly outmaneuvered him, grabbing him and throwing him over his shoulder. He ran towards the water with Sean shouting out and kicking his legs, his fists pummeling Dane where he could.

"Put! Me! Down!"

"Nope." Dane continued towards the water, totally undeterred. "You've earned a dunking, precious."

"Don't call me precious!"

"Don't call me jock boy!" Dane smiled widely as they neared the water, and he felt Sean grab on for dear life.

"Dane, don't you dare!" He dangled precariously over the water, clinging on like an upside-down monkey.

"Well?" Dane stood knee deep in the water, a broad grin on his face. Sean stubbornly said nothing, just continuing to cling to him. "Okay then." He loosened his grip on Sean, who shrieked.

“Okay, okay, okay. I won’t call you jock boy.” He huffed loudly. “But you’re not to call me precious either.”

“Deal.” He turned around, his face smug, and headed back to dry land.

“Now put me down, you big macho idiot.”

Dane chuckled and plonked Sean on his feet, taking off out of his reach. He stood next to his towel and watched Sean slowly walking back towards him with vengeance in his eyes.

He glared at Dane. “I’m making a list you know.”

He raised his eyebrows. “A list?”

“Yeah. A payback list.”

“Bring it on.” He tried and failed to keep the smile from his face.

“I will.” Sean managed to keep a straight face for all of thirty seconds then dissolved into laughter. “You’re a dick.”

Dane winked. “I know.” He glanced at his watch. “Come on, we better get out of here, it’s after six. I’ve got to report for dinner duty at seven.” He rolled his eyes, and Sean sniggered. They grabbed their stuff and headed back to the car, pushing and shoving each other along the way. When Dane dropped Sean off and drove away, he felt a sinking feeling in his gut. He sighed. God, he had a lot to think about.

Later that night he lay on his bed in the darkness trying to figure out the mess in his head. If he was gay, that would just be one more thing for his father to hold against him. Why did this have to happen now? He had enough to deal with already. Sean Daniels had a lot to answer for.

Who was he kidding? Just saying his name made him smile. Today had been amazing. For some reason, Sean made him relax and brought out the fun side of his character. But what was with his dick’s reaction to him? He’d thought, at first, maybe it was a fluke, a one-off dick malfunction. But no, it had happened several times throughout the day. Usually when Sean’s body had brushed against his.

Picking him up probably hadn’t been the best idea. With his body plastered to Dane’s back, his dick had thought it was Christmas. He’d had to quickly shut that down before he’d faced Sean again.

Why all of this wasn’t scaring the shit out of him, he didn’t know. Surely he should be in mega-angst mode by now. But the main thing that was bothering

him was it just added to the ways in which his father would be disappointed in him. He didn't care about his friends' reactions. Besides, they weren't real friends anyway. Three days with Sean had shown him that, and he had no inclination to spend any time with them. They'd been calling him to hang out, but so far he'd managed to put them off. He'd been quite creative in some of the excuses he'd used too. They'd figure things out soon enough, he had his own issues to worry about.

The actual fact of being gay didn't really bother him either. It certainly didn't disgust him in any way. It actually felt like a bit of a relief knowing his equipment and horniness worked as it should. Not that he'd had trouble getting it up for girls, but it had been more of an automatic reaction to being touched. There'd been no excitement to go with it, and he'd always been left less than satisfied.

Just looking at Sean's bare chest today had created more of a physical reaction than full sex with a girl had. He'd felt desire for the first time. That appeared to answer the question for him. Was he gay? He tried another experiment by closing his eyes and bringing Sean to mind. Bare chest, dripping wet, twinkling green eyes. His shorts began to tent. He shook his head and opened his eyes. Yeah, definitely gay.

Sean had never been happier, not for as long as he could remember. He walked back behind the counter, dumped the dirty cups in the sink and turned to serve a customer. After taking the order, he set about making the lattes, the most popular drink here. He'd spent the last ten days in a haze of work, enjoying the time with May despite her mercilessly teasing him about Dane. That brought a smile to his face. All his free time had been spent with his new friend. With school and graduation now behind them, their time was their own. They'd gone to the lake several times, just hung out around town and even been to the movies. Seemed they had the same taste in films, Dane having a secret superhero obsession too.

They were meeting up later when Sean finished his shift. They'd arranged to go swimming again. The fresh air of the mountains would be good after the smell of coffee all day long. He'd grown to love their trips to the lake, his companion not the only reason. It was so tranquil up there. The rugged beauty of the place and open spaces inspired him.

He'd started taking his camera along and constantly slowed their progress by stopping to take pictures of a flower, an unusual tree, or just the vast

mountains all around. Dane teased him about it, but he also encouraged him, pointing out things he thought might interest Sean. They'd grown incredibly close in the short time they'd known each other, often confiding in each other about their fears for the future.

Dane still hadn't found a way to tell his father he was leaving. At first Sean had thought Dane might be angry that he was planning to go to San Francisco too, but he seemed thrilled with the idea. Happy he'd have a ready-made friend there. That suited Sean too as their friendship had become incredibly important to him. His relationship with the foster parents remained frosty, and there was really no point in trying to change that now.

There were three weeks until he had to leave. The thought both thrilled and terrified him. His fear was damped down by the knowledge that he'd have a friend nearby, though it still felt like jumping into the unknown without a safety net. He was alone really. No mother, father in prison, and no other family to speak of.

His father had shown no interest in staying in touch. The odd phone call they'd shared had been stilted and awkward. The letters Sean had written had all remained unanswered. It was no surprise really. In reality they'd drifted apart years ago, his father losing himself in the alcohol and drugs. Sean had learned to become very self-sufficient as a result, and this in itself had helped to protect him during his year in the foster care system.

May had helped too, being his rock when he'd needed it. This was why his friendship with Dane meant so much. Despite the fact they hadn't known each other very long, it was the closest he'd felt to anyone in years. He treasured their time together. The stupid crush was still there, but he'd managed to quash it—mostly. His groin still misbehaved whenever Dane's shirt came off. But the friendship they'd developed far outweighed the physical reaction he had and there was no way he was risking it.

It seemed to matter to Dane too, their meetups often instigated by him. He also frequently sent him funny texts and e-mails. He was quite the joker. Also, when they weren't together, Dane seemed to spend a lot of his time researching things about San Francisco. He was always giving Sean information on places to go, job opportunities and different types of accommodation available.

With Dane's help, Sean had his plan almost sewn up. Why Dane didn't spend time with his old friends anymore, Sean wasn't entirely sure, but he seemed happy. He smiled, looking forward to their swim later. He'd got over

his fear of cold water pretty quickly. Their first swim had seen to that. He felt a tingle run through him as he remembered how Dane had effortlessly picked him up. God, he'd had to fight getting hard. The threat of being dunked head first had helped though. He smiled and shook his head. His friend was a menace.

A few hours later Sean was stretched out on his towel, drying off after a swim. He didn't think he'd ever felt so relaxed, the sun deliciously warm on his skin. Dane was next to him, sitting upright, he appeared lost in thought. This was nothing new—the guy often drifted off into his own head. It didn't worry Sean. He knew Dane had a lot on his mind and he'd talk to him if he needed to.

He studied Dane a bit closer and found himself frowning. He did seem a bit more distracted than usual today. Maybe he should just check if he was okay. It wouldn't do any harm. He twisted around. "You okay, Dane?"

"What? Oh yeah."

Sean's frown deepened. Dane looked like he'd been caught doing something wrong. "What's up? You've got a funny look on your face." Dane opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Sean sat up, his eyes narrowing. "What's happened? You seemed okay earlier."

Dane cleared his throat. "Yeah, yeah I'm fine... Just got something on my mind that's all. Don't worry about it."

Sean's gut clenched. "I thought we were friends. Come on, what's wrong?"

Dane fidgeted, looking anywhere but at Sean. "Oh look... I hadn't planned to do this today."

"Do what?" Sean stared at Dane, confusion and fear battling inside him. Had he done something wrong? Upset him in some way?

Dane stared up at the sky and let out a huge sigh. He closed his eyes and when he opened them and turned to Sean there was steely determination staring back at him. "Okay then. I need to ask you something. I don't suppose I can go on like this for much longer anyway."

Sean swallowed. "What do you mean?" His voice unsteady.

"There's something I've been wondering about for a while and I really need to know."

"What?"

He stared silently at Sean, then licked his lips. "So um... Are you gay?"

Chapter 4

Sean froze, his eyes going wide. Oh God, he knows. He stared at Dane, momentarily unable to breathe, speak, or think.

Dane must have taken pity on him because he kept talking. "You see I've been having these feelings lately... when I'm around you."

Sean forced himself to breathe. "What feelings?"

Dane started chewing his bottom lip, and he broke eye contact. "That I want to kiss you." It came out as a whisper.

Oh God oh God oh God. Did he really just say that? He had to clarify. "You want to kiss me?" His voice was equally quiet.

He nodded, his eyes slowly meeting Sean's. There was a brief silence as they both studied each other. "I know you've never said, but you've never mentioned girls and you did use to stare at me a lot." The words came out in a rush.

Sean found his breathing increasing. "I thought you were straight?"

Dane grinned sheepishly. "So did I. Then you came along and took your shirt off and bam, instant confusion."

Sean jumped to his feet. "I don't want to be your experiment." He turned away but not before noticing the hurt look in Dane's eyes.

"You're not an experiment." Dane was instantly standing behind him, stopping him with a hand on his arm.

Sean stiffened. "Then what am I?" There was silence, the only sound being their loud and rapid breathing. The hand around his arm squeezed.

"You're the boy that I've been wanting to kiss. The boy I've been touching myself over at night." Sean shuddered. The huskiness to Dane's voice and his words heating him from the inside out. Dane stepped closer, his lips next to Sean's ear. "You're the boy I want." He trembled, unable to respond.

"Am I alone in this?" Dane's voice, strained.

Sean pulled away and turned around. He slowly shook his head and raised his eyes to meet Dane's, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Thank God.” Dane pulled Sean against him, crushing his lips with his own. Their mouths opened; tongues meeting in an erotic fight for control. Sean groaned, holding on to Dane’s shoulders for dear life. Dane’s arm tightened around his waist, his other hand moving to cradle his head, holding him in place as he took control of the kiss. Sean held on for the ride, whimpering and moaning his pleasure.

Dane ground himself against Sean, causing him to gasp at the hardness pressing against him. The kiss stalled for a moment as he caught his breath, stunned at what they’d just done. “Wow.” It came out before he could stop it.

Dane gave a slow sensual smile. “Yeah.” His voice low. “Been dreaming of doing that for the past week.”

Sean swallowed. “You hid it well.” They still clung to each other.

“Had to, wasn’t sure if you were gay. Besides, I didn’t want to ruin things.”

Sean laughed nervously. “Well, I guess now you know I’m gay.”

A wicked smile greeted that statement. “Yeah, your tongue in my mouth kinda gave it away.” Sean blushed, causing Dane to laugh, releasing the tension of the situation. “Come on, let’s sit back down.” He untangled himself from Sean and grabbed his hand, pulling him back down to their towels.

They sat there holding hands, neither of them seeming to be in a rush to speak. After the shock had worn off, the questions began forming in Sean’s mind. He asked the most obvious one first.

“So *are* you gay? Or are you just curious?” He felt Dane stiffen next to him and hurried to continue. “I’m not trying to be a dick, I just need to know. You’re my friend. I don’t want to ruin that. Our friendship means a lot to me.”

Dane squeezed his hand. “It means a lot to me too. That’s why I waited to say anything.” He frowned, looking like he was trying to get his thoughts clear in his mind. “I’ve thought a lot about this recently... since that first day we swam here.” He shook his head. “It surprised the hell out of me.”

“So you’d never...” He blushed scarlet and cleared his throat. “Never got hard for a guy before?”

Dane laughed. “No. But girls had never done much for me either, like I told you. I’ve had sex with a girl, but found it a bit bland.” Sean wrinkled his nose making Dane laugh. “Yeah, I know, TMI, but you asked. So it’s not really a big shock for me. It’s not like I haven’t questioned myself over the years. I’ve just

never delved deeply into it as I've never had a stiffy for a guy before. Until you." He winked at Sean, who found himself blushing again.

Dane reached out to stroke his rosy cheek. "I like this, it's cute."

Sean rolled his eyes and shook his head, forcing himself back on topic. "I've never done anything like this before you know. It's pathetic at my age, but you're my first kiss."

Dane reached for his hand again. "It's not pathetic." He squeezed. "I'm honored to be your first." His eyes heated as he looked at Sean. Oh man, that look. His breath caught. "Kiss me again."

That sensual smile was back. "Anytime."

He pushed Sean onto his back and leaned over him. His fingers tracing his eyebrows, over his cheek and around his lips. His eyes never leaving Sean's. "Please." He'd begun to pant, the anticipation killing him.

Dane's smile widened as he rolled on top of Sean. Their bodies pressed tightly together, their arousal obvious. "You really are gorgeous." Before Sean could reply, his lips were taken in a passionate kiss.

Sean groaned in pleasure, his arms wrapping tightly around Dane. They moved against each other, the kiss intensifying. Dane let out a low animalistic sound, causing Sean to tremble, every nerve ending responding to Dane's unrestrained reaction to him. He could feel the release of pent-up frustration coming at him in waves.

Dane leaned up on his elbows breaking the kiss, his body settling between Sean's legs. No words were needed. His eyes told Sean everything. All humor was gone replaced by a burning intensity which spurred Sean on.

He grabbed Dane's head, pulling him back down to the kiss, his body matching Dane's thrust for thrust. Mewls, grunts and groans became their only form of communication as they writhed together, complete lust taking over.

Dane gripped his hair, panting into his mouth between kisses. Sean's hands explored freely, moving over his bare back and reaching into his shorts. Dane's thrusting increased at the feel of Sean's hands on his ass, making Sean's confidence grow.

He squeezed again, causing Dane to tear his lips away. "Too many clothes," he panted. "I need to feel you." He yanked his shorts down and off, doing the same to Sean's. Arousal made any embarrassment disappear as their naked bodies came together.

“Aahh, oh God.” Sean’s eyes closed at the exquisite feeling. Their throbbing cocks slid against each other, causing Sean’s whole body to stiffen. “Oh man, I’m gonna come.” A feeling of urgency overtaking him.

Dane reached between them, wrapping his hand around them both. Holding himself up on an elbow, he took Sean’s lips again. Sean thrilled at the tight fist around him.

It really didn’t take long. Sean clung to Dane as they both grunted and shuddered through their orgasm, their seed spilling between them. Dane slumped over him, his face buried in Sean’s neck while Sean lay there panting, eyes closed, feeling as if he’d melted into the ground.

“Oh God, I’ve never felt anything like that.” Dane’s voice muffled against his skin.

Sean smiled, unable to move. “Not even with girlie sex?”

“Especially not with girlie sex. I’ve never come like that in my life.” He leaned up to look at Sean. “You’re surprising, Sean Daniels.”

“What do you mean?”

He chuckled. “Well, considering you’ve never done this before, you’re certainly not shy.”

Sean flushed from his neck to the roots of his hair. “I... I’m sorry?”

Dane laughed again. “Do not apologize. I like this side of you. Sent me wild. Or couldn’t you tell?” He winked.

“Well yeah, it was a bit hard to miss.” He grinned.

“I think there’s a wicked side to you which I’m looking forward to getting to know.” His eyes twinkled at Sean.

“So does this mean...” He started chewing his lip.

Dane raised his eyebrows. “Are we doing this again? Is that what you mean?” Sean nodded. “Hell yeah.” His face softened; a gentle smile forming. “I like you Sean and not just as a friend. I’d like to see where this goes. No pressure.”

Sean smiled, his stomach fluttering. “I’d like that too.”

“Good.” He grimaced. “Now I think we need to wash off. This is getting kind of sticky.”

Sean laughed, and they separated themselves and stood up. He had a moment's embarrassment as he stood naked in front of Dane, who smirked.

"No point being embarrassed after what we just did. Come on." He grabbed Sean's hand and led him towards the lake.

He shrugged, realizing Dane was right. He'd just come all over his friend, there was really no point in feeling self-conscious now. He focused instead on the firm ass walking in front of him. A smile forming of its own accord, his mouth beginning to water. Yum. There were no other words.

Dane couldn't believe how incredible he felt. He looked over at Sean rinsing himself off and a warm tingling filled him. It had worked out far better than expected. He'd initially been terrified when Sean had kept pushing him, demanding to know what was wrong. He certainly hadn't come here today with the intention of getting it on with the guy. But when Sean pushed him on it, those earnest eyes pleading with Dane, his resistance had failed. He'd been unable to hold back anymore.

The last ten days he'd struggled with himself on whether or not to say anything. He'd always chickened out until today. But the need he'd felt for Sean and the urge to act on those feelings inside him had just become too strong.

He smiled, remembering Sean's shock when he'd said he wanted to kiss him. It had been almost comical. The guy hadn't had a clue about how Dane was feeling, which was probably a good thing. His soul searching over the last week or so had allowed him to get things straight in his head. He'd also enjoyed just spending time with Sean and getting to know him better.

His dick, however, had been having other ideas and had repeatedly misbehaved. Dane was persistently fighting off erections so he didn't make a fool of himself. Well, that was now a thing of the past. His grin widened. Thanks to Sean's reaction his whole groin area could now have free reign. He laughed to himself. The relief that Sean felt the same was overwhelming.

He'd feared disgust or at the very least Sean pulling away from their friendship. But he'd responded to Dane with equal enthusiasm. He closed his eyes, the tingling feeling returning. When Sean's hands had gone into his shorts and squeezed his ass, it had sent him wild. The initial tentative touches becoming stronger and more confident. Dane's need for more had consumed

him. He blushed slightly as he remembered the way he'd ripped both of their shorts off, the need to feel skin on skin overwhelming him.

It had felt so foreign and so right at the same time. He'd meant it when he'd said he'd never come like that in his life. He hadn't; it had been the most intense release he'd ever experienced. He reached down into the water to feel his dick hard again. He shook his head. He'd had more erections in the past ten days than he'd had in the past year—or so it seemed.

He walked forward, feeling himself drawn towards Sean, the need to touch him again building. As he reached him, Sean jumped, appearing lost in his own thoughts. Dane wrapped his arms around him from behind, pulling him back against his chest. He smiled at Sean's whimper at feeling Dane's hard length pressing against him.

Sean's breathing stuttered. "Again?"

Dane buried his face in Sean's neck nibbling the tender skin there. "You're going to have to get used to this," he murmured. "Thinking about what we just did has got me hard as a rock."

"I can tell." He brazenly pushed his ass back into Dane, giving a little wiggle.

Dane growled. "Keep doing that and we'll be doing more than I ever dreamed today." Sean giggled and gave another cheeky little wiggle. Dane groaned; his dick throbbing like mad. "Behave." He gave a light bite to Sean's shoulder and held him tighter, keeping that sexy ass still.

Sean obviously heeded the warning as he relaxed back into Dane, leaning his head back onto his shoulder. Dane nibbled some more, resulting in more giggles from Sean. Seemed he'd found a ticklish spot. His hand moved to cup Sean's face and he took his lips in a slow and sensual kiss, taking his time to explore now that the burning intensity had eased off.

Sean turned in his arms, their lips immediately reconnecting and his hands sliding into Dane's hair. Dane's own hands moving down to lightly grip that naughty ass, taking delight in his first proper feel. He took full advantage as Sean groaned, pushing back into his hands, seeking more.

"Fuck, you're sexy." He spoke into Sean's mouth, both of them starting to pant and move against each other.

"You're going to make me come again," Sean panted out between kisses. The heat between them rising fast.

“That’s the idea.” Their erections ground against each other, causing Dane’s grip to tighten on Sean’s ass, urging him on. He was too far gone to stop now. The water swirled around them as they climaxed almost simultaneously. Their grip initially tightening before they slumped against each other, foreheads pressed together, both breathing hard.

They stood together still holding on while their breathing came under control. “Oh man you’re gonna finish me.” Dane still felt out of breath. “My legs feel like jelly.”

Sean laughed, circling Dane’s waist with both arms and leaning against him. “Can I sleep now?”

Dane chuckled. “No, not here.” He pulled him from the water back to where their towels lay. They both lay down, and Dane pulled Sean towards him into his arms. “Now you can sleep. Just a nap though, we can’t stay here that much longer it’s getting late.”

Sean snuggled in, his head on Dane’s shoulder. “Just a little snooze.”

“Yeah okay.” It sounded like a good idea after all that exertion. He smiled. Well, worth it though. Pulling Sean tighter against him, he settled in and found himself drifting off.

Chapter 5

Dane sat bolt upright, disorientated. Where the hell was he? It was pitch black, and he was freezing. He shivered. Why on earth was he naked? He felt movement next to him, and it all came flooding back. Sean. What they'd done. He smiled, feeling warm inside despite his shivering body.

Then reality set in. Fuck. The old man was going to go mad. He had no idea what the time was or how long they'd slept. He gently shook Sean, who just groaned and turned away from him. Dane rolled his eyes. Someone liked their sleep. He tried again, this time more firmly.

"Sean, wake up."

"Huh? Where are we?"

Dane grinned. "We're still at the lake. This is all your fault, you know."

Sean sat up and moved closer to him, his skin icy cold. "How'd you figure that? You slept too. Jeez, it's freezing. Where's our clothes?"

"I dunno, hang on." He scrambled around searching for his bag, eventually finding it a few feet behind them. He felt inside for his phone. "We can use this as a flashlight." He switched it on and began looking for their discarded clothes, not having paid much attention to where he'd flung them earlier.

It took a while to find everything, the phone not giving out much light. They hurriedly got dressed and put away their towels, Sean getting his own phone out to help in the light department. Even with that they could barely see a few feet in front of them.

Dane grabbed Sean's hand pulling him along so they wouldn't lose each other. It felt nice, Sean's hand in his. He couldn't resist giving it a squeeze and was more than happy when Sean squeezed back. Despite the trouble he knew he was returning home to, it was well worth it. Sean was worth any hassle his father gave him.

They slowly stumbled their way to the path leading up and out of there. Dane pushed Sean to go first. "I'll catch you if you slip."

"My hero." Sean snorted

"Watch it, sleeping beauty." He squeezed Sean's ass, pushing him forward. Dane kept his hands in place as he pushed Sean up the hill.

“That’s very distracting. How am I supposed to concentrate on not breaking my neck with your hands there?”

“What here?” He squeezed again, unable to resist.

“Dane!”

He laughed. “Keep moving shorty or we’ll never make it out of here.” He smiled as he heard Sean muttering under his breath and gave his ass a slap, causing the muttering to falter. Smiling widely, he kept pushing.

They emerged onto the main path and headed in the direction of the car. Their phones only just lighting the way, hands clasped tightly together. When the car came into sight, Dane heaved a sigh of relief. As much as he loved the mountain, being up here in the dark was creepy as hell. Not that he’d admit that out loud.

They both climbed in, and Dane turned the heating up full blast. After sitting in silence for a while warming up, Sean reached over and touched his hand.

“I had a really good time today. I honestly wasn’t expecting it, but I’m so glad it happened.” He sounded shy, hesitant even in confiding this. “As you can probably tell, I’ve liked you for a while.”

“Come’ere.” Dane pulled him into his arms. “I really like you too. I’m not going to change my mind so you don’t have to sound so worried.” He reached up, brushing the hair out of Sean’s eyes. They could barely see each other, the glow from the dashboard the only light. “I meant it when I said I wanted to see where this went.” He lightly brushed his lips over Sean’s, his sexy little whimper urging Dane on. He deepened the kiss, holding Sean tightly against him.

Sean’s hands dug into Dane’s back and shoulder; clinging on as they both lost themselves in the kiss. It was both sweet and passionate, and Dane didn’t want it to end. Unfortunately, reality intruded and he knew he had to get them home. He slowed the kiss, gradually pulling away. They both leaned their foreheads together, prolonging the intimacy between them.

“Can I see you tomorrow?” Sean’s voice a lot less hesitant after their kiss.

“You bet, I’ll pick you up after work.” He planned to see Sean as much as possible. These new feelings he was experiencing were strong, slightly scary, but nothing would stop him exploring them. Not now that he’d felt how good it could be. Being with a girl didn’t even rate on the same scale as touching and

kissing Sean. He was no longer under any illusion about which side of the fence he was on.

It wasn't just physical though. He liked being with Sean. Liked the person he was when he was with him. It felt easy, natural, and there was no pretense between them. This was refreshing for Dane and enough for him to want to pursue this.

He reluctantly pulled away from Sean and started the engine. "Let's get back and get this over with. No doubt his highness will be sitting there watching the clock."

Sean shrugged. "At least he cares."

Dane gripped the wheel tighter. "Nah. It's more about control than caring. He's shown that enough over the years."

He felt Sean's hand on his leg. "You'll be out of it soon."

The touch settled Dane. "Yeah, I can put up with it for a few more weeks." He placed his hand over Sean's and headed back to civilization.

After dropping Sean off, he drove home, the taste of him lingering from the goodnight kiss they'd shared. It had promised so much more and left Dane wanting. His erection a reminder of the feelings stirred. He smiled as he adjusted himself, this better have gone down by the time he got home. It would not look good to walk in sporting a stiffy.

His father's reaction was just as Dane expected. He stood there glaring as Dane entered the living room, looking pointedly between him and the clock.

"Where the hell have you been?" Before Dane could answer he continued with his rant. "Your mother's been worried sick. We called all your friends, they hadn't heard from you. Hadn't seen you in weeks apparently." His eyes narrowed. "You've been hanging around with that geeky kid again, haven't you? It stops now!"

Dane opened his mouth, but his father rushed on. "This behavior ends. As long as you live under my roof, you'll behave in a manner befitting this family. Your friendship with that boy ends now."

Dane waited with his arms crossed and his eyebrows raised to see if there was any more to come. It seemed not, as his father matched his stance and just glared at him. He waited a moment, then cleared his throat and smirked, knowing he was about to infuriate his father even more. "Whatever." He turned and calmly walked to his room, locking the door behind him.

It didn't take long to get a reaction. "Dane Peterson, get your ass back out here, we're not done."

"Oh, I think we are." Dane spoke through the door. He knew he was pulling the tiger's tail, but he couldn't resist. It appeared that standing up to his father was addictive. "If you don't want me here anymore, just say the word. Colleges do have accommodation you know."

Silence greeted that statement. Followed by barely controlled outrage. "What's gotten into you?"

Dane wrenched the door open. "Nothing. I'm just finally growing some balls and answering you back for once." His father gaped at him. "Now, it's midnight, I'm tired, I'm going to bed. Goodnight." He closed and locked the door again, leaving his father standing there, for once lost for words.

It hadn't been the right time to mention San Francisco. For one, he didn't trust his father not to interfere. He would tell him, just closer to the time. He'd confirm everything first, then drop the bombshell. He shuddered. If answering his father back caused this reaction, he could only imagine the fallout when the truth about his future was revealed. This was going to be just as hard as he'd thought. But he would do it, he owed it to himself. Sean had made him realize that.

Sean. His eyes closed, images of their time together flashing through his mind. He shivered. What had this guy done to him? Not only had he pushed him to fight for what he wanted, he'd also exposed his sexuality. Shone a light on the person he really was, bringing it to the surface.

He knew he should probably be feeling all sorts of stress about this new turn of events, but he just didn't. It felt good and right and there was no nagging doubt in his gut that any of this was wrong.

Coming out officially was not an option for him right now; he had enough on his plate. There was already one confession waiting in the wings to be made. He certainly couldn't add this to the things he had to tell his family—not yet anyway. His father would blow a gasket as it was. Also, the prejudice both his father and brother had towards homosexuality would not make for a pretty conversation; definitely something to be left for a later date.

He had a feeling Sean would understand this and not put any pressure on him. There was a calmness that came from being around Sean that soothed Dane. Deep down he knew Sean would give him the time he needed to deal with this.

He lay on his bed thinking of the intense passion he'd felt today. He'd never experienced need like that before. God, he'd been horny. The feeling of rubbing up against Sean had felt so different, but so good. It still confused him as he'd never felt anything remotely like that for any other guy. It was just Sean. He had no answer for it.

Maybe you just needed to meet the right person and that triggered something. Released something inside you that was buried. Who knows? All he cared about was that it felt natural and right. Everything sexual before now had felt forced, so all he could feel right now was relief.

He needed to let these feelings settle inside him for a while before he expressed them to the rest of the world. He might be okay with this new change within him, but it was still a huge life change. Something he needed to sit with for a while and come to terms with.

At least he had Sean to talk to. Even with this new heat between them they were still friends. Dane knew he could confide in him if he needed to. Especially with the pressure now off about whether Sean was gay.

He instinctively grabbed his phone and dialed. Sean answering almost immediately.

"Hey." Sean's voice husky.

"Hey. You weren't sleeping were you?"

"No." There was a silence. "I can't stop thinking about today."

Dane laughed quietly. "Yeah, I know. I just felt like talking to you. You don't mind, do you?"

"Hell no. You're all I can think about."

Dane swallowed, unsure what to say next. "I don't know really why I phoned. I was just thinking about everything and... I guess I just wanted to hear your voice. Sappy I know."

Sean laughed. "Nah, I like that you did. Makes me feel I'm not alone in this... this thing between us."

"You're not."

"Good." Sean's breathing stuttered. "God, you were hot today."

Dane felt his own breathing increase. "So were you. I meant it when I said I'd never come like that before." Sean giggled. "It's true, I couldn't see straight."

That caused Sean to giggle even more. Then he became serious. "You caused the same reaction in me too. I couldn't get close enough to you."

Dane chuckled. "I know, those hands were going everywhere." There was a moment's silence as he imagined Sean blushing. He couldn't resist calling him on it. "You're blushing aren't you?"

"Am not."

He laughed. "You so are. Don't worry, I like it."

Sean spluttered, making Dane laugh even more. "You're impossible."

"Yep, that's why you like me."

Sean let out a small sigh. "Yeah, I do." His voice quiet.

"Me too." Dane now equally serious. "Still up for hanging out tomorrow?"

"Definitely."

"Cool. I'll pick you up at six." He sighed. "I suppose I'd better go, let you get some sleep."

"Okay. G'night."

"Night Sean." He hung up with a small smile on his face and a warm feeling spreading through him. Yes, this was definitely right. His smile widened and he closed his eyes, replaying their day together.

Sean was cleaning down the surfaces at work, thinking how fast the last week had gone. With another day almost over, he was getting ready to close up, looking forward to meeting up with Dane. He glanced out of the window and noticed a youngish-looking man staring at him from across the street. He wouldn't normally have paid any attention, but it was certainly not a friendly look he was getting. A shiver went down his spine as he stared back. The man held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned and walked away.

Sean shook himself to get rid of the uneasy feeling running through him. That had definitely been weird. He wouldn't let it spoil his mood though, he had a night with Dane to look forward to. The foster parents were away for the night so Dane was coming over for pizza and a superhero movie marathon. He leaned back on the counter and thought back on the past week.

They'd seen each other every day, spending several hours together after Sean finished work. Mostly they'd hung out in Dane's car, talking and making

out. He smiled, recalling how well acquainted he'd become with the back seat of that car. His trousers tightened as he thought of Dane on top of him, their legs hanging out the door, both rubbing off against each other. He'd made a mess of his pants on more than one occasion.

They hadn't done much more than touching each other so far. He was hoping tonight things might progress a step further. He wasn't ready for sex yet, but there were other things they could try. He'd been doing some research online so his innocence didn't make a total fool of him. His trousers tightened even more as he thought of what he'd seen. Tonight really couldn't come soon enough.

His mind went back to the last time they'd been at the lake, a few days after they'd first kissed. They'd just skinny dipped together and Sean was sitting on the towels watching Dane. He'd insisted on getting some exercise after they'd finished playing around. Sean had thoroughly enjoyed the show he'd put on moving through the water. He'd walked towards him after his swim and stood over him, his gloriously naked body glistening.

As he'd leaned over, Sean had momentarily lost his mind. He'd pulled Dane down on top of him, and they'd rolled around, hands and mouths everywhere, making out like the two horny teens they were. It was one of his favorite memories of their time together so far. Just thinking about it got him hard. Dane really was his own wet dream come to life. He straightened up, forcing his mind back to the task at hand before he came in his pants. Tonight would be here soon. His dick jerked at the thought.

After demolishing an enormous pizza between them and making it through one-and-a-half movies, Dane got that look in his eye that Sean now knew so well. He bit his lip as Dane looked at him with the sensual heat that would soon have him panting.

Dane threaded his hand through Sean's hair, drawing him closer. Their lips met, tenderly at first and then with more force, an urgency taking over. Sean found himself pushed onto his back, Dane leaning over him, his hand stroking over the hardness in his pants. Sean groaned, arching up into Dane's hand. The hand tightened around him, causing his brain to short circuit.

"Naked now." He had to feel Dane's skin. Dane squeezed again and caught hold of Sean's bottom lip with his teeth. He slowly began to suck, causing Sean to almost go out of his mind with need. "Please."

Dane released him after one final suck of his lip, and they both disrobed in record time, coming back together with simultaneous moans of pleasure. Sean

quickly took over, rolling Dane onto his back and moving down his body. He took his time, leisurely kissing and licking his way to his destination. It didn't take long before Dane was writhing and panting beneath him, his hands touching any parts of Sean he could get a hold of.

When Sean settled between his legs and took hold of his cock, Dane raised his head. "Are you sure? You don't have to." His voice gentle despite the need etched on his face.

He smiled, knowing there was no pressure for him to do this. He wanted it, had been dreaming of it, and he was damn well going to do it. He grinned mischievously. "I know. Don't worry I've been practicing."

Dane sat bolt upright. "With *who*?" His eyes blazing.

Sean laughed, thrilled at his reaction. He pushed him back down. "Relax. My practice partner came from the fruit bowl."

"Huh?"

"A banana." Sean winked. "Several bananas actually."

Dane threw his arm over his eyes. "Oh my God. I'll never look at a banana the same way again." Sean laughed. Dane thrust his hips up. "Go on then, banana boy, show me what you've learned."

With a snort, Sean stilled Dane's hips with one hand and took hold of his length again with the other. He lowered his mouth and glanced up at Dane to see his mouth hanging open and his chest rising and falling with increasing speed. He smiled, loving having Dane at his mercy. After drawing it out for long enough, he poked out his tongue to take a taste. Dane shuddered, his panting increasing. Sean took this as a good sign and swallowed him completely.

"Aahh!" Dane's whole body practically came off the floor, nearly choking Sean in the process. He held him back down, took a breath and went to work, sucking, bobbing and licking to his heart's content. The taste of Dane spurring him on. He reached one hand under Dane, taking a gentle hold of his ass. Dane made unintelligible sounds, thrusting slowly into his mouth.

Sean found himself rubbing against the floor, the friction and Dane's responses making his own climax near. His hand stroked over Dane's ass, causing an idea to come to mind. He brought his finger to his mouth and thoroughly wet it, then moved his hand back to Dane's ass. He sped up his mouth as a distraction and then slid his finger to Dane's opening and traced around the outside.

He moved his finger round and round loosening his entrance, causing nonsensical gibberish to pour from Dane's mouth. His thrusting increased, causing Sean to suck harder. Just as he felt Dane stiffen, he pushed his finger all the way in searching for the spot he'd read about. As Dane started to come, he found it and brushed over and over it, wringing as much pleasure out of Dane as humanly possible, swallowing Dane's release with equal enthusiasm.

Dane jerked and shook through his orgasm, moaning Sean's name over and over until it was obvious he couldn't take anymore. Sean eased up and crawled over him until he reached his mouth, lying quietly until Dane opened his eyes. He gave Dane a sweet kiss and stared down at him, quirking his lips.

"So, how'd I do?"

Dane swallowed. "There are no words." His arms came around Sean holding him tight.

Sean settled himself and leaned down for another kiss. A deeper one this time, Sean wanting Dane to taste himself in his mouth. A naughty but insanely hot thought.

Dane groaned, his hands moving over Sean's ass. "What about you?" He spoke against Sean's lips.

"I'm good. Came when you did. Those noises you were making sent me over."

Dane pulled away slightly, his eyes fixed on Sean's. "Yeah. That thing you did with my ass—so hot. You read about that online?"

Sean blushed and nodded. "You didn't think I was too forward, did you?"

The smile he received answered the question for him. "I like horny-Sean. We want more of him."

Sean giggled, for once not caring about his red face. Dane pulled him back down and kissed him slowly and with so much feeling Sean's heart clenched. The feelings he had for Dane were growing so fast it scared him. But it also filled him with a sense of peace he hadn't felt in a long time. Since before his mother died. Sean held Dane tighter and tried to express with his kiss what he wasn't yet ready to say.

Chapter 6

After eventually getting dressed again and sitting in front of the movie, Dane turned to him. "I'm going to tell them in the next few days—about San Francisco." He gave a small laugh with no evidence of humor. "They're certainly not ready for the gay thing yet." Sean squeezed his hand. "I've confirmed my placement there and the accommodation is all sorted so I'm good to go. There's nothing he can do to interfere now." He frowned. "It's time to tell them."

Sean shuffled closer. "Okay. You know I'm here for you right?"

Dane smiled and pecked a kiss on his cheek. "I know. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be going anywhere." His face became serious. "You've given me the belief in myself to go for what I want." He tenderly stroked his cheek. "Thank you Sean."

He smiled back at Dane. No reply coming to mind as he wasn't really sure what he'd done. It seemed to be enough as Dane kissed him, this time on the lips. A slow sensual kiss that turned Sean to mush.

"I really liked what we did today." Dane's voice husky, his arms holding Sean close.

"Me too." Sean stared directly into his eyes. "I know I'm new to all this but all I want to do is touch you. All the time. You just have to give me that look of yours and I react."

Dane's grip on him tightened. "I like that person. He's got a very talented mouth." Sean squirmed under the scorching look Dane gave him. "Just wait till tomorrow night. You'll definitely feel my appreciation."

Sean groaned, dropping his head to Dane's shoulder. "I wish you could stay the night."

"Me too." He sighed. "The old man's still being difficult though so I don't want to push it. We're having almost-daily arguments as it is."

Sean pushed away and frowned. "About me?"

Dane shrugged. "He's not dictating who I'm friends with. No one will stop me spending time with you Sean." He started to argue, but Dane interrupted. "No arguments. You're too important." He shrugged. "Anyway, I'll be out of there soon."

“Are you sure you don’t mind me going there too? I really feel bad for copying you.” He smiled sheepishly. “It’s just that it looks so good and that photography course is the best I’ve seen.”

Dane mock glared at him. “Will you cut it out? You’re not copying me. We both just happen to like the same place.” He fixed Sean with his serious look. “You know I want you there.”

Sean relaxed. Yeah he knew, but it didn’t stop him needing to check every now and then. He glanced at the clock; it was nearly midnight. His sensible head snapped back into place. “You better go before my alter ego comes back and rips your clothes off.” He stared ruefully at Dane who sniggered.

“You’re probably right, but don’t forget tomorrow is my turn.” His eyes heated, and he pressed his lips to Sean’s in a searing kiss. “Tomorrow,” he promised. Then he got up and walked out, leaving Sean hard, horny, and helpless.

The next day at work May kept teasing him due to the silly smile that kept slipping onto his face. He knew it was there but couldn’t seem to stop it.

“You really have got it bad,” she said as he was taking the trash out. He ignored her, making his way outside to the back lane where the bins were kept. If he replied, he’d only end up embarrassing himself. He’d done enough of that already today.

He was heaving the bags into the dumpster when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned to find the same man who’d stared at him yesterday walking towards him. Instantly on edge he looked around but there was no one there but the two of them.

He licked his lips and stood up straighter. “Who are you? What do you want with me?”

He stared at Sean with hate in his eyes. “You and me need to have a little chat about your inappropriate attachment to my brother.”

Oh fuck. Sean’s eyes widened, immediately realizing who this was. “Look...”

He didn’t have a chance to go any further as he was roughly pushed up against the wall, the guy’s hand around his throat. “You listen to me, gay boy. The time spent with my brother ends now. You’re not going to spend one more second infecting him with your disease.”

Sean fought to breath, the hand tightening around his neck. He wanted to respond to the bile spilling from the guy's mouth but was unable to get any words out. He struggled to no avail. This guy was bigger and stronger than Dane. Eventually, his grip loosened. He glared at Sean with an ugliness he'd never experienced before. So much hate clear in his eyes.

Sean cleared his throat. "Being gay is not a disease."

Dane's brother crowded in on him. "Not only is it a disease, but it's wrong, unnatural, and you are not dragging my brother down that path." His nose wrinkled in disgust. "I've seen you both rolling around together in the back of his car." He spat on the ground. "Disgusting."

Sean gasped. "Have you been following us?"

"Had to do something to find out why Dane started acting the way he has." He sneered down at Sean. "He was completely normal until he met you."

Sean closed his eyes, knowing none of this was true but having no idea how to handle this situation. He didn't want to do anything that would make things worse for Dane.

"Here's what you're going to do." He shook Sean pulling his attention back to him. "You're going to text him saying you can't see him anymore. Then you are going to avoid all contact with him." His eyes pierced Sean. "Because if you don't... this little encounter will feel like a fantasy ride compared to what you'll get."

Everything inside Sean rebelled. He glared back. "Do what you want to me. The only way I'll stop seeing Dane is if he tells me that's what he wants, and I can tell from his face that he means it." He continued to glare at the man threatening him with equal hate in his eyes.

Dane's brother tilted his head, studying him. "Yeah, I think you mean that."

"I do," he said through clenched teeth.

"So be it. We'll go for option two then." His look unwavering in its intensity.

A shiver went through Sean. "Option two?" What was he going to threaten him with now?

"Yeah." He smirked. "You're obviously not concerned with your own well-being, maybe you'll be concerned with Dane's."

Sean's breathing stuttered. "What do you mean?"

The hand around his neck tightened again, the smirk now gone. "What I mean you little weasel is that if you don't leave Dane alone I'll have no choice but to out him to our father. The result of which will have him chucked out and disowned by the family. Maybe that'll straighten him out." He shrugged. "It doesn't particularly bother me either way. I'm done with him after what I've seen." He looked down at Sean like he was a bug he'd like to step on. "There's no way in hell my father will ever accept a gay son. So unless you want to destroy his whole family I suggest you leave him the hell alone."

Sean was left dumbstruck, his mind going blank. With his point obviously made, Dane's brother gave his neck one final squeeze then released him. He gave a cruel grin and then walked away.

Sean sank to the ground. His eyes squeezed shut, his mind wanting to rewind the last few minutes and pretend they hadn't happened. His eyes opened as a heaviness settled in his chest. Dane's brother had meant every word. He could tell from the look in his eyes they'd been no empty threats. He'd been so disgusted at the thought of having a gay brother that he was prepared to have him disowned.

The throwing out part wasn't so much a problem as Dane was leaving anyway—not that they knew that yet. But losing his family? That was something Sean couldn't be complicit in. He'd lost his own family. Knew the loneliness and fear that came with that. He couldn't put that on Dane. He wouldn't. His heart clenched painfully. He rubbed his chest. Why? Why did this have to happen? Everything had been going so well. He felt tears forming. For himself, and for the hurt that he knew he was about to cause Dane.

A hate so consuming filled him. Why couldn't people just accept their children the way they were and love them anyway? Why did there have to be conditions placed on love? It wasn't right. There was so much prejudice in the world. No wonder people hid their true selves. It wasn't surprising Dane had lived most of his life torn up inside, pretending to be someone he wasn't. It was so unfair.

He had to let Dane focus on getting away from all that, without all the gay stuff getting in the way. He was a distraction and a threat that he didn't need. Dane needed to focus on his future. Getting away from the negative influence of his family. But at the same time not losing them completely. There must be love somewhere there, and Sean couldn't risk him losing that love. Family was precious despite their faults.

He pushed himself to his feet, brushing away his tears. He knew what he had to do. The heaviness inside him increased as the realization set in. This felt so wrong and yet there was no other option. He couldn't put his own needs above Dane's. If he stayed... No, he couldn't put Dane through that. He raised his collar to hide any marks on his neck and headed back inside. With his eyes down he grabbed his stuff and shouted to May that he was off, then escaped before she could see him. If she saw his face, she'd know instantly something was wrong. He'd never been very good at hiding his feelings.

As he walked home, he took his phone out. He was meant to be meeting Dane later. That was no longer possible. He stopped walking, his gut feeling like he'd been punched. The thought of never seeing him again was suddenly overwhelming. His body trembled. Was he doing the right thing? He knew Dane wouldn't think so. He straightened up. Yes, he was. He was protecting Dane. He owed him that much after the friendship he'd shared with him this summer.

He closed his eyes tightly and took a deep breath. He could do this. Upon opening his eyes a firm resolve settled over him. His mind made up he tapped out a text to Dane cancelling their plans, then headed home making a list in his head. The first thing he had to do was write a letter. Dane deserved to know the truth. He rubbed his chest again, the ache persisting. Sean didn't think it would ease up anytime soon. He sighed and kept walking.

Dane didn't get it. He really didn't. He'd left Sean the other night convinced he was happy. So why was the guy avoiding him? It had been three days. Three days of having his calls, texts, and visits ignored. He'd even been to his work only to be told he'd phoned in sick. What the hell was going on? He didn't think he'd upset him.

He pulled up in front of the coffee shop determined to find out what was going on. This was the fourth day now, he couldn't still be off sick. Taking a deep breath, he got out and walked inside.

There was no sign of Sean so Dane went up to the counter where he found May staring at him with sympathy in her eyes. His stomach twisted. This was not a good sign. He bit his lip, hesitant to hear what she had to say.

She sighed. "He's gone Dane."

He just stared at her as if she were speaking a foreign language, his heart rate picking up. "What do you mean gone?"

“He left yesterday. I’m sorry, I tried to talk him out of it.” She looked genuinely distressed. “He left this for you.” She reached behind her and retrieved an envelope which she passed to Dane. He stared at it for a moment too stunned to move. May came around the counter and guided him to a seat.

“Come and sit down.” She sat opposite him. “I think you need to open it. He explained things a little to me, but I’m sure there’s more in the letter.”

Dane looked up. “What did he say to you?”

She squeezed his hand. “Just read the letter then I’ll answer whatever questions you have.”

He sunk back into the chair, his heart plummeting. With no enthusiasm whatsoever, he opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. Taking a steadying breath, he began to read.

Dear Dane

First of all I’m so sorry to do this by letter, but there’s no way I could have done it in person. Writing this is painful enough.

Your brother came to see me Dane. He knows about us. He threatened me and when that didn’t work he threatened you. He’s been following us, saw us making out in your car. He threatened to out you to your father, to get you thrown out and disowned. He meant it Dane, I could see it in his eyes. If I’d stayed around he’d have caused no end of trouble and pain for you.

I can’t let you lose your family Dane. I know what it’s like to lose everyone you love. I won’t put you through that, especially not because of me.

Please know that everything I ever said to you was true. Your friendship has meant the world to me. You’ve made me happier than I’ve been since before my mom died. I’ll always remember this summer and what we had together.

Please still follow your dream Dane. Don’t give in. Escape and live your own life.

All my love, always

Sean.

He looked up at May, not bothering to hide the tears in his eyes. There was anger coiling inside him, but he'd deal with that later. "Where's he gone?"

She sighed. "I don't know. He wouldn't tell me. He tell you about your brother?" There was anger in her voice.

"Yes." His own anger rising to the surface. "I'll deal with him later. Do you think he's gone to San Francisco?"

She shrugged, looking just as lost as him. "I really don't know. He just said he'd call when he got settled somewhere."

"Stubborn boy! I don't care if my brother does out me. I'm sick and tired of living a lie." He thumped the table. "He's done this for nothing. I was going to come out anyway at some point. Sooner rather than later now. I'm not having my brother thinking he can hold it over me." He huffed. "If only he'd told me, I wouldn't have let him do this."

May smiled. "He knew that Dane. Why do you think he avoided you for days? That boy can't hide his feelings to save his life. If he'd seen you, he wouldn't have been able to stop himself telling you. He wasn't prepared to risk that."

"Damn martyr. I'll find him. Then I'll give him hell for running out on me. Good reason or not."

"You really think he's in San Francisco?" Her face brightened.

"It's what he planned." Dane closed his eyes. "I've got to think he's there. Because if he's not..." His voice broke. He opened his eyes. "No, I won't think that. He will be there and I'll find him." He stood up. "Now if you'll excuse me I've got a family to deal with."

May stood and gave him a hug. "Wait." She grabbed a pen and wrote her phone number on the back of the envelope. "Let me know if you hear anything. I care about him, he's been through a lot."

"Sure." He pocketed the letter and the number. "Hang on." He got the envelope back out and ripped off a corner. After writing his own number down, he handed it over. "You call me if you hear anything too. Even if he tells you not to tell me where he is."

She hesitated, then took the number. "Okay. I wouldn't normally go against his wishes, but in this case I think he made the wrong choice, despite the good intentions." She smiled. "You're good together, and you tell him I said so when

you find him.” She hugged him again, holding him tight. “You will find him.” They stared at each other when she let him go, a camaraderie forming. He smiled then walked out, preparing himself for the confrontation to come.

Chapter 7

As soon as he arrived home, he saw his brother, and without a moment's hesitation, he walked up to him and punched him in the face.

"What the fuck!" He grabbed his face and glared at Dane. "What was that for?"

His teeth ground together. "You know exactly what that was for," he almost snarled.

His brother smirked. "Your little boyfriend's run away with his tail between his legs has he? So sad."

Dane clenched his fists, determined not to get carried away with a brawl, no matter how much he wanted to. "Keep out of my face *and* my life."

"With pleasure." He sneered. "After what I saw you doing you're no brother of mine."

"Suits me, now fuck off."

His brother shrugged and headed for the door. "Was headed out anyway. Not my problem anymore, I've done my bit."

Dane forced himself to breathe deeply and turned his back before he went after him and finished what he'd started. When he'd calmed slightly he went to his bedroom and started packing, he had plans to make.

He booked bus and plane tickets, making the first use of his trust fund and also rang the accommodation office at the university. After checking it was all right for him to move in sooner than planned due to unforeseen family circumstances, he finally started to relax. At last he was taking firm control of his life.

Telling them that he was going didn't seem like such a scary prospect anymore. The fear of never seeing Sean again far outweighed any disapproval from his father. He closed his eyes, refusing to let the fear overwhelm him. He would find him, somehow.

He heard the front door open and close and the muffled conversation of his parents as they walked through to the kitchen. Steeling himself, he stood and went out to face them.

As he walked into the room he mentally crossed his fingers for luck. They were both putting shopping away and paid him no attention. He cleared his throat and went for it. "I need to talk to you both." He turned and walked out into the lounge. After a few minutes, they joined him, questioning looks on their faces.

Grabbing hold of the strength he'd gained from his time with Sean he plunged ahead. His heart desperately holding onto the hope of seeing him again. He took a deep breath and stared his father in the eye. "I'm not going to Boulder." He waited for the sparks to fly, but nothing happened. They continued to stare at each other as a heavy silence descended on the room.

After what felt like forever and Dane was on the verge of repeating himself his father finally cleared his throat. "What do you mean by that statement?" His words clear and precise.

"What I said." He paused for what he hoped was a dramatic effect. "I'm going to San Francisco."

"You are not!" His father's face becoming red. "You'll damn well do as you're told."

Dane tried to remain calm. Not easy considering how rattled he felt after everything that had happened today. He put his hand in his pocket and felt the letter. His insides settled slightly.

"Yes I am, it's all arranged. I'm sorry I've had to do it this way, but you've made it impossible for me to talk to you. Both you and Alex..." His back stiffened as he thought of his brother. "You both act like you've got the right to control my life." He breathed through the anger and forced himself to continue. "I know you want me to join the family business, but it's not what I want. I can't live my life anymore according to what you want. I need to find my own way."

"You selfish, ungrateful little bastard! After all I've done for you, who the hell do you think you are?" His face now verging on purple.

"Frank!" His mother turned on him. "Don't you dare speak to him like that. He's right. You're always trying to control him, to control all of us. It's his future not yours. If he doesn't want to work for you, he doesn't have to." She glared at him, causing Dane to look on in shock. She'd never stood up to his father before, not that he'd seen.

"Our son has the right to make his own choices." Dane blinked, she obviously wasn't done yet. "My mother foresaw this, that's why she set up the

trust funds. She knew you'd try and interfere with their lives. If Dane wants to go to San Francisco then that's where he'll go and you'll do nothing to stop him."

She took a step closer to his father who flinched. "Do you understand me Frank? Because if you interfere it won't just be a son you'll lose. I'll pack my bags too. And don't think I'm bluffing because your controlling behavior has reached the limit of my patience too." With that, she stepped back and crossed her arms, her eyes never breaking eye contact.

Dane took a lung full of air not realizing he'd stopped breathing. He cautiously looked in his father's direction to see him staring open mouthed at his mother. She stood her ground, her eyebrows raised. He snapped his mouth shut, glared at Dane and stormed out of the room. Dane collapsed into the chair next to him, staring gratefully at his mother. A new respect growing for the woman who raised him. "Thank you." His voice barely above a whisper.

She crouched in front of him. "Dane I wish you'd talked to me."

"I didn't know how." He gave a sad smile. "It wasn't until I met someone that I started thinking differently."

"A girl?" He bit his lip, wondering if this was the moment. She laughed gently before he could reply. "A boy."

"I umm..." He stared helplessly back at her.

She squeezed his hand. "Dane honey, I'm not your father. It's kind of obvious you're not that into girls. He may go around with his head up his ass, but I do not."

He laughed. This was a side of his mother he hadn't seen before. "Doesn't it bother you?"

"That you're gay?" Dane quickly looked around. "Don't worry he's sulking in his study, he won't be out for hours." She fixed him with a calm but serious look. "And no, it doesn't bother me that you're gay. Your father, on the other hand... well, maybe you better leave telling him for another day. We don't want to overload his brain all at once."

"Alex knows."

"Your brother? How do you know?"

"He threatened Sean, told him that he'd get me thrown out and disowned if he didn't leave me alone. So he's gone, thought he was protecting me by leaving." He shook his head at Sean's false logic. The pain he was in now far

worse than any reaction from his father. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he'd found someone he could truly be himself with and had fallen deeply for the guy in the process. By using his family against him, his brother had touched a nerve in Sean, guaranteeing he'd react in the only way he could. His past had seen to that.

His brother chose that moment to walk back through the door. "I would like a word with you, Alex." His mother's voice cold as ice. She stood and smiled down at Dane. "We'll talk later." Then she gestured for Alex to follow her to the kitchen. He did so, shooting daggers at Dane.

Now alone, he finally began to relax. It was done. His father had been told and for once was not forcing his will. Not that Dane would have stood for that, but thanks to his mother he hadn't had to really go into battle—she'd done it for him. The relief flowed through him. She knew he was gay and she hadn't freaked out. She'd accepted him completely. He hadn't seen that coming. To be quite frank, he hadn't seen any of today coming.

Just thinking of his brother and what he'd done made him want to punch him all over again. They'd never been close, but he'd never thought he would ever betray him in such a way. Thank God he was leaving, he really didn't think he could stay in the same house with him after what he'd done. He supposed he better tell them it was tonight. After a few calming breaths, he stood and went to check he was all packed.

His mother had cried when he'd told her he was leaving tonight but had immediately understood. She was insisting on driving Dane to the bus station. He'd catch a bus to Denver then fly on from there. With a last look around his room, he went to meet his mother out front. His father was still in the study, still sulking apparently, and Alex had disappeared. It was a relief. He'd had all the drama he could stand for one day.

The letter crinkled in his pocket as he walked along. It reassured him, strengthening his resolve. Sean Daniels was going to be found whether he liked it or not.

Epilogue

There was a knock at the door, the sound loud in Sean's tiny apartment. Tiny but his and he loved it. He frowned as he walked towards the door; no one ever came calling on him. It was probably a mistake. He swung open the door and froze, his mouth falling open.

"Hello Sean."

"Dane." His heart started pounding. He'd found him. "How?"

"May."

He closed his eyes. Of course. He knew she thought he'd made the wrong decision. He'd only recently rung her with his new address and phone number. He shook his head, sneaky woman.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh yeah, sorry." He stepped aside. Just seeing Dane again was almost paralyzing. There were so many conflicting feelings running through him. But the one making its presence felt the most was relief. Just being in the same room again brought Sean a sense of peace he hadn't felt in over four months. Every day he'd had to fight against missing Dane and longing to be in his arms. He'd dreamt of him over and over, some of them nightmares with Dane's brother playing a starring role.

"Sean, we need to talk." He came back to the present to find Dane staring at him, his eyebrows raised. He swallowed, unable to look away. It was like no time at all had passed.

"Okay." At this point, he'd have agreed to anything. This was why he'd written the letter. Face to face it was impossible to deny him anything. How the hell was he going to stand his ground?

Dane stared at him, his posture rigid and expression fierce. Then slowly his face softened and his shoulders slumped. He let go of a shuddering sigh. "It's taken me months to find you." His voice barely audible. He glared at Sean. "I should spank your ass for running from me."

Sean blinked. "But I..."

"I know why you did what you did. But you made the decision for both of us and you shouldn't have. I had a right to make my own mind up and you took that right away."

Sean couldn't speak, his mind racing with Dane's take on things. The hurt staring back at him punctured his heart. "I'm sorry. I just thought I was doing the right thing. Your brother..."

"Forget about my brother. He's an asshole. Him and my father both. My mother's the only one that matters." He smiled. "She stood up for me when I confronted my father. She also guessed I was gay." He shook his head. "She's fine with it. In fact, it's brought us closer. We speak more now than when I lived there."

Sean bit his lip. His next question lodged in his throat. "Does your father know?" His voice barely above a whisper.

Dane grimaced. "Yes, Alex told him after I left—his revenge."

"Alex?"

"My brother. I'm not exactly flavor of the month back there." He shrugged. "Hell, I don't care. Like I said, my mother's the only one that counts. I'm done with the rest of them." He walked closer, stopping directly in front of him, an intensity burning in his eyes. "So that brings us back to you Sean."

"Me?" His voice unsteady. The hunger in Dane's eyes making him step back.

"Yes you, precious." He stalked Sean until his legs bumped against the bed. "Are we done with this running shit?"

"So you still want me?" Something in him needed to hear it.

Dane looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. He pushed him onto the bed and leaned over him. "I've searched for you for four months. Going into every coffee shop, accommodation office and evening class I could find. So in answer to your ridiculous question, yes I still want you." He glared down at Sean, who grinned back at him. Four very long months of dreaming of this very moment, combined with Dane's obvious acceptance of his family situation, instantly dissolved every ounce of resistance in Sean.

"Good." He pulled him down smashing their mouths together. Both instantly relaxing the moment they touched. Sean pulled him up onto the bed refusing to release his lips in the process. They devoured each other. The time apart having stoked the fire between them.

"I want you Dane. I've missed you so much." Sean panted as he spoke between kisses, complete lust taking over his brain. But it wasn't only lust

burning there. The warmth in his heart matched the heat in his groin, pushing him to go after what he ultimately wanted—Dane inside him. He captured his eyes. “Please, I need you.”

Dane pulled away and studied him. “We don’t have to rush this. We’re together now, there’s no hurry.”

Sean swallowed, trying to focus his mind to explain the feelings inside him. “I know there’s no rush and I also know you’d never put any pressure on me. But I thought I’d lost you, that I’d never see you again.” He closed his eyes. “I need to feel you Dane. To reassure me that it’s real.” He opened his eyes and smiled shyly. “And there’s no one I’d want for my first time other than you.”

Dane’s eyes became possessive. “You better not, precious, otherwise I will spank that ass.”

Sean giggled. “So masterful.” He became serious. “Please Dane. I need to feel you inside me.”

That seemed to ignite something in Dane. He took Sean’s lips in a forceful kiss, his hands moving down to claim his ass in a move of ownership. Sean groaned, giving himself over to the kiss and Dane’s possession. There was nothing he desired more than for Dane to take him completely.

“Take your clothes off, Sean.” It almost came out as a growl.

Sean giggled again, loving this new side of Dane. He could order him around all he wanted as long as he kept that look in his eye. Sean had never felt so wanted. They both stripped in record time, Sean grabbing the lube from his cupboard and Dane retrieving a condom from his wallet.

Sean raised an eyebrow. “Hoping to get lucky?”

Dane shrugged. “Only with you.” He frowned. “I didn’t come here to get into your pants you know.”

Sean pulled him down on top of him. “I know that.” He gently cupped his face and smoothed back his hair. “We’ve been apart for long enough. I want you, Dane. Now.”

Dane whimpered and leaned down to kiss him. Slowly at first, a sweet kiss filled with emotion. As they moved against each other, this built, merging into desire, need, lust and many other things Sean had no name for. He reached for the condom, ripping it open and pushing it at Dane, who had to take a breath to calm himself.

He knelt between Sean's legs and rolled on the condom, reaching for the lube. Sean lay there with his stomach fluttering as he watched Dane's every move, the building anticipation causing him to tremble. Dane moved closer, and Sean automatically pulled his legs back exposing himself, unable to prevent the blush caused by such an intimate position.

"Don't be embarrassed." Dane's voice soft, his hands gentle on Sean as he stroked his entrance. "You're beautiful."

Before he could respond, Dane's finger breached him, causing his eyes to close at the new sensation. He lay there in a haze as Dane sensually stretched him, adding two then three fingers, smoothing the way for what was to come.

By this time Sean was gasping, the need for more overwhelming him. Dane also looked as though he was hanging onto his control by a thread. He leaned over Sean and lined himself up.

"Tell me if it hurts. I'll go slow."

Sean just nodded, unable to respond due to his rapid breathing. Instead, he pulled Dane down and wrapped him up as he felt him push inside. There was an initial burn which caused him to bite down hard on his lip, squeezing his eyes closed.

Dane froze. "Sean?"

He shook his head. "No keep going, I'll be all right in a minute." Feeling Dane's hesitation, he wrapped his legs tighter and pulled Dane deeper, the burning easing into a pleasurable fullness.

"Oh Sean." Dane thrust deeper, unable to resist any longer. "So good." He hid his face in Sean's neck and slowly began to move.

The feeling of Dane moving inside him, them both clinging to each other was the most intense experience of his life. They kissed and stroked each other, neither in a hurry to end this. Eventually, their bodies took control, the urgency to climax taking over.

Dane sped up, Sean matching his movements perfectly. He reached for himself, but Dane brushed his hand away, stroking him with matching precision. Sean crushed their mouths together and came, shuddering through his orgasm. Dane stiffened, cried out and buried his face again, clinging on as he shook through his own release.

After disposing of the condom and wiping Sean clean, they lay under the covers in each other's arms, no space between them. For the longest time no words were spoken, only hands moving soothingly over each other's bodies.

After what felt like an eternity of being lost in their own little bubble, Sean spoke, his voice soft. "I'm so sorry for hurting you. I just thought I was doing the right thing." He leaned up on an elbow and stared down at Dane, his heart fluttering at the look in his eyes.

"It's over with now," his voice equally as soft. He reached up to stroke Sean's cheek. "We're together." After gazing at each other for a moment, Dane frowned. "Why haven't you started college yet? It's made you very difficult to find."

Sean settled back down and nestled into Dane. "I decided to just work for a few months and save. I had no idea how expensive it was going to be supporting myself. It's all under control now though—at last. I start college next week." He glanced up at Dane and then hid his face. "I'm sorry I changed my phone number, but I knew if I spoke to you, I wouldn't be able to resist you... you'd have talked me round."

"Hmm, stubborn man." He tightened his arms around him. "No more running. Whatever problems we have we face them together."

Sean glanced up, holding Dane's gaze. "I promise." They continued to stare at each other, and Sean sensed this was a turning point for them. A fresh start to be built on and cherished.

Dane took a deep breath. "I know we're only young Sean, and I don't know exactly how you feel, but this just seems right to me." He paused, a crease forming on his forehead. "You're the only one who saw me for who I am. The only person who's ever given me the strength to fight for what I want. If I hadn't met you and become your friend, I'd still be two people in one body, torn between doing what's expected, and being who I really am." He started to smile. "But it's not just that. It's you... I fell for you right from the start. It just took you taking your shirt off for me to realize it."

Sean felt his eyes moisten at the sincerity in Dane's voice. The look in his eyes reflecting the feelings in Sean's heart.

"I love you, Sean."

He nodded, choked up by the building emotion. He did the only thing he could do in this situation. He kissed him.

The End

Author Bio

Angela Maye is a hopeless romantic who is addicted to reading romance. Sweet, sexy, whatever. You name the genre—as long as it's a love story—she'll probably enjoy reading it. Having recently discovered a passion for writing her own love stories, you'll often find her with a pad and pen, staring dreamily out of the window creating characters and stories in her mind. MM romance has become her favourite thing to read and write and this has led to some very steamy imaginings and some very strange looks from her husband. Long may it continue.

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TOUCHING NARCISSUS

By Jamie Fessenden

Photo Description

The picture is of the Brewer Twins. One is sneaking up behind the other, putting his hands over his brother's eyes. They're both shirtless, and it appears to be nighttime.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They say everyone has a doppelganger out there and I have found mine. He is beautiful, he is perfect, he is... me. The mirror image of myself in every way and I want him. I think he wants me. I pretended to be someone else online and planned a blind date/hook up for him, for us, telling him every detail of will happen. I told him when he got to the destination to take off his shirt and wait. Will he accept or reject me when he sees me, himself, reflected back when he opens his eyes?

Please give us our story. Tell me what happens and where we go from here. An HEA/HFN is fine. Kink/BDSM is fine. (Please no sci-fi or paranormal and nothing alien.)

Sincerely,

Sara

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: doppelganger, obsession, grad student, businessman, deception

Word Count: 13,914

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TOUCHING NARCISSUS

By Jamie Fessenden

Chapter One

The first time I saw myself was in the window of Popovers on the Square. No, I don't mean my reflection. My reflection was right in front of me, eyes wide and mouth gaping like a startled guppy, and like me it was staring at the young man inside the café. He was reading a paperback and sipping a cappuccino, completely oblivious to the fact that he was being watched. His face was handsome in a boyish way—not pretty, like some of the really beautiful guys I know, but not rugged, either. Just... soft, round-cheeked, with a full, sensuous mouth. He had thick, golden blond hair, swept back from a high forehead and tucked behind his ears. I couldn't see his eyes from this distance, but I was willing to bet they were sky blue, just like mine.

Because he was *me*. It wasn't just that he looked a lot like me. He looked *exactly* like me.

It was the weirdest feeling. Like looking in a mirror, except that he was moving, and I wasn't. I watched him finish his cappuccino, tuck his book into his backpack, and stand up, all while I stood motionless, locked in place.

"Are you going in?" a voice said behind me, making me jump. I hadn't even noticed Rob's reflection in the window until he spoke.

I turned slowly to face him, as if waking up from a deep sleep. "I, uh... yeah, I'm going in."

"Well, come on." Rob was grinning at me, his red hair blowing around his head in the wind that always seemed to be blowing in Portsmouth, coming off the harbor and mixing the smell of saltwater and seaweed in with the exhaust of the traffic. We'd arranged to meet here for lunch. Usually, I would have grabbed a table by now.

I glanced back at the window and the tables inside the café, but I was dismayed to find the guy I'd been so enthralled with gone. I looked at the door, and there he was, walking away from us, carrying his backpack slung over one shoulder. For a moment, I had a strong impulse to push my way past Rob and chase after him, but he'd already stepped out onto Congress Street, and by the time I could catch up to him, the next wave of cars would have overtaken me. It's a one-way street, and crossing it at rush hour is a matter of waiting until a window opens when the lights two blocks down change. I'd missed my window.

I thought about shouting out to him, but I had no idea what I'd say.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Rob asked. He glanced over his shoulder to see what I was looking at, but of course he just saw traffic and random pedestrians.

"Nothing," I said. "Let's get a table."

"He was *gorgeous*!"

Rob laughed. And he definitely wasn't laughing with me—he was laughing at me. "Colin... you just said he looked exactly like you. Now you're saying he's gorgeous? How vain is that?"

The girl at the table next to us was looking at us funny, so I lowered my voice. "I do think I'm good looking," I admitted, "but it's not like I spend my day jerking off in front of the mirror, or something. I just... seeing him like that... seeing *me*... I can't describe it."

"I can describe it," Rob said, leaning over his salted caramel latte. "You're a sick man with a narcissistic complex. You probably have a secret stash of twincest books."

I stared back at him coldly. Sure, I might have read one or... four... books with twins in them, but so did a lot of people. That didn't make me sick. "You're just mad because I won't sleep with you," I replied.

Rob didn't dignify that with a response. He made a rude noise with his lips, and then took a sip of his latte. Truthfully, he didn't have more than a passing interest in me, and we both knew it. He'd chased me for a brief time, when we first met, but that had been years ago. Now we were comfortable with each other.

Rob was right that I was a little vain. I worked out, I had a close, personal relationship with my hair stylist, I had a drink named after me at our local juice bar... In other words, I cared about my appearance, and it showed. I'd considered being a model, when I was in high school, but I knew myself too well. A little flattery and those shirtless shoots would turn into pants-less shoots. Then underwear shots would become "tasteful nudes." Before long, my modeling career would be a porn career.

So, I went into business management instead. Now, a couple years out of college, I was a low-level manager at Top Circle Security Corporation in

Portsmouth, NH, and... well, let's just say I was doing pretty well for myself. Rob was a shift supervisor working under me, which was another reason we couldn't date.

I took a sip of my green tea and set it down. "I want to find out who he is."

"You want to stalk him."

I gave Rob a sour look. "I'm not going to *stalk* him. I'm just going to use a little Google-fu... see what I can track down."

"In other words... stalk him."

I took another sip of tea and tried to pretend I was alone at the table. But Rob wouldn't let it rest. "We might be able to clear this up right now," he said.

He stood up and walked over to the counter, motioning to the barista. "Did you see my friend come in here about a half hour ago?" He pointed at me. "He might have been wearing different clothes."

The guy looked uncomfortable. "Why?"

"I just want to know if he was in here earlier."

"Why don't you ask him?" The guy knew something weird was going on—he just had no idea what—and the café probably didn't pay him enough for this kind of crap.

But another barista—a young woman who'd made the dubious fashion choice of sky blue lipstick that morning—rescued him. "I saw him, or someone who looked just like him. In a light brown sweater." She approached the counter and leaned over it to talk directly to me. "What's the deal? Are you twins?"

"He's my stunt double," I replied.

She laughed and looked as if she wanted to ask me something else, but Rob interrupted. "Do you know the other guy's name?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "First time I've seen him in here."

I had a couple meetings back-to-back, when we returned to work. But as soon as I had a few free minutes, I tackled Google. I didn't have much to go by but appearance, so I tried Image Search. Obviously, I didn't have a picture of the guy, but that hardly seemed like a problem. I just used one of mine that I'd

posted on Facebook. But as soon as I tried it, I realized my mistake. Google Image Search immediately located the picture—on my Facebook page.

I scanned down the list the search had returned, but it was pretty much all references to me for a couple pages, before it disintegrated into useless stuff. If this was going to work, I'd have to try a picture I hadn't already posted. Unfortunately, I had work to do, and IT would start to wonder what I was up to if I kept using company web access to search for pictures of myself on Google. So, I put it aside for the rest of the day.

When I got home that evening, I nuked a frozen dinner and ate it in front of *Teen Wolf*, trying to pretend I wasn't obsessed with tracking my look-alike down. But as soon as the show was over, I tossed the dinner tray in the trash and went back to the computer. I figured I'd have to try some photos of myself that had never been posted online if I wanted to have a chance of getting some hits that weren't actually me. Unfortunately, I didn't have many—some high school pictures which were probably too young-looking, some old photos from college...

The college photos turned up nothing, except for my awful yearbook picture. That brought up the same picture on the UNH website. Not helpful. My high school pics were more interesting, in that one of them matched up with a cute Czechoslovakian model on a gay porn site. That was flattering, but again, not helpful. I bookmarked the site and moved on.

I had one option left. If none of my existing photos brought up a match, I could take a few new ones. I didn't have a webcam, because... well, I'd always been afraid of what I'd do with it. If somebody hot started chatting with me online, it probably wouldn't take all that much to flatter me out of my clothes. And I had nightmares about some disgruntled employee stumbling across nude photos of me and posting them. We had an internal site where people could post pictures from company picnics and quarterly meetings—all that whacky, fun stuff that goes on in corporations. Wouldn't it just be terrific, if a few pictures of my dick showed up on it?

Yeah... no career-killing Anthony Weiner stunts for me, thanks.

I did own a digital camera. Since it wasn't normally attached to my computer, I considered it reasonably safe. I found it in the drawer of a small side table in the living room, and spent a couple minutes looking around the apartment for a completely blank wall to use as a backdrop. I assumed the more generic the photo was the better. It turned out I didn't have a blank wall, so I

removed a couple art prints from my living room wall. I also didn't have a tripod, so I propped the camera up on a bookcase across the room, aiming it at the wall and zooming in a bit.

I remembered the guy had been wearing a brown sweater and jeans at the café, so I found a similar "ensemble" in my dresser and put it on. Then I spent about ten minutes setting the timer on the camera and scurrying across the room to pose before the flash went off. That gave me six pictures to try.

Nada. No matches for any of them.

I sat there for a minute, playing with the zoom on the camera and feeling annoyed. I was zooming in and out on my crotch, when the thought of taking some dick pics popped into my head. As I said, me plus a digital camera generally equals a bad idea. I have too strong an exhibitionist streak. It occurred to me, though, that loading an image into Google Image Search wasn't necessarily the same as putting it online... was it?

I had to admit I wasn't sure. Google wasn't exactly the safest company to trust with personal data. But what if my lookalike had a profile on a hookup site? The only pictures he might have on there could be nudes, or at least shirtless. I decided to risk taking a couple shirtless pictures. As long as I had my jeans on, they wouldn't be completely embarrassing, if someone dug them up. I hoped.

So that's what I did. I did give into the temptation to snap a couple of nudes, but I erased them from the camera as soon as I downloaded them, and then deleted them from the hard drive after I'd looked at them. I loaded the best picture with jeans on into Image Search, and was shocked when it returned a result from gay.com, one of the common hookup sites. I had a login on the site which I was surprised to discover hadn't been deactivated, even though I'd never filled in my profile. The fact that I could login allowed me to look at the profile I'd found in my search.

The shirtless man in the picture wasn't me, but even I couldn't tell us apart. He was looking into the camera with his head tilted down slightly, his eyes smoldering under an angry brow. His hands were thrust into his pants pockets.

The profile said he was a grad student at UNH, studying literature, living in Dover, which was on the bus route between Portsmouth and the university. He didn't list his actual birthday, but he did list the year. We were the same age. No last name in his profile. Just... Joshua.

I'd found him.

Chapter Two

I hadn't really thought about what I'd do if I managed to find the guy online. A glance at the clock showed me I'd spent close to five hours tracking down the identity of a complete stranger, simply because I'd been fascinated by his appearance when I got a glimpse of him in a café.

Rob was right. I was a stalker.

Christ. It was two o'clock in the morning, and I'd just succeeded in totally creeping myself out. Not to mention that I had to be up at seven, in order to make it to work on time. I bookmarked Joshua's profile and shut the computer down. Then I went to bed.

I had a bizarre dream about stripping naked in front of a mirror. I stared at my nude body in the reflection for a long while, caressing myself with my hands, exploring the solid muscles of my chest, rubbing my palms over my nipples until they grew hard and made me twitch with every touch. I slid one hand down the taut muscles of my abdomen, and through my pubic hair, searching for my rapidly swelling cock. But as I stroked myself, something odd happened. My reflection began to move on its own, drawing closer to the mirror, still stroking. Fascinated, I approached. When my reflection leaned forward, placing its lips against the glass, I did so too, until we were nearly touching, our kiss separated by a thin barrier of cool glass. The barrier melted away until I felt warm, soft lips against mine, and hot, panting breath filled my mouth.

I woke up in the throes of an orgasm, my seed spilling from my painfully swollen cock onto the bed sheets. In the back of my mind, part of me was freaking out about the mess I was creating, but it felt so fantastic, so *beautiful*, I just lay there, writhing in pleasure, letting it happen.

Sheets can be washed.

The next morning sucked. I was dead tired and took so long to drag my ass out of bed that I didn't have time for much more than coffee before I had to rush off to a morning meeting. My team's stats had been slipping recently, so the VP kept making snide comments about how "sleepy" I was. I practically had to go down on him in front of the other supervisors in order to appease him.

I spent the rest of the morning in my office, in too pissy a mood to speak to anyone. Rob came around at lunch time with Chinese takeout, bless him. I could eat in peace without interacting with anybody—except for him, of course. But Rob didn't count. We'd shared a room for years, gotten drunk together, and cried over breakups in front of each other. He'd already seen me at my worst, bad hair, morning breath, and all. He wasn't going to be chased off by a case of morning grumpiness.

It didn't take him long to pry out of me that I'd been up all night, and he quickly deduced the reason. "Jesus! You were searching for that guy online, weren't you?"

I didn't answer. But my silence, as I pretended to notice something food-like in my General Tso's chicken, confirmed his suspicions.

"Well," Rob asked with a sigh, "did you find him or not?"

"I did."

"Great! Has he taken out a restraining order yet?"

I looked up at him and attempted to glare, but I didn't really have the energy for it. "All I did was track down his profile on gay.com. I didn't try to contact him."

"But you're going to."

"Why not?" I asked. "Now that I've *found* his profile, it's no different from anyone *else* finding his profile, is it?"

Rob laughed and scooped the rest of the pork fried rice we were sharing out onto his Styrofoam plate. "Stalker."

"Seriously—"

"Stalker, stalker!"

"—I'll just fill out my profile, and contact him like anyone else on the site."

"Stalker, stalker, stalker!"

I ignored Rob, for the most part. I did make up my mind not to be "creepy" when I talked to Joshua. But then, that was never a good approach anyway. The first step, when I got home that evening, was to fill out my profile. It was possible to contact someone on the site with a half-assed profile, but guys who did that were generally just looking for sex, rather than anything long-lasting.

And Joshua's profile expressly said, "Looking for something lasting. Not interested in a hookup."

So, fine. "Lasting" sounded good to me. As long as there was sex somewhere in the mix.

I could have tailored my profile to match his as closely as possible, of course. He said he liked reading and old black-and-white movies, so I could have put down the same thing. But I'd dated guys like that, who always loved everything you loved... until they'd fucked you a couple times. Then it quickly became clear you had nothing in common, and the relationship tanked after that. That wasn't what I was looking for.

I decided to put as much accurate detail in my profile as possible, keeping in mind that other guys could see it too. I wrote in my home town as Portsmouth, but no street address, and didn't give the specific company I worked for. Also, no phone number. Joshua hadn't listed one either, which spoke well for his intelligence. Or at least it meant he wasn't a complete moron. For interests, I listed computers, science-fiction, online-gaming, working out, clothes shopping, gourmet food, and a host of other things. Some of them overlapped Joshua's interests, some didn't. I thought about removing "online-gaming," in case he'd be afraid I was one of those guys who actually thought he was an orc, or something like that. But in the interest of honesty, I left it. Though I did add the word "moderate" in front of it.

I balked at putting a picture of myself on the profile. Although a user had to have an account on the site in order to see another user's profile, anybody could view the pictures. And by "anybody," I was thinking "coworkers." Besides, if I posted a real picture of myself, Joshua might think it was a prank—that somebody had Photoshopped his face onto another body or something. It might be better to get to know him, before saying, "Surprise! We look exactly alike!"

On the other hand, a profile without a picture wouldn't get me anywhere. So I decided to lie a little on that point. I searched online for a generic picture of a blond guy who matched my description. Nothing too slick—I hadn't claimed to be a model, so I wouldn't be likely to have professional head shots. I found something that looked like a family photo, and snagged it. The guy was my age and good-looking, without seeming unreal. But as I was about to upload it to the profile, I had an attack of conscience. For all I knew, this guy was married with a family, or studying to be a priest. And here I was, about to attach his face to a gay.com profile for all Internet eternity. That hardly seemed fair. So I tossed that picture and rummaged around in the gay.com photos. Yeah, I'd still

be misrepresenting somebody, but his picture was already on the site. I picked somebody from Oregon, so he'd be less likely to pop up in searches Joshua was doing locally.

Once the profile was complete, I fired off a note to Joshua:

Hey! I saw your picture and looked at your profile. You seem pretty cool, and you're going to my college! Are you still active on this site?

Hopefully, Joshua would find that friendly and nonthreatening. Admittedly, it wasn't very intriguing, but if I was judging him correctly, he'd have to be approached slowly. *You look hot*, wouldn't be the right tack. Not for first contact. And neither would, *Let's get together so your ass and my face can get better acquainted!*

After I sent the note, I sat in front of my computer, staring at his picture, until I realized I'd been doing nothing but that for several minutes. I forced myself to shut the stupid computer down and go out to Brewbaker's. That coffee shop stayed open until 1 a.m. during the summer. I didn't need to be up all night again, but it was still early enough for a decaf and some fresh air.

When I got back from the coffee shop, it was just going on eleven. I checked my gay.com profile for messages, and found a couple—but not from Joshua. They were just random guys trying to hook up with me. I deleted them without responding. Judging by the tone of the messages, nobody's feelings would be hurt. They were just prowling for sex. I shut the computer down and went to bed.

Two days later, I still hadn't received a reply to my message. There had been plenty of other messages, only two of which had seemed like sincere attempts to meet for coffee or something nonsexual. I sent them polite brush-offs. The other messages I deleted. If those guys couldn't be bothered to respect the part of my profile that said "Not interested in casual hookups," then they didn't warrant responses.

"Maybe he isn't on the site anymore," Rob pointed out, as I whined to him over Thai food about Joshua's continued silence.

"It's possible," I admitted. After all, I'd only used the site for a short time myself, before growing bored with it. I hadn't been on it in years, and wouldn't have bothered to go back, if it hadn't been for Joshua. He might have forgotten all about it.

Rob sat back in his seat, looking smug. “Maybe you’ll just have to reconcile yourself to not always getting everybody you set your sights on, like the rest of us mere mortals.”

“Me-ow,” I retorted, glaring at him over my chicken satay.

“Sorry, I’ve been rewatching *Queer as Folk* on DVD.”

“Well, go clubbing or something, so you can get it out of your system.”

Chapter Three

It was the next morning—Saturday—after I'd already written the gay.com thing off as a total failure, that I decided to log in one final time and just delete the goddamn profile. I didn't need it lingering in cyberspace with my information on it, sparse though it was. There were seventeen messages, all raunchy attempts to get me interested in a blowjob or a sleazy afternoon romp. It wasn't that I'd never had a down-and-dirty one night stand in my life—I wasn't exactly a shy little virgin. But those days were pretty much behind me. I wasn't sure what I wanted these days, but that wasn't it.

As I was about to dump the lot into the trashcan, I noticed one of the messages said "Reply" on the header. Then I noticed who it was from: Joshua.

I think I had a mild seizure for a moment. I couldn't move. I just stared at my inbox for a long time, before I finally remembered I had a hand, and it was holding a mouse. With a tremendous amount of effort, I willed myself to move the cursor to the message and click on it.

He hadn't said much in response to my message. Just a few words.

Are you a student here?

I could have faked it, of course. I'd been a student until just a couple years ago. But instead, I replied truthfully:

I already graduated. Business major.

My profile listed the year I was born. Hopefully, he'd see that and know I didn't mean I'd graduated the same year as his father, or something.

Would the "business major" part turn him off? What if he was only interested in artistic types? On the other hand, I knew I'd never be able to fake being a literature major for more than a few emails. I'd read a few of the "classics" in high school, but I barely remembered them. And I hated Shakespeare. So I just clicked "Send" and hoped for the best.

To my surprise, the answer came back right away:

Cool. I'm a lit major. Teaching degree.

He was online. Right now.

The site had an instant messaging feature, so I brought that up, hoping he'd be in the mood to chat. I typed in:

Colin90: *hi*

There was a long pause, before the reply came back:

JoshuaF: *Hello.*

Oh. My. God. I was talking to him! Well, almost.

Colin90: *Are you busy?*

I took a hint from his degree of study, and spelled everything out. I suspected abbreviating everything to single letters and numbers wouldn't impress a man fond of the English language. Sort of like torturing his friends in front of him.

JoshuaF: *Just eating breakfast and checking email. Not much going on today.*

Okay, I'm not going to reproduce this entire conversation, because it was basically two guys dancing around each other, asking meaningless questions about whether Pop-Tarts qualify as breakfast, and whether food was even necessary, if you had cream and sugar in your coffee. I found out he was on track to graduate with a master's degree next spring, and was hoping to become an associate professor in the English department. He was also working on a novel about life in a small New Hampshire town. I told him—truthfully—that I'd be interested in reading it, when he was finished. I also told him the truth about what I did for work, hoping he wouldn't find it tedious. He seemed to think it was cool that I was doing so well, just a couple years after graduation, which flattered the hell out of me. Certainly, it was a nice change from Rob's constant cynicism.

Something really interesting happened during the conversation—I started to like him. Not just because he looked sexy to me, but because he seemed like a cool guy and had a great sense of humor. Maybe this doesn't seem like such a big deal, but it was really rare for me. Most guys I'd met while I was dating bored the crap out of me, maybe because the conversation rarely got past, "I think you're really hot. What are you into?" Joshua wasn't interested in talking about sex, at least not over breakfast. We were just getting to know each other.

And it was really nice.

Eventually, I looked at the clock and realized how late it was.

Colin90: *Wow! We've been talking for almost three hours! Lol*

JoshuaF: *Really? I should head over to Durham. I have to find a book of contemporary critiques of Marlowe for my thesis.*

I had no idea who Marlowe was, but by this point, Joshua probably knew that. I thought about asking him out to coffee later, but I wasn't sure if we'd progressed to meeting in person. Besides, I wasn't sure if he was ready to learn I'd lied to him about my appearance. Fortunately, he solved my dilemma by saying:

JoshuaF: *I hope to see you around later. I'd love to chat again.*

He wasn't ready to meet in person. So, good. We'd have more time to get to know each other first.

I said:

Colin90: *Cool. Good luck finding that book!*

"I don't fucking believe it!" Rob panted, as we jogged side-by-side on the treadmills at the gym. "If I stalked some guy for a week, I'd end up with the police banging on my door. But you! He just falls right in your lap."

I'd long given up arguing the "stalking" point. "He isn't in my lap," I replied. "We're just chatting online. Even *you* can manage that, once in a while."

"It's all gonna blow up in your face, once he finds out about the picture."

I frowned at him in the mirror in front of us. "You're just dying for that to happen, aren't you?"

"It has amusement potential."

"You know," I said, "you suck as a best friend. You're not at all supportive. You just hang around me so you can laugh when I fall on my face."

Rob just laughed at me. "Oh, stop being so melodramatic. You know I love you."

"Then why do you keep putting me down?" I asked petulantly. "Why can't you be happy for me?"

I regretted that question the moment I asked it. Rob hit the button to bring his treadmill to a stop, so he could turn to face me. Breathing heavily, sweat soaking his T-shirt, he narrowed his eyes and asked, "Happy about *what*? What do you think you have here? True Love? Dude! You hunted this guy down because of the way he *looks*—nothing else. Don't claim there's anything there other than sexual attraction."

"There could be," I hedged. I knew he was right. At least, for now. But that didn't mean nothing could come of this, apart from some interesting sex. "He seemed like a really cool guy when I talked to him."

"Fine." Rob reached for the towel he'd draped over the railing of his treadmill and mopped the sweat off his face with it. "After you've talked to him for a while, maybe fucked him a couple times to get over this weird obsession... If you're still thinking he's wonderful then, I'll reconsider my opinion of this whole twisted... *thing* you've got going on."

He stormed off to the locker room, and I let him go. I still had five minutes on my run, and I needed the time to cool off before I talked to him again. Admittedly, he probably did too.

I wasn't sure if it would be a good idea to try messaging Joshua when I got home that evening. I didn't want to scare him off by coming on too strong. But when I checked my gay.com profile, I discovered he'd sent me a message a half hour before, asking if I was around. So I fired off the reply:

Colin90: *Sorry, I was out with a friend. What's up?*

I expected him to have logged out already, but to my delight, my message window popped up a few seconds later.

JoshuaF: *Hey.*

Colin90: *Hey. How are you?*

JoshuaF: *Fine. Just bored. Were you on a date?*

Colin90: *No, just watching the musical at Prescott Park with a friend.*

Rob and I had stopped snarling at each other long enough to get lunch and go down to the park, where an open-air performance of *The Big Band Broadcast of 1938* was being put on. The show was playing all summer, and we'd seen it twice already, but it was a good way to kill an afternoon.

I was a little afraid Joshua would start hinting that he'd like to see the show. Not that I didn't want to go with him, but it was too soon for my big unveiling. Fortunately, he didn't mention it.

JoshuaF: *Cool. I spent the whole day at the library.*

Colin90: *Exciting.*

JoshuaF: *Yeah. :-p*

We talked for a while about random stuff. Nothing big. But I felt completely at ease while we talked—more relaxed than I'd ever been around anyone but Rob. It was very cool. He ended up telling me about his Master's thesis, which was some kind of comparison between Shakespeare and his contemporaries, like Christopher Marlowe, Francis Beaumont, and other people I'd never heard of. Joshua was really enthusiastic about the subject, and he knew a bunch of anecdotes about all of them. Somehow, an hour went by before I realized I'd been completely engrossed in a conversation I normally would have found boring.

Eventually, he messaged:

JoshuaF: *Do you want to talk on the phone?*

Colin90: *Sure.*

A moment later, he messaged me his phone number and I didn't waste a second calling him. The voice on the other end of the line was surprisingly smooth. Not deep, but mellow. "Hey, it's Joshua."

"This is Colin."

"Yeah, I figured that," he said with a resonant laugh. I loved the sound of it.

"It's nice to hear your voice."

"Yours, too. So I wanted to let you know, I'm thinking of deleting my profile off gay.com."

I had a moment of panic. Was he telling me he was going to disappear? "Why?"

"Because in six months, you're the only decent guy who's contacted me. Everyone else has been creepy, or just looking for a quickie—or both."

I laughed. "I know the feeling. I created my profile years ago, but I stopped using it after a few weeks."

"What made you decide to log in again?" he asked.

I went with a half-truth. "The dating scene in Portsmouth kind of dried up for me. I was hoping to meet somebody more interesting."

"Instead, you met a dork with a Shakespeare fetish."

"You have to admit, there aren't many guys in the clubs who could say that." He laughed again, and I couldn't stop myself from saying, "I love the sound of your laugh."

“Thanks. I love your laugh too,” he said. “Your voice, in general. It sounds... I don’t know. Relaxing. Like I’ve known you forever.” He paused a moment, before continuing, “Anyway, I’ll probably yank the profile tomorrow. I’m sick of deleting mail from sleazebags. And you have my number now.”

“Yeah,” I replied, relieved that he wasn’t cutting me off. “I like this better.”

“Me, too.”

We ended up talking until past midnight. The temptation to ask him to meet up somewhere tomorrow was strong, but again I resisted. Things still felt too tentative to spring my surprise on him. In some ways, it didn’t seem as if it was all that big a deal. I’d lied about my appearance, and I didn’t really look like the picture on my profile. But I was still good-looking. It wasn’t like I was some disgusting troll hiding behind the picture of a model, like a bunch of the guys on the site.

Still, I had the feeling Joshua would be pissed when he found out. He seemed like a very straightforward, honest guy, and he was looking for the same qualities in me. I’d dug myself a hole, and I wasn’t sure how I’d manage to get out of it.

Chapter Four

The phone chats went on for about a week, until it had become a comfortable routine for me. I'd come home each night, have dinner, and then give Joshua a call. It was almost as if we were dating, except that we hadn't seen each other face-to-face yet. I thought about it, and perhaps Joshua did too. But neither of us suggested getting together. I wasn't sure why he hesitated, but I knew my reason—I was afraid everything would fall apart, if I moved too fast.

It almost blew up on me on Sunday afternoon. I'd arranged to meet Rob at Barnes & Noble for coffee, and then we were planning on hitting some other stores in the mall. I arrived a few minutes late, but that wasn't usually a big deal. Rob loved hanging out in the bookshop, and if he'd gotten bored he would have called me. Since he hadn't, I'd assumed everything was fine.

I soon discovered that wasn't exactly true.

Rob was fine. It was what he was *doing* that I had a problem with. As I approached the café, I saw him sitting at a table. There was a man sitting opposite him, and Rob was talking with him—or maybe *at* him would be more precise, since he was jabbering away and waving a book he'd picked up. The man at the table watched him in silence, as if he had no idea what to make of his companion. I couldn't see the guy's face, at first, but he was blond, and when he glanced to the side a moment, my blood went ice cold.

It was Joshua.

And Rob, the moron, was talking to him as if they were old friends—as if he was *me*!

Fuck me!

I stopped at one of the magazine racks near the entrance to the café and pulled out my cell phone. With one eye on the back of Joshua's head, so I could turn away if he looked in my direction, I texted Rob's phone:

that isn't me u idiot!

Rob stopped talking and looked annoyed as he started fishing in his pocket for the phone. I watched him look at the display and scowl. He glanced up at Joshua a second, and then back at his phone. I willed him to notice that, firstly, the text had come from me, and, secondly, the guy sitting in front of him hadn't sent it. *Come on, Rob! Use those neurons!*

He glanced at the cell phone again, and then looked around the room. A second later, he spotted me—the *real* me—and his face blanched. Apparently, Joshua noticed his odd change of expression, because he turned to see what Rob was looking at. I ducked down hurriedly, pretending to be fascinated by a magazine on the lowest shelf. I stayed there until I heard Rob's voice above me saying, "Jesus Christ, Colin!"

"Is he still looking this way?" I asked.

"No," Rob replied. "I told him I had a sudden emergency and booked it out of there. He's gone back to reading."

Good. But it still wasn't safe for me to be in the café. I needed to get out of there, pronto. "Come on!"

I stood up and marched away from the café, not stopping until we were completely outside the bookstore. "What did you tell him?" I asked.

Rob shook his head, his jaw hanging open in astonishment. "Nothing! I just sat down and started talking about Cory Doctorow's new book—the one I told you about a few days ago."

I noticed he wasn't carrying the book anymore. "Where's the book? You didn't just walk out of the store with it, did you?"

"I left it on the table," he said impatiently. "Jesus, Colin! He looks exactly like you!"

"So I've been telling you."

"I don't mean a *lot* like you, except he has a bigger nose or crooked teeth or something. He looks *exactly* like you. I wouldn't be able to tell you apart in a lineup."

I confess I thought he was being a bit slow. Hadn't we already been talking about this for weeks? It annoyed me that he hadn't believed me, when I'd told him all of this before. "You didn't call him 'Colin,' did you?" Joshua wasn't stupid. He would certainly connect that with the fact that *my* name was Colin. At least, I assumed he would. It was hard to imagine what he'd think, exactly.

Rob shook his head again. "No. I just said 'hey' and started talking about the book."

Thank God. Joshua would probably just assume Rob had mistaken him for someone else—which was the truth, of course—and chalk it up to Rob not being very observant. That stuff happens all the time.

But I didn't have any desire to tempt fate again. "Come on," I said. "Let's get away from here before he comes out."

"So, if things don't work out between you two," Rob said, an evil smile quirking up the corners of his mouth, "do you mind if I ask him out? I still have some kinky fantasies left over from the days when I had a crush on you."

"God! No, you pervert."

Rob snorted. "Like you're one to talk."

I wasn't actually bothered by whatever sex fantasies Rob might have about me—I doubted there would be anything really shocking there. I knew all about his sexual escapades, just as he knew all about mine, and he was pretty vanilla. I also wasn't bothered by his crass joke about hitting on Joshua, if things didn't work out for me. He was just trying to get a rise out of me. Mostly, anyway.

But Joshua nearly finding out that I looked like him? That freaked me out. And it made me realize I wouldn't be able to keep my appearance a secret from him for much longer. Portsmouth wasn't that big a city—just about thirty-thousand people. We'd already bumped into each other twice in just under two weeks. Well... I'd bumped into *him*. And eventually he might see me.

That night, Joshua called and told me about meeting Rob in the café. Of course, he didn't know Rob's name or that I knew him. "It was kind of funny," Joshua said, "but totally surreal. He just sat down and started talking as if we were old friends."

"Weird," I said.

"I never even found out what his name was. He got a text and said he had to go. Then he took off."

"That's fucked up." Then, because I thought it was something I was expected to ask, I said, "Was he cute?"

Joshua thought about it. "He was okay, I guess. I wouldn't say he was unattractive..."

But obviously, Joshua didn't find Rob to be drop-dead gorgeous. I felt like an asshole—what kind of friend is happy someone doesn't find you attractive?—but... I was relieved to hear it. I didn't need the added complication.

Still, it had been way too close for comfort.

It was time to figure out how Joshua and I could meet in a way I had some control over. I didn't want to tell him over the phone, "Oh, hey! I forgot to mention we look like twins. My gay.com profile? No, that was a lie." He'd hang up on me, and I'd never get a chance to meet him face-to-face. I was hoping he'd be willing to forgive the faked photo, once he saw me.

Yes, I know. My life had turned into a seventies sitcom.

Portsmouth had an outdoor stage in Prescott Park, right near the harbor, and the Prescott Arts Festival put on a musical of some kind every summer. It ran for weeks, which got a little tedious if you were in the area a lot, but it was a pleasant way to spend the evening. Admission was cheap, if you wanted to be near the stage, or free, if you just wanted to walk around the park and listen in occasionally on the musical numbers. I thought it would be a perfect spot for us to meet. There were plenty of people around, if he was concerned about meeting a relative stranger at night, but still a lot of places in the park we could go to be alone. Not exactly let's-have-sex alone, but certainly alone enough to talk, kiss, make out...

Unfortunately, Joshua seemed less than ecstatic about the idea. "I've still got a lot of work to do on my thesis..."

Okay. I knew a bullshit answer when I heard it. His thesis wasn't due for about six months. "You don't want to actually meet in person, do you?" I said.

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. Then I heard him take a deep breath and say, "I guess I... I just kind of like what we've got going here. I have someone to call up and chat with before bed every night. It's kind of nice."

"Yes, it is," I answered. "But I don't see why that would have to change."

"It would, though. Whenever two people meet face-to-face... two people who met on a *dating* site, anyway... they're kind of expecting it will lead to something. You know?"

"Yes, I know."

"I think you're really nice, Colin—"

Oh, shit, I thought. Couldn't we at least have one date, before he brushed me off?

"—and you have a really sexy voice. But... I don't know how to say this without sounding mean..."

“Just say it,” I said. I tried not to sound curt, but I didn’t really succeed.

“You have a nice body in your profile pic,” he said, “and you’re good-looking. But I’m not sure I’m really attracted to you that way. I’m sorry.”

That was an interesting twist. On the one hand, I didn’t really care if he found my profile picture attractive, since it wasn’t a picture of me. On the other hand, I’d selected that picture, because it looked a *little* like me. What if he hated blonds? Or what if I—and the guy in my picture—just wasn’t Joshua’s “type?” What if he liked skinny, dark-haired computer nerds with glasses?

“Look,” I said slowly, “that’s fine. So we won’t call this a date. We’ll just state right up front that we’re getting together to hang out as friends. Okay?”

It took me a while longer to convince him. Honestly, when I’d said we’d keep it strictly friendly, I was lying. I don’t mean I was going to pounce on him, or pressure him to “put out” or anything like that. But of course I was hoping he *would* be attracted to me, when he finally saw me.

Assuming he didn’t punch me in the face.

At any rate, he eventually agreed to meet me at Prescott Park that Friday at nine o’clock. The performance would already be underway by then, but Joshua insisted he couldn’t get away any earlier than that. It didn’t really matter. I’d seen the show a few times already, and it was just an excuse to finally meet him.

“Should we wear pink carnations in our lapels, or something?” Joshua teased.

“I usually go to these park performances naked,” I replied. Then I mentally kicked myself. Hadn’t I just agreed to keep it platonic?

But the joke didn’t seem to put him off. He laughed. “I’m not going to show up naked, but if the weather stays this hot, I might take my shirt off.”

“Shirtless is good,” I said.

Shirtless would be *very* good.

Chapter Five

Friday night was, in fact, hot and humid as hell. I wasn't sure if Joshua had been serious about showing up shirtless to the park, but I was hoping so. I got hard every time I thought about it.

I had dinner with Rob at the Friendly Toast. It was kind of an odd combination of health food and greasy spoon, with menu items that had no business tasting good, but did—quesadillas with brie and sliced green apple, burgers with avocado and balsamic vinegar. All of this was served in an atmosphere of sixties and seventies kitsch by cute college students with bad attitudes. It was one of our favorite cheap restaurants.

But after dinner I had to tell Rob to buzz off. "I can't let him see you with me," I explained. "Not yet."

"You're just afraid he'll choose me over you," Rob retorted.

I didn't tell him Joshua had already declared him uninteresting. No sense in being mean. Besides, I knew he was just giving me shit. "We'll get together later, have a good laugh, and then a massive three-way," I told him.

"I'll hold you to that."

He ended up calling Ray, the last guy he'd dated, to see if he wanted to go out to a movie. Knowing the way their relationship worked, I had no doubt they'd end up in bed together at the end of the night. I confess the thought made me a little jealous. I doubted things would work out *that* well for me and Joshua tonight, even if he didn't tell me to go away and never call him again.

But I quickly forgot about Rob's plans as I headed down Congress Street toward the park. It was a beautiful evening, hot and balmy, and the sunset had just faded into twilight. By the time I reached Dos Amigos on State Street, I could hear the music coming from the park a few blocks away—a kick-ass rendition of "Stuff Like That There," sung by a young woman with amazing energy. It was one of my favorite songs in the show.

A moment later, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Joshua.

"I got here a little early," he said, shouting over the music. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way. I'll be there in a few minutes." The music wasn't loud where I was, but I had to shout back in order for him to hear me.

“All right. Call me when you get here.”

I walked the remaining distance to the end of State Street and crossed Marcy Street to enter the park. The stage was near the Southern Pier, so I trotted along the red brick path toward the small building that housed the concession stand and public restrooms as the singer belted out her finale. I slowed down and dialed Joshua back when the applause died down, hoping to catch him for a moment before the next song started.

“I’m here,” I said. I was approaching the edge of the crowd, and my eyes searched for him, but there were a dozen shirtless men near me, and a lot more, farther in.

Ah, summer...

“It was too loud near the stage,” he replied. “I’m out on the pier.” He laughed. “And you got your wish. I’ve been sweating so much I had to take my shirt off.”

“Nice.”

I couldn’t see the pier from this angle. I’d have to go around the outskirts of the crowd, unless I wanted to waste money paying for a ticket, so I could plow through the sea of bodies. The band was starting their next number.

“Stay there! I’ll be there in a minute.”

I circled around behind the ticket booth and followed the water’s edge. There was a ship coming into the harbor, and the bridge was slowly rising to let it pass. The entire middle section was hoisted up by two vertical towers to let the ship slide underneath it, and at night, with rows of lights illuminating the entire structure, it was spectacular to watch. That’s what Joshua was doing, when I saw him—looking out across the water, watching the bridge rise.

We were still a fair distance apart, and he hadn’t seen me yet. But I knew him instantly. It was like looking at myself in a dream, somehow removed from my body, with the song “Night and Day” echoing across the field, sung by a beautiful tenor voice, and the lights of the bridge shimmering like stars in the water. Joshua was wearing jeans and naked from the waist up. I found my cock swelling at the sight of his muscular back and arms.

I removed my shirt and tucked it into the waistband of my jeans, exactly as he’d done. Then I called him again. “Don’t turn around.”

“What?”

He started to turn, so I said quickly, “Don’t!”

He hesitated. "Why?"

"I can see you from where I am," I said. "But I don't want you to turn around until I say so."

"You're planning on pushing me off the pier, aren't you?" he said, but his voice sounded amused.

"That's it. This whole thing has been an elaborate ruse to get you wet." He'd hardly die from a fifteen-foot drop into saltwater, even if wasn't particularly pleasant. Although the thought of him wet did have its appeal.

"I don't know if I trust you."

"We've known each other for two weeks now. You can trust me for five minutes."

He thought about it a long time, before replying, "All right. Fine."

I hung up. To make sure he wouldn't catch me in his peripheral vision, I ducked back toward the crowd, and then came at the pier from the park flower gardens. That placed me completely behind Joshua, as long as he kept his word and didn't turn around. The pier was made of wood, so it would have been difficult to disguise my footsteps, but we weren't the only people out there. A few others drifted along the railings, watching the bridge or talking softly. Still, I walked softly as I approached Joshua. The thought that I might touch him in a moment had my cock straining painfully at my fly, making me desperate to unzip and set it free. I struggled to keep my breathing calm and silent.

Then I was standing behind him, so close I could feel the heat from his naked back against my torso. He tensed his muscles, and I knew he'd sensed my presence. I heard him draw in a quick, soft breath. Then I leaned forward, until his soft blond hair tickled my cheek, and I could smell a faint mixture of sweat and sandalwood.

I whispered in his ear, "I'm here."

Joshua gasped and said softly, "I know," before he turned to look at me. He was smiling for a moment, but as his eyes looked into mine, I saw the smile fade into a look of confusion. I stepped back, reluctantly, wanting to lean in closer but knowing he needed to see me clearly. The furrow between his brows deepened as he looked me up and down. "What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," I replied. "This is me. Colin."

"Colin..." It was as if he didn't understand what I was saying.

I laughed gently. "You were just talking to me. You know my voice by now."

"I know your face, too," Joshua said, but he didn't look pleased. "It doesn't look much like the picture on your profile."

I shrugged, giving him an embarrassed half-smile. "I'm sorry. I thought... if I put my own picture up there, you'd just think it was a joke."

Joshua nodded slowly. "So, what? You saw a profile on gay.com that looked like... Christ, we could be brothers—twins..."

"Yes."

"And your first thought was try to date me?"

He looked utterly disgusted by the idea, which was like a huge bucket of cold water being splashed right in my face. I'd thought he would be excited when he saw how much we looked alike. But it was going horribly wrong. "I thought... I thought it was really hot..."

"So you led me on for the last two weeks, hoping you'd eventually get into my pants."

That wasn't fair, and it kind of pissed me off. "I saw your profile on a dating site," I said, frowning at him. "Sure, it was obvious you wanted to get to know each other before we met, and I was prepared to back off, if you said you weren't interested. But you can't blame me for hoping you would be interested. Everybody who meets up on dating sites hopes for that."

"We look like brothers!"

"But we're not!"

We'd drawn some attention by now. Several eyes had turned in our direction. To the onlookers, we probably did look like twins having an argument. I could only imagine what they must have been thinking, with the things we were shouting at each other.

But the argument was over now. Joshua shook his head and said, "I'm going home."

With that, he walked past me, the hot skin of his naked shoulder brushing against mine—a taste of a passionate evening that would never come to pass, of a potential relationship already cut short. I couldn't think of anything to say or do to bring him back, so I just watched him walk away.

I was far too miserable to stay for the rest of the concert. Joshua had been within inches of me. I'd whispered in his ear, we'd even bumped shoulders. But that was as far as it had gone, and it would go no further. I'd never been so utterly turned on by anyone in my entire life, and now he was gone. Worse, I was already feeling the loss of those hours-long conversations with him, nearly every day for a couple of weeks. It wasn't just that I'd thought he was hot. I'd *liked* him. A *lot*.

My life had just taken a catastrophic turn for the worse, so I decided to do what most people did when life sucked—go home and crawl into bed for the next year. Since I hadn't brought my car, that meant walking across town first. Fortunately, my apartment was only about a forty-five minute walk from the park.

I let myself in and shucked my blue jeans, tossing them and my shirt over the arm of the sofa. I tried to watch television for a bit, but nothing interested me at all. I ended up lying on the couch in my underwear, listening to the most depressing music I had loaded on Squeezebox while I stared at the ceiling.

I was utterly pathetic.

I laid there for what must have been a couple hours, until my bladder finally forced me to get up. When I came back from the bathroom, I noticed an odd buzzing sound causing an annoying dissonance in Concrete Blonde's "Mexican Moon." It took a moment to realize it was my cell phone, vibrating in the pocket of my jeans.

Fucking Rob. The last thing I needed right now was to hear about how he just got laid.

I let it go to voicemail. But a second later, it started buzzing again.

"Damn you, Rob!" I shouted, pulling the phone out to shut it off. But it wasn't Rob. It was Joshua.

I rocketed up from despair to elation, pulled an illegal U-turn, and then plummeted back into despair, all in about two seconds. *He's probably just calling to tell me what a pervert I am, or warn me he's filing a restraining order.* But I couldn't stop my hand from answering the call. I put the phone to my ear and said hesitantly, "Hello?"

"Where are you?"

My brain wasn't really up to complicated questions, at the moment. "Uh... home?"

“Are you alone?”

Just me and the naked mariachi band. “Yeah.”

“What’s your address? I’m coming over.” He said it just like that. No “please.” No question, at all. He was coming over, whether I liked it or not.

It didn’t matter. I gave him the address. He could do whatever he wanted—order me around, tell me what to do, swear at me, spank me—just as long as he gave me another chance.

Chapter Six

By the time Joshua rang the front door buzzer, I'd put my jeans back on. I didn't want to scare him off by answering the door in my underwear. I didn't bother with the shirt. A *little* sex-appeal couldn't hurt. When Joshua came upstairs, I was pleased to see he hadn't bothered putting his shirt back on, either. But he still looked angry.

"I've been driving around for a while, thinking," he told me. "Some things still aren't making sense."

"Like what?" I was willing to tell him anything he wanted to know, come clean about every little detail, if it would keep him in my apartment.

"That guy in the café. He thought I was you, didn't he?"

"That was Rob," I said. "My best friend. We were supposed to meet up there for coffee."

"But you never showed."

"I did," I admitted. "But I hid when I saw you, and texted Rob to get him to leave."

Joshua nodded. A rivulet of sweat ran down his collar bone and trickled down his sternum, until he absently wiped it away with his right hand. It took all my willpower to avoid licking my lips. I forced my eyes back up to his face.

"I'm still having a hard time believing you stumbled across someone who looks exactly like you on gay.com, just by pure chance."

"Well... there was chance involved," I said. "But the profile wasn't it." I took a deep breath and plunged into the explanation—how I saw him in Popover's and thought he was incredibly hot, how I searched for his picture online, how I found his profile.

Joshua raised his eyebrows. "In other words, you're a stalker."

"Rob keeps calling me that."

"I'd call you that, too."

This was beginning to fall apart again. I was terrified he'd take off, and I had no idea what I could say to prevent it. "Okay, fine. I'm a stalker. I just wanted to meet you."

“And fuck me.”

“If possible.” I was trying to be truthful, wasn't I?

Joshua shook his head, but when he moved away, it was to take a few steps farther into the apartment, rather than bolt for the door. He looked around at my sparsely furnished living room. Everything was high-tech, and frankly expensive—black leather couch, glass coffee table, the largest widescreen television I'd been able to find. But knowing him, I doubted he was impressed.

He turned back to me and asked, “Are we related? Cousins, or something like that?”

“I have no idea. Who are your parents?”

He told me some names from his family tree, and I told him some from mine. None of them appeared to overlap. After a few minutes of that, Joshua shrugged it off. “I suppose it's possible for two different families with people who look similar to produce a couple kids that happen to look like twins.”

“I guess.”

“How close are we?” he asked, taking a step closer to me. “I mean, really?”

His eyes looked directly into mine, and for the first time, I sensed something there, some of the heat I'd felt whenever I was in his presence—at the pier, now, even when we'd been separated by a plate glass window at the coffee shop. Again, without asking, he reached out and touched my face.

I didn't stop him. I'd been longing for it for so long, all I could do was sigh and lean my cheek against his palm.

“Do you have a full-length mirror?” Joshua asked.

I did, on the double door to my bedroom closet. We stood in front of the mirror, close to it, so we could see our faces in detail. I followed Joshua's lead, mimicking his movements as he tilted his head this way and that, examining our chin's, our eye's, our nostril's, our ears... he even compared our hairlines. It was all identical. There were moments when we moved so in sync with each other I felt as if one of us was a reflection. I just couldn't tell who.

Then we stepped back slightly to take in our torsos. Again, there didn't appear to be any differences. Neither of us had any scars or tattoos. Our musculature seemed identical, which frankly should have pissed me off. I went to the gym at least a couple times a week; I knew Joshua never did. All that time and energy spent on the treadmills and ellipticals to look exactly like somebody who never worked out?

The moment Joshua reached up to slide his fingers along my pecs and circle one of my nipples, I forgot all about that. He was touching me! And he didn't object when I mimicked the gesture, rubbing his nipple until it hardened under my fingertips. I couldn't stop myself from licking my lips this time, but he was doing the same, so I didn't feel self-conscious about it. His skin was *hot*, burning against my fingers and slick with perspiration. When I drew my fingers back to lick his salty sweat from their tips, Joshua smiled evilly and leaned forward to taste my sweat with his tongue... licking it off the flesh of my nipple. I moaned and felt my knees go weak under me.

But Joshua wasn't in the mood for sex. At least, not yet. He pulled away again, and I could see another way in which we were identical—at the moment, we both had nipples that looked hard enough to cut glass. Joshua lowered his hands to his fly, and said, "Are we checking everything?"

Fuck, yes!

"We may not be identical down there," I said, my mouth dry. "I'm hard as a fucking rock."

Joshua quirked one corner of his mouth up. "Then so far we're still alike."

I think my brain exploded. I couldn't think about anything coherent for a moment. Just the fact that Joshua had a hard-on. My eyes dropped to his crotch, where I could see the outline of his hard shaft in the fabric of his blue jeans. As if in slow motion, he began to lower his fly...

He stopped.

I glanced up at his face in a panic, wondering if I'd done something to bring things to a halt. His eyes were glued to my crotch, and I realized he was waiting for me to copy him. I lowered my hands to my fly and slowly began to unzip. Joshua's hand traveled lower again, gradually unveiling the white underwear underneath, and I was breathing so heavily I was growing dizzy.

Without a word, we popped the buttons on our jeans to open them wide and let them fall to our knees. We were both wearing the same, boring white underwear, though there was nothing boring about the way Joshua's briefs tented under the strain of his thick cock, or the damp spot of precum at its tip. I desperately wanted to drop to my knees and lick that spot, and then slide my tongue along the arched length of him through the fabric. But I'd been playing my games with him for weeks. This game was his to control.

Joshua drew a quavering breath, as he lowered his hands into the waistband of his briefs and slipped them down. His cock sprang up to bounce obscenely, a

trail of clear precum arcing between cock and underwear, until it snapped and hung in a glistening droplet from the tip. My cock did the same, when I freed it. Well, I couldn't be sure about the exact trajectory of my precum, but there was definitely a lot of it.

Joshua took me in his hand, rubbing some of that precum along my shaft, causing me to gasp and moan. But I really hoped he wasn't going to end the night with a couple quick and dirty hand jobs, and then book it out of my apartment. Fortunately, that didn't appear to be his plan. He stopped rubbing and used my dick as a handle to pull me closer. "Put it next to mine," he commanded.

We stood side-by-side, pressing our crotches together and looking into the mirror as we compared length and girth. I don't think I'd ever looked at a penis—mine or anyone else's—this closely in my life. Well, I'd been *close* to them, of course. But I was usually preoccupied with sucking them or stroking them or both. This was the first time I'd really looked. And yes, our dicks were twins too. From every angle. I couldn't see any differences.

I was fascinated. But by this point, I was so worked up I just wanted to get this over with, so we could fuck. Of course, I wasn't sure Joshua wanted to fuck. Or suck. Or anything else, but what we were already doing. I was afraid to say anything, in case opening my mouth would lead to me jacking off furiously, alone in my bed. Sobbing.

Joshua bent over, and for a moment I thought he was going to pull up his pants and declare this little adventure over. Instead, he kicked his sneakers off and removed his socks. Were we going to compare feet? That didn't sound very sexy. But Joshua then proceeded to step out of his pants and underwear, which definitely *was* sexy. I didn't have shoes or socks on, but I stripped the remainder of my clothing off, until we were both standing in front of each other, stark naked.

Again, I had the odd sensation that I was looking into a mirror—or perhaps Joshua was looking into a mirror, and I was his reflection. Then Joshua stepped forward out of the looking glass and embraced me. His hot skin pressed up against the length of my body, sweat mingling with sweat, painfully swollen cocks mashing together, trying to merge... In that moment we became two people again. Two people desperate to merge back into one.

"You were right," Joshua panted into my ear. "This is fucking *hot*."

"I'd like to move this to the bed now," I breathed.

“Yes! Please!”

Once we were on the mattress, any reservations Joshua might have had seemed to melt away. He crawled on top of me, sliding his naked body along mine, hard nipples sending a thrill of electricity through my torso as they drew parallel lines up my chest, until we were once again eye to eye. Joshua kissed me then, for the first time. I barely had a moment to breathe, before his warm, soft lips captured mine. I moaned, opening my mouth to his probing tongue. I wanted him inside me—inside my mouth, inside my ass, inside *myself*.

Joshua broke the kiss and gazed into my eyes, a shy smile stealing across his lips. “Is it incredibly egotistical of me to say I think you’re gorgeous?”

I laughed. “Who gives a fuck? We think what we think. I think you’re gorgeous too.”

“Thanks,” Joshua said with a sharp nod. Then he added, “Right now, I’m thinking I want to suck your dick.”

“Don’t you mean you want to suck *your* dick?”

Joshua shrugged. “I’m not even sure, anymore. Just stick one of our dicks in my mouth, please.”

“Sounds good. I’ll take the other one.”

We slipped easily into a sixty-nine position, and when Joshua’s hard cock slid into my mouth, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. He took me into his mouth just as smoothly, linking us together in an infinite loop of taking and giving. He was good—really good. His mouth moved on me with an alternating tenderness and passion that quickly had me squirming for release. I wanted to pour myself into him and swallow every drop he gave me in return.

Fortunately, Joshua had more restraint than I did. He gently pushed me away, just as I was approaching the point of no return, and gasped, “Not yet. I want you inside me.”

“I was already inside you.”

In response, he twisted around until our faces were lined up again and kissed me. “Lube,” he demanded.

I retrieved a bottle from my nightstand. In the intensely aroused state I was in, I might have been dumb enough to forgo using a condom, at least when he fucked *me*—the desire to take him completely inside myself was nearly overwhelming—but Joshua had enough of his brain functioning to veto that. He insisted I grab two condoms and had me put mine on first.

Entering him was amazing, not only because the feel of my cock sheathed in his tight warmth made my eyes roll back in my head, but also because of the way his entire body writhed underneath me and the way he sucked in his breath as I slowly penetrated his opening, and then slid my entire length into him. I was afraid for a second I might be hurting him, but when my eyes focused, I saw nothing but pleasure on his handsome face.

“Good?” I whispered.

“Fantastic.”

I fucked him long and slow, resting my upper body in the cradle formed by his upraised legs, looking down into his sky blue eyes, half-closed in lustful abandon. Joshua panted and clutched reflexively at the bed sheets beside him with both hands. He was rock hard and leaking copiously, but he didn't seem interested in touching himself. As I felt my orgasm rising within me, I reached down to stroke him, but he put a hand on mine to stop me.

“Do you want me to fuck you, too?” he asked.

“God, yes!”

“Then don't make me come yet.”

“Do you want me to hold off?”

“Will you lose interest, if you come now?” Joshua asked.

“Not at all.”

“Then go for it.”

That was all I needed. I thrust a few more times, and then buried myself in as deeply as I could, erupting and filling him with the most massive release I'd ever had in my life. Yes, I still had the condom on, but it didn't matter. I felt as if I was pouring myself into Joshua's entire body, not so much staking a claim as offering myself to him, hoping he'd accept. At that moment, Joshua did something a little odd—something I'd never seen a man do before. He grunted and arched his back, clearly in the throes of an orgasm. And he came. Not copiously, but his neglected cock trickled a small amount of semen—not just clear precum—onto his belly.

Fascinated, I reached down to touch the tip of his dick with my finger, but he grabbed my hand again. “No, don't touch it, or I'll spew everywhere. I don't want to, yet.”

“Do you normally have multiple orgasms?” I asked, enthralled and not a little jealous.

He laughed and blushed adorably. “Um... sometimes. When I’m really into it.”

“Beautiful.” I reluctantly pulled out, so I could lean down and kiss him.

Joshua had to clean himself up a bit before putting his condom on, but it wasn’t long before we were able to switch positions. He entered me with agonizing slowness, showing more concern for my comfort than any lover had ever shown before, and when he at last gave that final thrust and allowed me to draw his length into my body, I thought I’d never felt so complete. Something must have registered on my face, because he asked, “Are you okay?”

“You have no idea,” I answered happily.

He thrust into me unhurriedly, taking his time. We had forever. I felt warm and sated, my only desire at that moment to make Joshua happy. He could go as slow or as fast as he wanted, pound into me or barely move. We could watch the sunrise together, still joined as one.

It wasn’t long, though, before his mounting need drove him to move faster. Still, he seemed to be holding back, until finally I grabbed his shoulders and hissed, “Do it! Come on! As hard as you want!”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he gasped, sweat beading on his brow.

“You won’t! I promise.” Joshua still looked uncertain, so I added, “What I want, more than anything right now, is for you to go nuts. Give me everything you’ve got! Give me the best orgasm you’ve ever had in your life!”

He laughed, but I saw his eyes narrow as he allowed his lust to come to the surface. “Then here it is, Colin. All for you!”

He slammed into me then, sending delicious shockwaves from my ass to my fingers and toes. *Yes!* I watched the desire in his face transform into pure wanton need—his mouth gasping, his brow furrowed—as his eyes burned into mine, and his cock rammed into me over and over again. Then he grunted, “Now!”

Every muscle and tendon in his body tensed, and I could feel him coming again and again and again, deep inside me.

All for me.

Chapter Seven

I was afraid Joshua would skip out on me, after the sex. Maybe that was all he'd come for—take advantage of the jerk who'd tricked him, get off, then call me a creep and tell me to fuck off. But if he was still angry at me, he didn't act it. He was extremely cuddly after we'd cleaned up. With his head resting on my shoulder and one leg thrown across my crotch, he asked, "So what now? Is that all you wanted?"

"All?" I asked.

"This whole charade has been so you could fuck someone who looks like your identical twin," he said, sounding depressingly practical about the situation. "I'll understand if you've had your fill now."

I was shocked. Here I was, afraid he'd ditch me. I hadn't realized he was thinking the same thing. "Maybe I deserved that. Rob says I'm vain and self-centered, and this whole thing probably hasn't proven him wrong. But I really do like you. *More* than like you. And if you think I want to let you go, after the greatest sex I've ever had, you've got to be out of your mind!"

"The greatest sex you've ever had?" Joshua asked, chuckling. "Did Rob mention anything about you being prone to hyperbole?"

Ouch. "Um... well, no..."

"Was it really the greatest sex you've ever had?"

I was about to get slammed. Maybe for him it had just been mediocre. But I couldn't bring myself to lie, at this point, so I took a deep breath and said, "Yes, it was." There wasn't a doubt in my mind about that.

"Thank God," Joshua said, cuddling closer, "because it was for me too."

I introduced Joshua to Rob properly a couple days later. The reason it didn't happen the next day was because we spent that entire day fucking. At some point, we ordered a pizza. I put on jeans to meet the delivery guy at the door—no, there wasn't a kinky three-way—but didn't wear a shred of clothing for the rest of the day. By the next morning, we were both very sated and, admittedly, a little sore.

Rob met us at Popover's for coffee. I swear his jaw hit the floor, when Joshua and I walked in together. No doubt *he* was thinking about a kinky three-

way, the perv. After his initial reaction, he tried to act as if he hadn't even noticed the similarity in my and Joshua's appearances. But he finally glanced around to make sure nobody could overhear, and then leaned in to ask Joshua in a low voice, "So... did you have the same reaction Colin did? When he saw you?"

Joshua glanced around too, looking a bit uncomfortable. "Not right away. I went from being shocked to pissed off pretty quickly. Turned on came later."

Rob looked delighted, but Joshua and I had already discussed how open we would be with our relationship, and this was pushing it. New Hampshire wasn't a bad place to be gay, especially near the seacoast, which was dominated by the university. We'd both walked around town with past boyfriends, held hands, stolen an occasional kiss. But this was different. Even though we weren't self-conscious about being gay, we *were* a little self-conscious about the way we looked together. We weren't brothers... but everyone would think we were. And that was going to complicate our lives.

"Rob," I said, "you're my best friend. And I love you. But back off."

Rob looked shocked. "What did I do?"

"The same thing you and I always do—pry into the gory details of each other's sexual escapades."

"You admit you do it too."

"Absolutely," I said. "We're both perverts. But Joshua has better breeding." Joshua snorted at that, but I ignored him. "If you're hoping to find out what we do in bed together, or get us to email you a video clip, forget it. Off-limits. You got it?"

Rob held up his hands in surrender. "All right, fine."

Joshua smiled and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "I'm not a delicate buttercup who needs protecting. I think I'm capable of telling Rob to fuck off, if he asks inappropriate questions."

I shrugged, and Rob settled back into his seat with a lecherous grin on his face. "So... if I were to ask if you guys look alike *everywhere*..."

"I'd tell you to fuck off," Joshua responded coolly.

Rob laughed and raised his eyebrows at me. "Yeah, that seems to work." He took a sip of his coffee and asked Joshua, "You're sure you really want to stick with this guy? Even after learning what a loser he is? What a *stalker* he is?"

“Yes,” Joshua said without hesitating, and I felt a warmth spreading through my body at the affirmation.

Someday, maybe I would learn to bask in moments like that without spoiling them with wiseass comments. But that day hadn't come yet. I said, “I'll warn you, I stopped feeling guilty about my deception around about the fourth time we...” I noticed Rob's ears perking up, so I petered out, suddenly wishing I'd kept my mouth shut.

Joshua merely smirked and told me, “That's okay. I'm over it. And by that fourth time, I was glad you'd done it.” He glanced around quickly. “Rob! Keep a lookout!”

Then Joshua placed a hand on each side of my face and pulled me in for a long, hard kiss.

The End

Author Bio

Jamie Fessenden published his first novella in 2010, and has since published several novellas and novels through Dreamspinner Press. He and his husband have legally married in their home state of New Hampshire and purchased a house together in the country, where they live with their black lab pup, Kumar. Jamie recently left his “day job” as a tech support analyst to write full-time.

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TRISKELION

By Jana Denardo

Photo Description

Three firefighters stand proud. Their shirtless bodies are smudged, tired but defiant after battling a fire born of the demon-spawn.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The Prophecy:

Three to join – each a different race

Three to join – a saving grace

True to heart – one of blood, one of tail

True to heart – one of magic, they will not fail

Hold back the tide – with swords and shields

Hold back the tide – they will never yield

I've long been drawn to mixed paranormal matings, ménages and military stories. So my prompt is all in one... three men (my preference of wolf-shifter, day-walker vampire and magical fae or witch) all of military, law enforcement or clan leadership background. They are fated as "true-mates" and prophesied to bring down an evil (thinking demon horde, but you can go in another direction). Perhaps there is one demon and they fight it together or there is many and each man leads his clan in an epic battle. I would prefer a contemporary setting in which the supernatural exist, and while all the men are "alphas" outside the bedroom I would like at least one to give up control in it.

The picture is not ideal, but perhaps you can use it as a way they all met... volunteer firefighters or an end to the battle. I wanted to show that the characters are older, between twenty-five and thirty. Feel free to use my prophecy or one of your own.

Sincerely,

Alicia

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy

Tags: paranormal, poly mmm, vampires, shifters, magic, law enforcement, mage/sorcerer, medical personnel, military men

Content Warnings: murder scenes

Word Count: 39,942

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Author's Note

Thanks to Alicia for such a great prompt. I had a great time writing this. Thank you to S.J. Smith and L. Troy for the beta. A big thank you to the Athens Area Nano writers group who graciously allowed me to kill off their fictional selves (twice in a few cases where there was author/ RPGer crossovers), myself included. All places in the story are real, with the exception of the magic shop. The Ridges really was the former Athens OH Lunatic Asylum, but, of course, the Lucerna doesn't own it. Ohio University (OU) does, and the part doubling as housing for Faolan and the others is in part the Kennedy Art Museum (The rest is sadly closed due to age and asbestos). And a huge thanks to everyone who helped make Love's Landscape possible.

TRISKELION

By Jana Denardo

Chapter One

Just when he thought he'd seen the worst he could possibly witness in this job, Faolan inevitably found himself proven wrong. The sight of yellow, police tape marking off the Union Diner made his stomach clench. The yellow tape was nothing new in his line of work. The diner, however, was one of his favorite haunts, and a slow rage built in Faolan at the thought that something had touched it.

The scent of vomit assaulted his nose as he carried his medical pack up the hill to the diner. One of the uniformed officers leaning on a metal handrail outside the building didn't look well. Faolan wondered if the vomit belonged to him, and hoped it happened outside, rather than in the crime scene.

"You can't go in there," another uniformed officer said, stepping into Faolan's path. She looked young. Didn't she see his outfit? Did she think he roamed around in white jumpsuits and hair covers normally?

"I'm Doctor Fraser." Faolan hoped he wouldn't have to dig out his I.D. for the noob. He'd have to unzip the infernal jumpsuit.

"Faolan." Detective Jason Tsavaras leaned out of the glass front door to the diner, beckoning to him. Like Faolan, Jason was with the Lucerna, a militaristic magical group of protectors. They had been summoned to the diner for one reason. Whatever happened inside had its roots in the supernatural. "Get in here."

"Give me a moment." Dodging around the young cop, Faolan set his kit down in the doorway, freeing up his hand and the item caught between his fingers and the handle: paper shoe covers. Once they were on, he slipped and slid his way after Jason. The damn things offered precious little purchase and wouldn't until they were nearly worn through and his shoe treads could make meaningful contact with the floor.

The suit Jason wore couldn't hide his broad shoulders. It took the strong, metallic tang of blood to carry away the thought of how damn good Jason looked in his suit. Faolan relished the reminder of how lucky he was to have a man like this in his life. That thought would help get him through what he was about to see. Jason glanced over his shoulder, checking to see if Faolan still followed him. Faolan spotted Jason's blood teeth poking out from between his lips, a sure sign of tension. Faolan's stomach dropped in reaction, dreading

what he'd see. Jason surprised him by calling Faolan by his first name on the job. His lover must be rattled, and Faolan really didn't want to see what could shake up a vampire so old; he had been around for the original Olympics, something Jason never tired of talking about. Hearing whimpering coming from the direction of the kitchen, Faolan was surprised they didn't head back there.

Faolan caught a whiff of the stench of bowel, making a face, he asked, "What do we have?"

"Best you see it for yourself." Jason tugged at his tie. Faolan knew he hated them. The symbol of their organization—in the form of a tie tack—flashed in the light.

Faolan followed Jason down the steps to the lower dining area, which was more like a descent into hell. There had been a group of a half dozen women ranging from college- to middle-aged in the booths near the two TVs on the wall. An equal number of laptops sat in ruins of blood, coffee and soda. Two teens, one dark-haired and the other light, had never even made it out of the booth. Another with short, greying hair had nearly made it free of the fray. Two of the middle-aged women had fallen just outside their booth, their skirts sodden with blood. All of the women had been shredded. Bright red puddles and viscera painted the cheap, fake leather booths.

Faolan pressed his hand to his gut as his stomach flipped. Even though he functioned as the Lucerna's medical examiner, Faolan wasn't inured to scenes such as this. In the aisle between the booths, a dark-haired woman lay atop one of the forty-something women with reddish-brown hair. A broken hot sauce bottle had been jammed into the neck of the dark-haired woman. The woman with the reddish-brown hair obviously used the makeshift weapon to try to save her own life. She'd failed, but she had taken the enemy with her.

"What do you make of that?" Jason squatted down, pointing at the dark-haired woman's neck.

He indicated the purple foam, which had substituted for blood, and had bubbled out of the torn carotid. The dark-haired woman had most likely been the demoness or demon-possessed. There was something vaguely familiar about the older women, but Faolan was damned if he knew what it was.

"I have no idea."

Jason widened his eyes as he straightened up. "There's something not in that big head of yours?"

Faolan snorted. "Contrary to popular belief, I don't have the whole of the Lucerna's library in my head." He turned back to the victims. The crime scene techs would have finished their job by now, probably already on the way back to the lab with their samples. Jason would have mentioned that Crime Scene still needed to do their work. Normally, the medical examiner's office would have sent someone to do the work at the scene, but Faolan didn't work for the county. Whenever the local cops saw something weird, they brought in people like Faolan and Jason. Most people were happy to punt the paranormal to the Lucerna. The group had a worldwide, centuries-long reputation, after all.

Faolan squatted down and opened his kit. He took his own sample of the foam. The diner fell away as he gently examined the body, trying to put the sequence of events into order in his head. Thoughts of his handsome lover watching him in his horrible white jumpsuit that nearly matched his potato-hued skin faded as Faolan tried to concentrate on his job. It was hard to be here and not think about the times he and Jason would stop by the diner in the past and how much they loved the diner's fried cauliflower and fried Oreos. Jason inevitably ended up with ranch dressing on his chin every time they had the cauliflower.

Faolan hadn't seen such carnage in a long time. It demanded his concentration. He brought with him not just science, but all he had learned from his druid ancestors. Demonic activity left some clue behind on occasion. It might give him a clear picture of who was behind this.

Chanting softly in Gaelic, Faolan put his hand over his throat. Under his jumpsuit, he could feel the wide, choker-like guard he wore. He rubbed his fingers over the silver Cernunnos embedded in the throat guard, hovering just above his larynx. It wasn't necessary to have a touchstone for his magic, but it eased his anxiety. This time, his magic went unanswered, other than a glow around the woman leaking purple foam. It outlined her, showing a spiraling, but otherwise invisible, symbol. Faolan scowled as he tried to imprint the symbol on his brain, but it slid away like a shoe on wet ice.

"What is it?" Jason's voice snapped Faolan back to the diner.

He gestured to the possessed dead woman without looking back at Jason. "You don't see this?"

"No."

Faolan grunted. It figured. It was going to be difficult to capture what demonic influence was behind this. "This demon left a very weak signal. I can't even form a meaningful memory of it. Paper, please."

Jason passed Faolan his note pad, and Faolan sketched as quickly as he could, but it still wasn't exactly right. He wasn't an artist at the best of times, and it showed now. "I need to get them all back to the lab." Faolan stood up and stepped over some of the bodies to take a closer look at the dead women in the right hand booth. He wondered if they were OU students. Sadly, they seemed to have died before they could get out from the tangle of laptop power cords and head phones. "We can't do the autopsies until tomorrow morning."

"It's only one in the morning. You should just be hitting your stride."

When he shot a hot look at Jason, Faolan saw his lover's smirk. "I'm not the vampire here. Besides, I need help with this one. I won't be able to organize that until morning. There aren't enough Lucerna medical examiners here to deal with this completely in-house. I'll need to bring in the county."

Jason scanned the scene, nodding. "Thought as much."

Faolan went back to his cursory exam. Finally, he had gathered all the information he could possibly do *in situ*. He wouldn't get any real information until tomorrow at the morgue. As Jason walked him out of the diner, they caught a snippet of conversation between two uniformed officers, one of them wondering if the smell inside the Union was like a delicious buffet to a vampire like Jason. While they were used to the fearful insults from the Normals, it still hurt. The glare Jason leveled at the cops could have set the place ablaze. Faolan thought the one who had said it might actually have wet himself. The Normals didn't necessarily like the Lucerna—some thought the paramilitaristic ancient organization was too violent—but usually they didn't hesitate to call them when there was the tiniest hint of the paranormal.

"We're going to have to call in all branches of the Lucerna," Faolan said as they stepped out into the chilly night air. The spring equinox was only a few days away, but it had been a long and unseasonably cold winter.

"I thought as much. I'll bring in the local group of vampires. We have too many who aren't old enough to have achieved Daywalker status yet," Jason replied. "But demons like the night as much as we do. I'll leave you to contact the furballs."

Faolan nodded. It was just better that way. Vampires and werewolves didn't always get along. It dated back to the days when they were still hidden from the Normals. Vampires had a habit of using the wolves especially if the vampire was too young to withstand the sun, and the werewolves had never forgotten it.

"I'll give Douglas a call." Douglas Holtz was the youngest alpha Faolan had ever worked with before. The Hocking Hills pack was widespread but not tremendously numerous. They were as Appalachian as it came. He knew Douglas wasn't completely prepared to be alpha, but his father had been killed last year by a teen texting and driving, of all things. That left the twenty-five-year-old in charge, especially since his twin was over in the Middle East. Faolan had only come to Athens five years ago and hadn't met the twin, who was on his third tour of duty.

"Good, because I'll be at this most of the night," Jason said.

"I know." Faolan also knew the Detective would be at it the rest of the day, too. Sleep was a luxury most detectives didn't get during the first days of a homicide investigation, even more so if the detective worked for the Lucerna. The Organization knew more than half its members were supernaturals and could work harder than the average human. "I don't envy your job."

"I was thinking the same thing about yours," Jason said before turning back into the diner.

Listing out the things he would have to do next, Faolan walked downhill to his car. His first action would have to be to wake up his grandmother. Brigid and he shared leadership over this section of the Lucerna, and the formidable woman would peel his skin like an orange if he didn't tell her immediately. Brigid wasn't entirely ready to retire. She was gone from the field, leaving that to him, but he didn't mind sharing power with her. He'd rather be lost with his books than sitting in meetings listening to everyone squabble. He didn't know what it was about meetings that brought out the worst in people, and it was too late at night to ponder it. Faolan headed for the Ridges and home. There was much to do.

Chapter Two

Faolan sliced through the superior and inferior vena cava first, before tackling the aorta. On this patient, the demoness had done that work for him, removing half the chest plate. The aorta's heavy muscle needed a bit of sawing through. He needed to change his scalpel blade once he finished this task. Once he had the heart free and quickly measured, he put it on the scale. Faolan dictated his findings as Gretchen, his assistant, took the organ to a side table in case he wanted to slice it down for a few samples. Faolan wasn't sure it would be necessary. It was plainly obvious how everyone had died. Still, there were procedures to be followed before he put down a cause of death as cardiac failure secondary to exsanguination status post evisceration. His heart went out to the families of these women.

His parents had died at the hands of demons when he was a child. Faolan hadn't seen the damage with his own eyes, but he had read the reports as an adult. They were haunting enough. The scar on his neck twinged. Attacks this bad always took him back to that day in New York when he and the Lucerna had been betrayed, attacked by rogue members of their organization. The remembered fear made his hand shake. Sometimes the memory of lying on the floor, bleeding out while he listened to his sister's screams as she was savaged stole his breath away.

Pushing the memories away, Faolan stepped back and stretched. He'd been at this all day. His back knew it, muscles begging for a rest. He couldn't stop yet. There was too much to do, even if his feet had other ideas. His eyes had begun to close. He would have to make this the last autopsy and hand the rest over to Dr. Christie. He started to cut the right lung free.

"Got anything?"

Startled, Faolan nearly took off his finger. "Pause recording, two fifteen, Dr. Fraser." He turned around, glaring. How the hell could a vampire move so silently? "Damn it, Jason. You startled me."

He smirked. "I noticed. So, did you find anything useful?"

"Gretchen, take a break." Faolan studied Jason. Even vampires got tired, and Jason looked like he was fresh up out of the grave. "Well, the women died as you might expect. So far, I've come across nothing that would lend itself to the demon behind this, nor the conjurer who summoned it." He couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Do you think there is a conjurer?” Jason’s dark eyes lit up. “People can make their own deals with the devil.”

Faolan grabbed the cuffs of his gloves, drawing them off simultaneously to turn them inside out, trapping anything blood-borne inside the nitrile cage. He waved Jason over to the stools at the work station, wishing it was more comfortable. He woke up the laptop. “Not this woman. She looked familiar, so I spent some time last night looking her up.”

“When you should have been sleeping.” Jason patted his shoulder, and Faolan shrugged.

“I found this picture.” He pushed the laptop toward Jason. It showed an angry, middle-aged woman who bore a resemblance to the one who had purple foam issuing out of her. In the picture, she seemed to be screaming at three women.

“Is that you in the background?” Jason ticked a finger off the screen.

“Yes. That’s the Grove at the Unitarian Universal church, during Samhain. When we were at the diner, I had an inkling I had seen some of the other women, too. Look at them, Jason. The three older women are in that picture. The possessed woman was with some fundie Christian group who showed up at our ritual to protest our Satanic ways.” Faolan scowled. “The three older women were Pagans.”

“Other druids?”

Faolan shook his head. “No, I think Wicca, maybe one followed Odin, I’m not really sure. We briefly made small talk, and I don’t even remember what about. I do know they weren’t mages of any kind. Competent in spell crafting, yes, but not the sort of stuff the Lucerna looks for.”

“Do you think the possessed woman sought out the power, so she could take vengeance on a group of people she didn’t like?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know. That’s more your job, Detective.” Faolan smiled, wondering if it looked as weary as he felt. “It would seem unlikely given her feelings about God, but it wouldn’t be the first time severe hate drew in a demon.”

Jason stifled a yawn. “I was hoping for more than that, Faolan. How about that purple stuff?”

“I have no idea. I handed it off to lab techs, you know the people whose job it is to do that sort of thing. I deal with bodies.”

Jason leaned in, not put off by the blood all over Faolan's disposable autopsy garb. He planted a kiss on Faolan's lips. "You are an MD/PhD, *Doctor* Fraser. I expect you to know everything. You love the lab stuff. You're one of the smartest people I know."

"Flattery still won't get you a quick analysis of the purple foam." Faolan wished Jason wasn't so close to him. It made Faolan want to take Jason to his office and do unspeakable things to him. Of course, no work would get done that way. "I can't do multiple autopsies and be lab god and arrange to bring the wolves in all at the same time, no matter how smart I am."

Jason ran a thumb along the line of Faolan's jaw, making him shiver. "You did well enough to find this connection between them. That'll save us hours, if not days. Do you have anything else for me?"

"Not really," he said, shaking his head, leaning into Jason's touch, wanting to take more comfort, but there wasn't time for it. "They all died of what it looked like they died of, blood loss secondary to trauma. I completed the autopsy of Amy Bowman, the woman possessed, first, but other than her blood being turned into purple foam, I saw nothing else of interest, no demonic sigils stamped into her skin or organs, no nests of worms in her liver, nothing to indicate what demon did this or who might have summoned it. Grandmother has my drawing of what my spell revealed, and is looking it up to see if it's in the *Ars Goetia* or *The Lesser Keys of Solomon*."

"Hopefully she'll have more luck than I did." Jason slid off the stool. "I better get back to work. So, tonight, the wolves are arriving?"

Faolan nodded. "In theory. Will it just be you, or will the rest of your Murder be there?" He smirked, knowing how much Jason hated the term 'murder of vampires.' He loved teasing Jason.

He narrowed his dark eyes. "There isn't even a murder in this Podunk place."

"Athens isn't bad," Faolan protested.

"The rest of the place is," Jason said, and Faolan shrugged, conceding the point. The Appalachian region of Ohio was sparsely populated and even more spartan in terms of culture, at least in terms of things he and Jason enjoyed. "There are just me and a couple of clans of vampires. The clans are more than content to let me lead. They'll do whatever I say."

"That's because you're so forceful." Faolan winked at him.

“Are you flirting with me, Doc?” Jason nudged him.

“Just a tease for later, you know, in a year when we’re both finally not worked to death.”

“A year? You’re so optimistic.” Jason grabbed another quick kiss. “All right, I will see you later.”

“Until then.”

Faolan watched his ass shamelessly as Jason walked off. Sighing, he went back to work and called Gretchen back in. “Resume recording, two forty-five, Dr. Fraser continuing the post.”

Faolan carried his palak paneer from The Star of India up to the imposing edifice of the Ridges. He walked into the red brick building under its tiered, filigreed grand entrance. Fumbling with the lock in his second story apartment door, he stumbled his way into his kitchen, wanting to just drop onto the linoleum and sleep. He unwrapped some naan, plopped it on a plate, and poured himself a drink, then spooned out some of the paneer. He all but fell on the couch and turned on the TV. Using his naan as a utensil, he channel-surfed with his other hand. Faolan settled for *Dr. Who* on *BBCAmerica*. He could always trust the eleventh Doctor to make him grin, no matter how tired he was.

“I’m beginning to think you’re in love with that mad man in a box.” Jason’s voice came from the hallway.

Faolan nearly choked on his paneer. “Dammit, Jason! I didn’t know you had let yourself in.” Even though they had been lovers for years, the vampire kept his own house; partially because there were things the vampires as a group wanted privacy for, things that did not concern the Lucerna. Jason needed space to conduct those meetings. Though Faolan thought the real reason was Jason was simply too superstitious to want to live in The Ridges, a former insane asylum the Lucerna had ripped the asbestos out of and repurposed. Jason was uneasy about ghosts, and Faolan’s apartment was definitely haunted, by a sad young woman. The graveyard she rested in was barely more than a stone’s throw away.

Jason rubbed his eyes as he walked into the room. “I needed a nap, and since we have a meeting tonight, I figured your bed made more sense.” He flopped down next to Faolan, leaning against his shoulder. Jason made puppy eyes at him. “She crawled into bed with me again.”

“Just tell Rebecca to go and she will.” Faolan’s ghost was fairly benign, but she did like to get into the bed or go through his closet, leaving a lingering, vaguely astringent smell behind.

“She doesn’t listen to me,” Jason whined before stealing a quick kiss. “Mmm, spicy.”

“Not nearly enough. I’ve had two bites.” To illustrate his point, Faolan took another bite. “Have you eaten?”

“Waiting for you.” Jason took Faolan’s hand. He kissed Faolan’s pulse point.

“Can I eat before you snack?” Faolan poked Jason’s hand with his naan.

Jason nodded, shifting his weight so he could lean on the arm of the couch. “You eat. I’ll keep napping.”

He seemed to go right back out. Faolan didn’t rush eating since there was time enough, and Jason obviously needed the rest. Vampire physiology beat baseline human in almost every sense, but even it had limits. Faolan put the dishes in the wash and started tea.

Jason didn’t wake up until the kettle whistled.

He stretched with a Tarzan-like yawn. “What are you brewing?”

“Darjeeling Puttabong. Want some?”

“It’s wasted on my taste buds, but the caffeine would be nice. You could just whip in a generic tea bag in a cup for all I can taste.” Jason flipped his hand at Faolan.

Faolan pitied him. Vampires ate food, and while it made up the bulk of their diet, they seemed to have lost most of their taste buds. Blood was about the only thing with a taste that appealed to them. “I’m brewing a pot. Who else do I have to waste my more-expensive-than-crack tea on?”

“Grandma and Sorcha?”

“My sister does like her tea.” He programmed the timer before sitting back down.

Jason took his hand, running Faolan’s wrist just under his nose as if taking in the bouquet of a fine wine.

“The wrist? Really?” Faolan scowled. “It stings more there.”

“Buck up.” Jason smirked. “Besides, babe, you’re so tired, you don’t remember that you have on your infernal neck guard.”

“Oh, sorry.” Faolan took it off. The blessed leather and silver presented problems for a variety of supernaturals. Jason would burn himself if he contacted the silver. The alpha wolf they were expecting later wouldn’t appreciate it, either. No one knew why both lycanthropes and vampires had such severe reactions to silver, but it made for a great weapon against any rogues.

Jason wrapped his muscular arms around Faolan, pulling him across his lap. Faolan laughed until Jason nuzzled Faolan’s neck. The brush of his fangs galvanized Faolan’s skin. He wanted more than being a snack, but doubted there would be time or energy for that tonight.

“Just a snack, lover. We have that meeting shortly.” Faolan regretted that, until it filtered through his tired mind he didn’t particularly like sleepy sex to begin with.

“Just what do you think I’m doing? Do all druids have such dirty minds?” Jason chuckled against Faolan’s pulse point. “I guess it comes from all that naked worship.”

“That’s mostly Wiccans going sky clad. I wear a robe. Besides, I *know* you and what you’re like.”

“What you’re hoping I’m like.” Jason kissed Faolan’s neck, then sunk his teeth in.

Faolan barely felt the teeth going in thanks to the anesthetics, which ran down the grooves in the back of vampiric fangs. He was half-surprised and a tad disappointed that Jason did behave himself, feeding as utilitarian as the DMV. Faolan enjoyed the way Jason usually played with his feedings, over two millennia of practice showing in his touch. None of that was present tonight, and Jason let him up quickly.

Jason took one look at Faolan’s face and laughed, loudly. “Someone seemed to be hoping for more.”

“Someone was not.” Faolan felt the heat of his face. No one could stop a blush, being an involuntary reaction, but he did wish it didn’t show so brightly on his pale skin.

“Later. If we’re not too tired.” Jason brushed his fingers against the other side of Faolan’s throat where he was forbidden to feed.

Faolan shuddered at the touch, muted as it was over his scarred, insensitive skin. Jason liked to touch the scar, as if to prove it didn't matter to him. The ragged scar held too many bad memories for Faolan, which was why he refused to allow Jason to feed from that side. The timer beeped, and he went to pour the tea. "That's where this comes in." After sweetening the tea, he handed over Jason's cup, sitting next to him again. Jason slipped an arm around Faolan's shoulders.

Faolan couldn't think of too many things that made him happier: cuddled up with his lover with a cup of tea and a quiet moment watching *Doctor Who*. Okay, maybe a beer and athletic naked-times were better. He took a sip of the Darjeeling, a sweet muscatel taste filling his senses. Sex might be better, but there really was something about tea time, too.

"You're being quiet." Jason drummed his fingers on Faolan's arm. "You really do have a crush on the Doctor."

Faolan snorted. "More like I'm exhausted and half-asleep on your shoulder. Even with all the help I had in Autopsy, it was a very long day."

"I believe that. For all the hours I put in, it's not so much a who dunnit, but more, was she possessed by her own doing or is this the start of something?"

"The latter, that's what you're thinking."

"You, too, or we wouldn't be here waiting for a fur bag to help out."

Faolan elbowed him. "Be nice. No taunting the alpha. The last time you did that, he scent-marked your car."

"He does that again, I'm neutering him," Jason said, and Faolan wondered if that was an actual promise.

"I repeat, behave yourself."

Jason simply rolled his eyes at him. The problem was the werewolf alpha wasn't the only alpha male in the group. He and Jason were just as dominant, and meetings between the three branches of the Lucerna usually ended up in more fights than needed.

They drank their tea in companionable silence, before leaving the apartment and walking across the campus to one of the many outbuildings, the former auditorium with its stark Greek columns, where Faolan's business office was. Susan, one of the young researchers, had offered to play secretary tonight, and she waved at them as they walked past her desk and into his office. Unlike his

space in the morgue, which was cramped and overflowing with paperwork, Faolan's office, as the partial head of the southeast Ohio branch of the Lucerna, was richly appointed. It would look at home in an English gentleman's club, lots of warm wood smelling of lemon oil and thickly cushioned leather chairs. He had several bookshelves with his most common references resting on them. A small table stood under the window with an altar to Cernunnos atop it. A clay statue of the horned god rested on some fresh oak leaves from the grounds.

Jason took up residence on one of the well-padded leather chairs, looking too damn fuckable, and Faolan wondered if he had draped himself on the chair with that in mind. Jason liked to play up the sensual vampire when he had an audience. When Bram Stoker, one of the Lucerna's dissenting members, had outed the vampires, the entire species had nearly panicked, but other than the people who just had to have someone to hate and rail against, society accepted it better than expected. Books and movies loved the vampires. Werewolves followed suit a few decades later, during the first war to end all wars. It took the mages a lot longer to come out of the broom closet, not until the end of the next world war. Faolan's grandmother told him stories about the mages stepping out into the open with the other supernaturals.

Hearing Susan talking to someone in the anteroom, Faolan shot Jason a warning look he knew the vampire would simply ignore if it suited him, then turned back to the door. He took a step back when someone slightly different than he was expecting came through it. Instead of Douglas, his doppelganger swaggered in. Either that, or Douglas had shaved off his long dark hair and beard, opting for the Marines' high and tight style. However, that wouldn't explain the thousand yard stare. The amber eyes fixed on Faolan had seen some things that left their mark. Granted seeing too much would be true of anyone in the Lucerna, but this seemed to be something more. It was common for Lucerna members to go into the military first, as further training because they would be expected—well, most of them, at any rate—to fight and do any number of dangerous things if need be, from combat rolling into the street after a rogue mage or rescuing hostages from burning buildings. Faolan hadn't gone the military route, opting for the rigors of both graduate school and the Lucerna's own combat training.

"Ah, this must be the twin." Jason studied the werewolf. "Or else the big bad wolf caught the mange."

First words out of Jason's mouth were a taunt. How did Faolan know it would go like this?

The young man's eyes narrowed, and if he had hackles in this form, they'd be up. "I expected the vampire to be a douche, but not the head of the Lucerna," he growled, and Jason balled up, laughing so hard Faolan thought he'd roll out of his chair.

"Derrek, it is Derrek, isn't it?" Faolan asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "Jason is the vampire."

Jason waved a hand at Faolan. "He's just Irish white."

Derrek's face went red right to what the military barber had left of his hair. "Sorry," he muttered.

"You won't be the first to make that mistake," Faolan said ruefully, gesturing to the chair nearest his desk. "Have a seat. I did get it right, didn't I? You were already in the Middle East when Jason and I were assigned here five years ago."

Derrek nodded, but he didn't sit. He kept his eyes on Jason as if hoping he could turn him to ash just by the heat of his gaze. "Yes, it's Derrek."

"What happened to Douglas?" Faolan asked before Jason could jump back in to stir the pot some more. He took a seat, hoping the alpha's twin would do the same. Faolan tried to remember what he knew about Douglas's twin. Not much other than he was a Marine, had done more than one tour of duty, and had earned some medals. Derrek had certainly proved himself. To the other werewolves, Derrek just might have had to prove how tough he was. He recalled Douglas telling him he planned to share the alpha duties with his twin, which hadn't sat well with the Appalachian pack. Derrek was gay.

"Not Lucerna business." Derrek finally sat. "Just a pack squabble over who gets to run where in the Hocking Hills."

"I thought you fur balls just peed on your corner of the world to solve that sort of issue," Jason said, and Derrek's lips peeled back in a way that was definitely not a smile.

"Jason!" Faolan shot him another warning look, hoping his idiot lover would take it. What was it about vampires that they couldn't resist pulling a werewolf's tail? He turned back to Derrek. "Did your brother tell you why we asked him here?"

Derrek nodded. "I saw it on the news, too. The mass murder at the Union. Was it really a half-dozen women dead?" He swiveled in the chair so he could give Faolan his attention.

“Unfortunately.”

“But the demon who did it was killed.” Derrek wrinkled up his nose. “Or should I say, the person possessed was.”

“Yes. We’re looking now for information on whether or not she was responsible for her possession, or if this is the start of something new.”

Derrek frowned, an expression that oddly didn’t take away from how handsome he was. “I hope not. I’ve had enough action for a while. I was looking forward to quiet time back home.”

“I doubt you’re going to get it,” Jason interjected, serious now.

Derrek’s expression found a new level of down. “Do you agree with him?” He inclined his head to Jason.

Faolan nodded. “While there is suggestion the possessed woman knew some of the others...”

“She wasn’t known to all of them,” Jason broke in. “She slaughtered a writers’ group, but some of them were also in a coven or something like that.”

“I think they were solitary practitioners actually.” Faolan leaned across his desk to show Derrek the picture on his tablet. “But they did at least go to this holiday together.”

“That’s you.” Derrek pointed to Faolan in his robes.

“Yes. I remember meeting them, vaguely. I didn’t know them though.”

“Can’t tell that from this picture.” Derrek shrugged. “I’ll have the pack keep an ear out, but you know we don’t know a lot of magic.”

“Yes, you are here for the muscle.” Jason smiled at the werewolf, and Faolan barely resisted the urge to throw something at him.

Derrek narrowed his eyes. “I don’t have to—”

“Ignore him, Derrek. And the point I was trying to make is we’re all going to need to work together if this is the start of something big. That’s why I invited your pack in as early as I have. Jason is the leader of the local murder of vampires. We’re going to need to work together, even if I have to get a gag for Jason.” Faolan pointed at Jason who raised his eyebrows.

Derrek snorted. “Do they make them big enough for vampires?”

“Take a walk back to his apartment and find out,” Jason said, sweeter than honey.

Derrek rolled his eyes. "My brother had already made up his mind to help. He wanted me to see what was really going down."

Faolan noted Derrek didn't have as much of an Appalachian accent as his brother, but then again, as far as he knew, Derrek had been many years away from here. "Good. Then let's see what we can find out about these women and any rumors we can investigate." Small towns like all the ones around Athens were good for rumors and gossip. Too bad most of it turned out to be pure crap. "We can meet at Jackie O's tomorrow to compare notes and grab dinner. Jason will buy."

Jason's eyebrows climbed higher, but he didn't protest.

"Good. I'll bring my appetite." Derrek smirked at Jason. He rose up from his chair. "Anything else?"

"No, thanks for coming on short notice. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Will do."

Derrek let himself out. Faolan watched him go. The young man had a fine ass. Jason came over and tapped Faolan's shoulder.

"You like him."

Faolan looked up at Jason. "I barely know him. I'm more annoyed at you being a prick."

Jason sat on the desk. "You can't change centuries of instinct when it comes to werewolf-vampire interaction."

"I can if I bust your heads together." Faolan shoved him, but failed to dislodge his muscular lover. "I should make you get in your car and head home."

Leaning back on the desk, Jason grabbed Faolan's shirt, hauling him off his seat and into a kiss. After nipping Faolan's lip, Jason let him go. "I was pretty well-behaved for me."

Sadly, Faolan knew that was true. "Doesn't mean I don't want to knock you in the head."

"No, I think you might rather knock something against that kid's ass."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Faolan knew his blush made a liar out of him. "And he's not a kid. He has to be in his late twenties. I'm not that much older. It's not my fault you're a million years old."

“I’m not that old, but point taken. Still, he is cute. I’m surprised. Usually I like men with hair I can play with.” Jason reached up and toyed with Faolan’s. “So I would have thought his twin would have been cuter. But there’s something about him.”

“Why are we even talking about this? We’re together and he doesn’t even know us.” Faolan tapped Jason’s nose. “Unless you’re thinking about a Greek orgy.”

Jason rolled off the desk, holding out a hand to Faolan. He took it. “You never know.”

That was the thing about Jason, one never did know. He’d had countless lovers before Faolan, and would have countless more when he was gone. Susan had already left, probably off to the library to study, so Faolan locked up. Even as they walked hand-in-hand back to his apartment, thoughts of the well-built werewolf stuck with Faolan. It was an interesting development.

Chapter Three

Faolan took a long draught of his Meigs County Black I.P.A., savoring the citrus and resin flavors of the dark beer. He loved experimenting with beer, but today had been as hard as yesterday, so he went with a favorite. Jason had a Black Betty porter since its bold flavors made their way through to vampiric taste buds in ways most food and drink didn't.

Jackie O's was relatively empty at this early hour, but still as darkly lit as most pubs. John, someone Faolan, as a regular, knew casually was tending bar. A noisy group of barely twenty-one year olds were in the corner table by the street-view window but other than that, it was fairly sedate. The music could be a little less loud and Faolan wondered if that meant he was getting old.

"I'm hungry," Jason said, rousing Faolan out of his thoughts.

"No nibbling here." Rubbing his neck for emphasis, Faolan looked at the door as if he could will Derrek to come through it. The werewolf wasn't late yet, but he was pushing it, and keeping a clamp on Jason's sarcasm wasn't an easy thing.

"I might spice my beer with werewolf blood if that boy doesn't put a wiggle in it."

"I don't think anyone says 'put a wiggle in it' anymore. And if he wiggles it, we might lose it." Faolan took a deeper drink, trying to drive the image of Derrek wagging his tail out his head. He failed. He shifted around on the stool, nearly kicking over his *Fullmetal Alchemist* messenger bag, the one Jason hated—because it proclaimed Faolan's geeky side to the world—but respected whenever it came to a fight. Faolan had it loaded for bear just in case they were ever surprised on the street. After getting his throat torn out five years before, he took no chances.

"Is that the Royal We?" Jason reached over, slapping Faolan's arm. "I don't recall saying anything about wanting to see the fur ball wiggling it."

"Thank Jesus."

Derrek's voice at his elbow made Faolan jump. He banged his knee against the table leg, making him swear. "Where did you even come from?" he snarled, rubbing the offended joint. "There's not that many people in here. How did I miss you?"

“It’s dark in here. Besides, I had to hit the restroom first.” Derrek shrugged, taking the stool next to Faolan. “Do I even want to know why the leech is talking about my ass?”

“Why? Hoping I might do something about it?” Jason arched his eyebrows.

Derrek sneered. “Not even close. Did you have any luck tracking anything down because I came up with a goose egg.” He waved at the waitress to get her attention. “What’s good to drink? I’m used to Bud.”

“No piss in a bottle here.” Faolan pointed to the dry-erase board. “There is plenty. If you like darks, I have a black IPA, and Jason has a porter, but if you like it paler, try the Paw Paw Hefeweizen, or the Firefly amber ale.”

A bewildered expression flitted over Derrek’s face as he perused Jackie O’s beer list. “Um, I have no idea, but I don’t want beer that dark. Hell, I thought you were drinking cola.”

“Never trust a beer you can see through.” Faolan laughed. “Also, Jason is whining about being hungry. Might want to have a look at the menu before he starts snacking on us.”

“I will bite him right in the face.” Derrek jabbed a finger at the vampire.

“We were thinking pizza,” Faolan said, trying to derail any nonsense, even though he was the one to start it.

Derrek picked up the menu, peering over it at Faolan. “You’re a druid, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You aren’t gonna insist on the vegan pizza or something are you?” Derrek’s face pinched so comically Faolan had to bite his lip to keep from laughing again.

“I guess the fur ball is voting for the Neanderthal pizza.” Jason drained his beer, then waggled the glass at the waitress.

“Well, most of these pizzas are vegetarian.” Derrek frowned, studying the menu with too much enthusiasm, either embarrassed or restraining himself from dining on vampire.

“I’m fine with the Neanderthal.” Faolan peered at the menu, trying to read in the dim light. “The Reuben’s are pretty delicious, too.”

“I’m thinking burgers.” Derrek tapped the menu. “These fancy pizzas are always pretty small, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are,” Faolan said.

Derrek nodded, looking over the burger selection. They ended up ordering the Neanderthal pizza and sandwiches all around. If nothing else, there would be leftovers. One would hope. Derrek went with the Firefly amber ale. Once the waitress moved off, Derrek asked, “So, really, why were you talking about my ass?”

“We weren’t. Jason said you needed to hurry your ass up.” Faolan wondered where business-like Derrek had buggered off to. He liked that side of him and really didn’t want to have to confess to why they were talking about his butt. He didn’t exactly want to advertise how attractive he found Derrek.

“I couldn’t find a damn place to park. I hate that about Athens,” Derrek grumbled, and Faolan couldn’t argue that. “Doug said you two are a couple. That true?”

“Yeah.” Jason gave Faolan the hairy eyeball. “Not that it keeps some men’s eyes from wandering.”

Faolan was glad it was too dark to show his blush. He’d about sell his own soul to have skin color other than mother of pearl. So much for not advertising. “Ignore him. You know how vampires like to tease.”

“I know how they like to think they’re funny,” Derrek replied. “Hey, can I taste that stuff?” He pointed to the dark beer. Faolan pushed the glass toward him, watching Derrek’s lips as they sealed over the glass. Was this a test? Derrek had a perfect little cupid’s bow to his lips, or did until he made a face. “That is *so* strong. Shit.”

“It’s over seven percent alcohol. Puts hair on your chest.” Faolan reclaimed his pint glass.

“Just what a werewolf needs, more hair.” Jason snorted.

“Shut up.” Derrek scowled at Jason.

“Back to your original question, I found nothing much,” Jason said. “Bowman, that’s the demon possessed woman, had a rather boring life, a pretty despicable one if you ask me. I’ve never liked people who use religion like a weapon. She never met a group of people she didn’t like to criticize, or at least from what I’ve learned from coworkers and neighbors. She thought the Westboro Baptists had it right. Gays were condemning this country to hell, and we were still better than the Pagans. If she could have brought back stoning for either offense, she would have.”

"It's hard for me to feel tremendously sorry she's dead, and I know that's awful." Faolan drained his beer, pushing the glass to the edge of the table.

"Don't waste too many tears on her, Faolan. She's the type who organizes protests when little girls want to wear short hair and T-shirts, claiming it's promoting the lesbian lifestyle. I'm serious." Jason took out his tablet and brought up something. "Here, it made the news." He surrendered the tablet to Faolan and Derrek.

"That is gross." Derrek's face twisted up, and Faolan didn't blame him.

"Extremely. I do remember her at Samhain. She made the news then, too," Faolan said.

"What's that?" Derrek sat back from the table so the waitress could slide his beer in front of him. She promised to be back with their food shortly.

"It's a hinge time of year, when the doors to the other side swing open. Ghosts, fae and other entities can walk freely here then. It corresponds with Halloween," Faolan explained.

"Okay, yeah I can see where that would upset someone like her." Derrek took a swig of his beer. "Oh, hey, this *is* good."

"Most of their beers are." Faolan spread his hands apart.

"Do you remember anything important about that rant in the grove?" Jason wagged his hand at Faolan, rocking back a bit on his barstool.

"Not really. It was your usual 'you people are going to hell and taking the country with you' speech. Most of the protest was directed against the women, but she did spot me as I was coming to move her and her cronies along. I really got it because, as a man, I should have control of these wild women, and it was my fault we weren't giving glory to God, and that my family must be so ashamed."

Derrek snorted, sitting back in his chair. He crossed his arms over his chest "Glad I spent years getting shot at for people like this."

"Tell me about it," Jason said, and at Derrek's puzzled look, "Well, not recently. Last round was Desert Storm for me."

"Ah." Derrek bobbed his head. "Served with vampires in Afghanistan, kinda creepy."

"All that killing does bring out the blood lust," Jason said with less rancor than Faolan had been expecting. "In the wolves, too."

Derrek looked uncomfortable with that statement, but was spared answering when two waitresses arrived with the large pizza, their sandwiches and Derrek's burger. Derrek grabbed a couple slices immediately. Werewolves had a higher metabolism rate. Faolan rarely saw one who wasn't always hungry.

"What did you tell that lady after her outburst?" Jason took a bite of pizza.

"That we were all there giving glory to God, *our* Gods, and the only time my family had ever pretended to be anything but druids was in the time when the Christians killed anyone who didn't see things their way." Faolan shrugged. "Honestly, thought she'd have a heart attack on the spot. But she did tell me it was a shame they hadn't wiped us all out, and that we would pay for our sins. I can't see her actively hunting down a possession ritual, so she could kill gays and pagans at will. She was far too holier than thou to welcome a demon into her."

"I hate to say it, but I agree with you. And I found out nothing particularly helpful, not even rumors of kids messing with Satanism," Derrek said. "But I probably covered that earlier with the goose egg comment."

"No help, no food." Jason tugged Derrek's plate toward him.

Derrek growled deep in his throat, a wholly inhuman sound.

"By that logic, do you get to eat?" Faolan beckoned for the waitress. He was going to need more beer before he was tempted to murder his lover.

Jason pouted. "No."

Derrek snatched back his plate and took a huge bite of hamburger for emphasis. He took two more, nearly demolishing the thing, before focusing on Faolan. He swallowed his bite then asked, "Did you do better?"

"Not really. I did an analysis on the purple foam leaking out of Bowman, but I'm still waiting on some of the results. It is acellular, which is peculiar, since it was traveling in her blood vessels." Faolan paused for pizza then, as the waitress returned, gave his beer order to switch it up with a Dragon's Milk. At ten percent alcohol, it might mellow him enough to withstand this meeting of the alphas.

Derrek made a face, going a bit pale. "Also gross."

"And here I thought you wolves loved rolling around in carrion." Jason snagged the pizza slice off Derrek's plate.

"That's dogs!" Derrek's color shot from low to high. "I'm not a dog."

Faolan kicked Jason in the ankle, making him yelp. "Jason, seriously, I will bring out a gag and make you wear it in public."

"You're dating a prick," Derrek growled in his throat, more wolf than man in that moment as he replaced the stolen slice.

"He's dating me because of my prick." Jason held his hands up nearly a foot apart for emphasis. Derrek rolled his eyes.

The waitress looked at them funny as she put Faolan's drink in front of him, then hurried off.

"I don't know why I date him half the time." Faolan shook his head. Jason could be a trial.

"It's the centuries of experience," Jason replied.

"Centuries? Really? I'm not sure I've ever met too many really old vampires. Some said they were around in Jesus's day, but I'm not sure I believe them." Derrek finished off his bacon cheddar hamburger and started with the pizza. "Be interesting though to pick their brains if they were."

"That's what draws me to vampires." Faolan took a drink, the bitter stout going down easily.

"I was already over three centuries old by then." Jason chewed his Potter melt, with the faraway look Faolan associated with storytelling time.

"Really?" Derrek swiveled his stool to look Faolan in the eye. "Is he still teasing me?"

"No, he really is that old. He was a pankratiast back in Greece, got famous, then was assigned a pretty embarrassing death." Faolan grinned, but regretted it when Jason's eyes clouded over.

"They didn't understand vampirism then, were terrified of it. They said I committed suicide after being framed for theft by the Macedonians." Jason chased a drop of condensation on his glass with a finger. "I would like to have been remembered differently."

"Jason, was that your original name? It doesn't sound that Greek, but I guess there's Jason and the Argonauts." Derrek swiveled back to Jason.

Faolan said, "That isn't his original name. It's—"

"Don't you dare." Jason returned his kick to the ankle with interest.

Faolan shook out his wounded leg. "Fine, but the next time you try to get a rise out of Derrek, I'm telling him."

Jason pouted. "You take the fun out of it."

"You're the only one having the fun." Faolan pointed at Jason, but his lover didn't seem the least bit sorry.

"What's a pankratiast?" Derrek seemed to have forgiven Jason for the moment.

"If I can finish my report, then Jason can tell you all about it because we'll be here all night hearing tales of Olympic glory," Faolan said, serving only to deepen Jason's sulk.

Derrek's eyebrows climbed toward his shorn hairline. "He was an Olympian?"

"He's right here." Jason thumbed his chest for emphasis. "And yes, back in the original days. But go ahead, Faolan, finish your story."

"We did a little book work. Grandma and I believe the demon has the ability to obfuscate his sigil. I literally can't remember what I saw over Bowman's body in the diner. If I hadn't drawn it then, there would be nothing left in my head of it. Only a handful of demons can do that." Faolan gestured with his beer, nearly sloshing it.

"Let me guess, all of them high-powered and bound to be a pain in our ass." Jason rolled his eyes.

"We wish that's all they'll be. These are the types where calling in reinforcements from the outside might be needed," Faolan replied. "Grandma is more interested in who might be behind it all. She says there have been some portents whispering about something bad on the horizon."

"Your grandmother is a seer?" Derrek asked, flicking his gaze back to Faolan.

"No, the gift of prophecy doesn't run in my family, but there are many seers in the Lucerna."

"If you guys were psychic, you would have known you were dating a douche before you got involved." Derrek favored Jason with a feral grin.

"That public gag can just as easily be used on you if you try to wind up the vampire, Derrek. Douglas will not be amused if I return you to the pack muzzled and collared." Faolan hoped the warning was plain in his tone.

"No, he'd be amused. He'd take pictures. But I'd like to see you try it," Derrek scoffed.

“He’s not just a druid. He’s a mage,” Jason warned. “He’d have you collared before you could move. Mages cheat that way.”

Derrek took a fresh appraisal of Faolan. To a Normal bystander, Faolan looked just as muscular as his companions, but in a physical fight, no human stood much of a chance against a vampire or werewolf.

“It’s not cheating,” Faolan said.

Jason waved him off. “So why hasn’t Brigid mentioned this before?”

“She has to me. The Dark Summer, but I haven’t put much stock in it since it’s not even Beltane yet. Even though the tourist advisory boards would like to convince us May Day is summer, it’s not until mid-June.” Faolan shrugged. “And you know how prophecies are, vague to the point of uselessness. Grandmother and Sorchia are looking into that angle.”

“Sorchia?” Derrek cocked his head to one side.

“My sister. She’s also a doctor with the Lucerna.”

“So you have to share leadership, too?” Derrek frowned slightly making Faolan wonder how rough things might be within the pack after Derrek’s homecoming.

“With my grandmother, yes. Sorchia was... injured.” Faolan scowled, rubbing the stellate scar on his neck, earned during that attack. Derrek eyed the old wound, opening his mouth to ask, but Faolan glanced away. “She can’t go in the field anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Derrek said just as Faolan’s phone interrupted, trilling out a reel of violins and pipes. Derrek rubbed his ears as if his sensitive canine hearing didn’t like the melodious tones.

“Sorchia?” Faolan said, seeing his sister’s number on his screen. “We were just tal... what? Damn. We’re only a few blocks away. We’ll head there now. Reinforcements are on the way, right?”

Jason was already on his feet. Faolan slid off the chair, grabbing his messenger bag.

“What’s up?” Derrek leapt to his feet as Faolan pulled his neck guard free from the bag.

“Demon attack at the Athena Theatre, the one here, not the one out on State Street.” Faolan snatched his wand out of the bag as he ran for the door. “John, we have a situation. We’ll be back to settle up,” he called to the bartender, who knew them well.

“We’ll pack up the food and have it waiting for you,” John shouted back.

“The theatre wouldn’t have people there yet, would it?” Derrek asked, loping along.

“Not normally, but it’s the international film festival. It goes all day. Usually I’m there,” Faolan said. “Go on, don’t wait on me.”

His supernatural companions didn’t need to be told twice. Faolan had no hope of keeping up with them as they raced up the street. Faolan was fast, but he was still only human. He pounded up the broken, uneven sidewalks. Why were the sidewalks always a mess? Faolan had to dodge half-drunk OU students as he ran. Really? Drunk this early? Of course, he was regretting his own high alcohol content beers now.

Screams drew him to the battle. His companions were alone in the fight, the rest of the Lucerna not in evidence. They were probably stuck somewhere on the crowded streets. People, mostly teens, ran everywhere, some of them bloodied, like a disturbed ant hill. There didn’t seem to be any demon-possessed, but imp-like demons, low level but still dangerous, bounced around. They were hired out by other demons not wanting to face a battle themselves, and by mages looking for more power. Their red hides and long whip-like tails were what gave rise to the common image of the devil.

Derrek stood half-transformed, facing off with three of them. Faolan knew Derrek couldn’t go full-wolf without stripping. The Hollywood ideal of werewolves just bursting through their clothes like the Hulk was impractical, and occasionally painful, if one considered the effects of a zipper. However, even half-transformed, Derrek had an elongated snout full of fangs and strong claws at the end of his fingers. A feral glint in his amber eyes suggested Derrek enjoyed the workout he was getting.

“Hey, Gandalf!” Jason bellowed. “A little help.”

Faolan swiveled around to spot Jason rather overwhelmed under the marquee. Vampires usually fought with brute strength, and if they could sink their fangs into it, they would. Most, however, wouldn’t bite a demon unless there was no choice. They tasted bad. Faolan pointed his wand, using it to concentrate his natural power. He sent forth gale-force winds, slamming a handful of the demons into the brick walls of the theatre. Reaching into his messenger bag, he came up with one of the several water pistols he usually carried full of holy water. He threw one to Jason. It was a myth vampires didn’t like holy water, but it definitely worked on demons.

“Didn’t know it worked for nonbelievers,” Derrek lisped, pounding a demon’s head into the concrete so hard both bone and cement split.

“The faith only matters when it’s being made.” Faolan slashed his wand, knocking away a few more of the imps so Derrek had room to move.

“No fire?” A wolf-headed grin always looked strange to Faolan, like a Husky on caffeine.

“I could, but it’s too close quarters. Too much collateral—” Faolan grunted as something hit his back. He dropped to the ground. Pain shot through the knee he landed on.

Before the thing could savage him, Derrek jumped it, bowling it over onto the street. He finished it with a swift, bone-crunching bite to the neck. Faolan picked himself up off the sidewalk, ignoring the stinging pain in his abused knees and hands. This was going on too long, with too much risk to innocents. Where the hell was backup? It would drain him almost completely, but he needed a bigger spell. Faolan took a quick survey of where most of the imps were, then concentrated, stabbing his wand down. The concrete and ground responded. Thick, pliable ropes of earth, with manmade shell clinging to them, rose up. Loops of earth, guided by the magic his body strained to direct, reached outward, ensnaring the imps. They raged against his construct, making Faolan’s body shake with exertion.

“Fucking cool.” Derrek leapt after the nearest one. His claws ripped out its throat, and Derrek sprang back from the spray of blood.

“He can’t hold it forever.” Jason raced in with the water pistol, blasting two imps right in the eyes. The holy water melted straight through their heads.

“I can hold it long enough!” Faolan raised his wand, and shot concentrated energy straight through the skulls of the three nearest imps, ending their struggles. Drained now, he fumbled in his bag for a sheathed hunting knife. He’d use it if necessary, but Jason and Derrek made short work of the captured demons. They were left with an earthen curlicue that bore a sick resemblance to something out of a Dr. Seuss story.

“Is that all of them?” Faolan’s voice quavered with exhaustion.

“Yeah, bud, it’s over,” Jason said.

Faolan sagged down, his wand nearly tumbling from his numb fingers. The earth melted down to its natural state, dropping the demons like rotted apples. His breath rasped in and out, and Faolan didn’t know if he had the strength to stand up.

Derrek stuck out a furry hand to him and hauled him up. Faolan steadied himself against Derrek, feeling the strong muscle under his fingers. Derrek thumped Faolan's back. "Never seen anything like that. No wonder you're in charge," he said, or at least that's what Faolan thought he said. It was hard to understand wolves in their half-shifted state.

"Easy there, furball. You're drooling everywhere." Jason slapped Derrek's shoulder.

Derrek growled at him, wiping at his jaw as it receded into its human form.

"Hey dog-boy," Jason said, and Derrek's amber gaze went so hot, Faolan thought he'd just slip back into wolf form. "You fight well."

Derrek smirked. "I know. You, too, leech."

"Don't make me rap your heads together. I'm much too tired," Faolan said. "We have to check on the wounded, and find out where this started." He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "I'm assuming inside. Where the hell is backup?"

"Got me." Jason started climbing stairs to enter the theatre. Derrek followed, but as soon as he did, Faolan lost his support. He nearly toppled. Jason doubled back, catching Faolan's arm. "Whoa. Maybe you need to sit down."

Faolan shook his head. "Just give me a second. I can do this. Or at least sit down inside." He did slip an arm around Jason for support then mustered enough strength to walk inside.

The metallic stink of blood was even worse here than it had been in the diner. It shouldn't have surprised Faolan, but it still took him aback. More demons, enclosed space, and a lot of victims. There were three bodies that never made it out of the theatre. The Athena was small, and international film festivities weren't enormous draws, at least not this early in the evening. It could have been worse. Of course, he had no idea how many had been injured and escaped.

"Fraser!"

Faolan twisted so he could look over his shoulder. Behind him were Jack Parker and his team. "We have it contained," Faolan said. "but the injured are probably far afield by now."

"Sorry. It's game night. The streets were clogged."

Faolan nodded. "Get your team helping any injured they can find and start cleaning up. We'll handle things in here." He sat on the seat. "My medical kit is back in the car with the jumpsuit."

"We don't really have to worry much about contaminating this scene," Jason said. "We know who killed them. We need to find out who is calling them here."

"And why here?" Derrek hunkered down near the body of an old man, no doubt a local. "This is a college campus. There are plenty of targets with more victims if that's what they were after, like the game."

"Good point." Jason nodded.

"I like this theatre." Faolan rubbed his forehead. "But you're right. It's not a logical spot. That will have to be our next task. Figure out why. The diner can almost be explained away as a grudge between Bowman and the pagans, but this? I have no idea. Are the attacks linked or just coincidence?"

"We don't have enough information yet," Jason scowled "And I'm not entirely sure how we're going to get it."

"We better figure it out and fast," Derrek said.

Faolan nodded. "And it starts here. Help me back up. I need to investigate the dead."

"Can you do a spell to tell us who sent them?" Derrek asked.

"I wish, but it doesn't work like that with the imps. I don't even know what I think the dead can tell me, but I need to do *something*," Faolan said, and his companions helped him back up. He'd investigate and feel worse when he learned nothing as he expected he would. He sent Jason and Derrek back out to see if the witnesses could at least tell them how the attack began, leaving him alone with the dead. Faolan hadn't felt this helpless in a long time.

Chapter Four

Faolan rubbed his eyes, wondering why the hell he was awake before dawn. A quick glance at the clock told him it wasn't much before, but still. What was worse, he felt energized. That surprised him after how draining the night had been. Luckily, there had only been the three casualties at the Athena. The injured were all expected to fully recover, and with a better understanding of how real the dangers were. Hollywood made being in the Lucerna and other demon-fighting groups look fun and exciting. Well, they had the latter part right, but in all the wrong ways.

He shut his eyes, but that made Faolan more aware of all his aches and pains. It was going to be a long day. Maybe the morning should be more enjoyable. He rolled over on the king-sized mattress. Next to him, Jason sprawled out, taking up most of the bed. Hitching himself up on his elbow, Faolan played with Jason's thick chest hair, following its path down to his ripped abs before curling around the coarse thatch of hair around Jason's unaroused cock, then reversed course.

Jason swatted at his hand, still sleeping. "Rebecca, stop it."

Rebecca? Faolan plucked at a chest hair and Jason's eyes snapped open. "So just what are you doing with my ghost? It's true. Vampires will do it with anything," he teased.

Jason looked over at the clock, groaned, and pressed a hand against Faolan's chest, pushing him away. "That better be six in the evening, babe."

"You know it's not." Faolan moved in close again, brushing his lips over Jason's.

Jason captured Faolan, crushing him to his body as he deepened the kiss. When he let Faolan go, Jason's fangs showed. Jason caressed Faolan's cheek. "Did someone wake up horny?"

Faolan circled his fingers over Jason's awakening cock, stroking up its length. "Someone did."

Jason arched his hips to make the most of Faolan's touch. "Does someone have time before he's supposed to be back at work?"

"Not as much time as he'd like." Letting Jason go, Faolan reached over and turned off the alarm. He wouldn't need it now. Afterward, he straddled Jason.

Taking hold of Jason's wrists, Faolan pressed them against the pillows above Jason's head. "So instead of tying you to the headboard, and doing any number of unspeakable things to you, I'll have to get creative."

"You always are." Jason chuckled, wiggling under him. "You'll just have to picture me all tied up to carry you through the day."

"Since I'm working with Grandmother today, I think not." Faolan let go of Jason's wrists, skimming his hands along Jason's strong arms.

Jason laughed louder, so Faolan kissed him quiet. His tongue scraped along Jason's sharp fangs as Faolan plunged it deep into Jason's mouth. Jason ran his hands down Faolan's back, giving his hips a gentle squeeze when his fingers got there. Faolan shifted, resting more of his weight on his knees rather than on Jason's chest. He couldn't stop from wincing as his knee informed him that wasn't his better idea.

Jason broke the kiss, and moved his hand down Faolan's thigh, stopping short of the joint. "Babe, that knee looks sore."

He put his hand over Jason's. "It is. Sorcha is working up a healing spell for it, but you know how that goes."

Jason nodded. They both knew too well. It would take the soreness out, but healing spells only worked on minor things like his bruised and scraped knee. Otherwise, Sorcha and he wouldn't have the scars they did.

Jason caught hold of Faolan and flipped him onto the mattress in one smooth move. Jason had been a vampire for centuries, but he had been a wrestler all that time as well. The sheer physicality Jason brought to their relationship was one of the many things Faolan loved about him. They didn't really have much time for that this morning, though. Jason cupped Faolan's face.

"I know you like to be the one in control, but you might want to let that knee rest." Jason twisted around to gently kiss Faolan's swollen, abraded joint.

"I'm in your hands." Faolan rested back against the bed, the bedding soft, like a caress, against his skin.

"Mmm, just like I like it." Jason shifted about again, pressing his lips against Faolan's thigh, kissing his way up. His fangs were retracted by the time his mouth started playing with Faolan's jewels. Jason wrapped his calloused hand over Faolan's cock. The heat of his touch radiated through Faolan, awakening him deep to his soul. Sex charged his inner stores. Done right, there was something sacred about it, and he'd never known Jason to do it wrong.

Faolan lost himself to Jason's touch. His knee still ached as he pressed his heels down into the bed, so he could thrust into Jason's mouth. Jason pinned Faolan's hips down, laughing.

"You still can't let go of control." Jason tapped Faolan's cock, making it bob.

"It's my nature." Faolan reached down, running his fingers through Jason's hair. Jason knew how to let go, how to not dominate, but Faolan had never mastered it.

"I know." Jason kissed the tip of Faolan's penis before taking it deeply into his mouth.

Making a happy noise, Faolan gave himself over to Jason, fighting to let it all go. The slow but demanding rhythm of Jason's mouth eased Faolan back into that sacred, inner place. His fingers curled in the soft bedding as his desire coalesced deep inside. As his body tensed, Faolan wished every morning could start like this. They should be free to have easy days with nothing more to do but love each other. Unrealistic, but a lovely thought none the less. He rode the divine wind of orgasm, his body going taut before puddling down against the sheets, senseless.

Nuzzling his way up, Jason nestled his hot body against Faolan's. As Jason sucked against Faolan's neck, he rallied enough of his senses to lick his hand, thoroughly dampening it. Jason's teeth pierced Faolan's skin, making him groan. This was the sensual sort of feeding Faolan loved so much. It was nearly enough to make him hard again, and Jason damned well knew it. As Jason fed, Faolan stroked his thick cock, sweeping his thumb gently over Jason's foreskin and the moist head of his shaft. He held tight to Jason with his other hand, trying to touch him as much as possible. Jason stopped feeding, his body tensing against Faolan. Faolan quickened his caresses over Jason's shaft. Jason muffled his cry against Faolan's neck as he came. Afterward, Faolan rubbed Jason's sweaty back, in no hurry to disentangle himself.

Eventually, Jason rolled off onto the bed, his breathing still ragged. "You have my permission to wake me up like this all the time."

Faolan patted Jason's chest. "Noted." He stole a kiss before climbing out of bed to wash his sticky hand and get ready for the day. The necessity of it sucked. All Faolan really wanted to do was lounge in bed all day. Jason joined him in the bathroom, but there wasn't time now for fun shower games—even if

he trusted his knee for it. They both got ready, but Faolan doubted either of them was ready to face what this day would hold.

Faolan nestled himself down against the thick trunk of one of the old oaks on the vast property the Lucerna held around the Ridges, what he called the little grove. He would rather rest in the woods just outside the cemetery where the proper groves grew. The trees there were older, more numerous and powerful but he was meeting Sorchá and his Grandmother to do the research. It was asking a lot for them to meet outside. While his Grandmother could have easily made the hike into the woods—and as a druid would have been happy to do so—Sorchá's ruined legs weren't really up to going that far.

Their grandmother rested on the bench under the oak's budded branches. She had a hefty stack of books on the bench next to her. Sorchá sat in her wheelchair, looking vaguely amused by him. A fat tome sat on her lap. "Finally awake, brother?"

"I've been awake since before dawn." Faolan chanted a quick spell, one of the first he'd learned as a child. Now no bugs would come anywhere near him as he sat on the ground.

"Rolling around in the sheets with your vampire boy toy doesn't count." Sorchá shook her head, grinning. There were only eighteen months between them and Sorchá loved to live up to her big-sister-in-charge reputation.

"I dare you to call Jason my boy toy to his face."

"Vampires often enjoy being toys or keeping them," Brighid said, handing him a book, maybe to shut him up. Sex talk never bothered the old woman. She'd join in if he'd let her. "Let's have a look at that knee, son."

Faolan didn't want to know what his grandmother knew about having vampires as sex toys. Obediently he rolled up his loose sweat pants worn just because he knew his sister should have a poultice for him. He took off the dressing he put on after he finally got out of bed. Most of the skin was abraded away on his knee cap, and the joint felt soft, like a rotten melon, from the swelling. It was as big and purple as the fat end of an eggplant.

Brighid's brow creased. "Are you sure nothing's broken, Faolan?"

"It was x-rayed. The injury's all soft-tissue." It didn't rule out a meniscus or ligament tear, but Faolan didn't think he was hurt that badly.

Sorcha handed a bag to their grandmother who passed it to Faolan. "This should fix you up quickly, herbs and magic together."

"Thanks." Pulling a jar out of the bag, he opened it and slathered the minty-smelling salve all over his knee. He rubbed the rest of the stuff into his hands before plucking some gauze out of the bag. Faolan taped himself up well before cleaning his hands on the towel his sister had thoughtfully put in the bag. Finally, he picked up the book his grandmother had given him. "Have you two found anything yet?"

"There is supposed to be a prophecy about the Dark Summer." Brigid traded her book for another. "But so far we haven't found it."

"Did the new werewolf know anything? What's Derrek like? I haven't met him yet." Sorcha shot him a quizzical look, leaning forward in her chair. "Should I introduce Deirdre to him?"

"I don't think you can avoid it. He seems like he's staying." Faolan thought his niece would like Derrek, but the four-year-old liked just about everyone. "He's like Herne himself in a fight, a wee bit short-tempered, but Jason keeps annoying him, so it could just be that." He shrugged. "And no, he hasn't found anything yet."

"Doug's cute." Sorcha tapped the edge of her book against her chin. "I have to assume his twin is, too."

"Sorcha, really." Brigid narrowed her eyes at Sorcha. "We have work to do."

"Faolan doesn't have his 'I'm here to work' face on," Sorcha protested, but she did turn back to her text.

"I've already been working. I had a call from the governor's office and Athens's mayor already this morning." Faolan took off his shoes and socks. He pressed his toes into the loam, feeling the prick of twigs and the pressure of an acorn or two. He slapped his palms against the ground a bit too hard, forgetting they, too, were bruised. Ignoring the bite of pain, he sent his weakened power into the earth. Roots surfaced, wrapping around his bare feet. He gasped as the oak fed him some of her energy.

His grandmother arched an eyebrow at him. "Better now?"

Faolan went boneless against the tree trunk. This was way better than the best spa he'd ever been to. "Much."

“That was a hell of a stunt you pulled yesterday.” A hint of recrimination hid in Brighid’s tone.

“Had to. Too many civilians and backup was delayed.” Faolan looked at his book wondering just how old the idea of a Dark Summer was. This book dated back at least a few centuries, and naturally didn’t have anything helpful like an index. “So, Dark Summer?”

“I found a reference to a trio of powers, but I’m not sure if that’s our team or theirs.” Sorchá shrugged. “It’s going to be a long process.”

“So I suggest we all get on it,” Brighid said in a tone that brooked no argument. Neither Faolan nor Sorchá offered any, turning their attention to their tomes.

Chapter Five

Derrek looked up at the house, surprised it housed a vampire. He always pictured something more Gothic. This was a tri-level out of the Sixties, part brick, part white siding. It was typical of housing in the Athens-Albany area, and at least better than the abundant, decade or more old doublewides that could be found everywhere. Of course, he never imagined going into a vampire house alone, but Jason answered Derrek's call, while Faolan's people said he was indisposed. Getting out of his Ford F-150, Derrek followed the walk to the house and rang the bell.

The young man who answered the door could only have been a newly turned vampire. His skin was so pale and grey, he looked fresh from the grave. "Jason is expecting you. I'm Bob." He wiggled his fingers at Derrek. "I'll take you to him."

"Thanks."

Derrek noticed all the curtains in the house were black, long and drawn. He wondered if other vampires were in the house. Derrek decided he should know, but didn't want to ask. Bob didn't offer anything. He delivered Derrek to the basement, which made him a little nervous. He knew Jason and the vampires were just as much a part of the Lucerna as his pack, but he didn't feel an abundance of trust for them. He didn't really want to be in an underground room with only one way in and out.

Once he glanced around, he realized he was being stupid. No lines of coffins, no rampaging blood suckers, just Jason sitting in a leather recliner, listening to jazz. Or at least Derrek thought it was jazz. It wasn't his thing. Music, not Dracula's secret lair fixtures, dominated the room. Derrek saw shelves of albums and little records, but he couldn't remember what they were called. CDs took up at least two walls on either side of an impressive sound system. Next to the sound system was a pillar with a smiling man's head carved at the top, his curly hair and beard making him look almost real. Derrek decided not to look at that, so he turned away and saw a desk sitting opposite the sound system with a collection of art on the array of shelves behind it.

Sitting up, Jason turned the music down with a remote. "On the phone, you said we had something to talk about."

Derrek rubbed his back pocket where his phone was tucked away. "We probably could have done this on the phone, except the reception sucked where I was."

Jason smiled that shit-eating grin of his, stretching. Derrek tried not to notice the way it made Jason's muscles move. "Worried about being in a vampire den, Fuzzy?"

What was it about this vampire that got his hackles up? Repressing the urge to make him eat the chair he was sitting in, Derrek said. "Hardly worried about vampires."

"Maybe you should be. Vampires can be downright dangerous when they want to be." Jason climbed out of his chair, sauntering over as if to prove his point. "Though, you can say the same of your kind. So, what's up?"

Derrek would be damned if he gave an inch to this little, if imposing, man. "I tried to get in touch with Faolan, but they said he was indisposed. He's the one who really needs to hear it."

Jason's brow furrowed as he parked his butt on his desk. It would have been a sexy sort of pose if Jason didn't seem so worried. Not that he thought the vampire was sexy. Faolan on the other hand, the man was smoking. Derrek shook his head slightly, trying to knock the wizard out of his mind's eye.

"He's probably recharging his batteries after a spell that big." Jason picked up a little statue of a woman with a bear at her side and a bow in her hand. He turned it over in his hands. "What did you hear?"

"Was there something weird about how Faolan took over here?" Derrek couldn't keep his eyes off the stuff behind Jason. It seemed a better bet than meeting a vampire's eye anyhow. They could make you do stuff if they caught your eyes. That's what his grandfather always said.

Off to one side was one of those old-fashioned record players, the ones with the big flower-like bell on them, sitting on top of a wood cabinet, and next to it was a marble statue of what might have been a Greek God or warrior or something. More interesting to Derrek were the two things behind glass, directly off the vampire's right shoulder. "Something that might make someone pissed at him?"

Jason's dark eyes took on a dangerous glint. "His family came here five years ago from New York. She took over with the understanding Faolan would transition into the role, which he has."

“So, not local.” Derrek rubbed his chin. “He has an accent, but I didn’t think it was New York.”

“They’re all originally from Ireland, but after his parents were killed in the line of duty when Faolan was a kid, his grandmother took a leadership position in New York.” Jason ran his hand through his hair before asking, “How does this relate to what you’ve learned?”

“Haney, one of the grey-hairs, loves to gossip, swear to God he knows everyone. Anyhow, he heard someone at the Donkey Bar, you know the coffee house next to the magic shop, about someone complaining about being passed over as the leader for our branch of the Lucerna,” Derrek said, unable to contain his curiosity about the two items on the shelves behind Jason. He took several steps closer. One was in a light box under glass, a small, very old-looking coin. Next to it, unilluminated and out of line with any natural light that came from the small windows near the ceiling, was a Greek vase with a picture painted on it. Faded now, the vase’s picture bore a resemblance to Jason.

Jason slid off the desk, crowding a bit into Derrek’s space. “Did Haney say who it was?”

Refusing to step back, Derrek shook his head. “The person didn’t say who was doing the complaining, just that they felt cheated and planned to do something about it.”

“I came with them from New York,” Jason said, surprising Derrek. While he had known he’d never seen the vampire before his deployment in the Middle East, Derrek had assumed the relationship between Faolan and Jason was more casual. Werewolves didn’t usually think much of vampires on the whole, and the high sex drive of the vampire was legendary. They weren’t known for sticking to one partner for long, or at least not exclusively. Of course, how much of the legend was true Derrek didn’t really know. Maybe he was hoping it was casual between the two men because he found Faolan striking. Derrek didn’t usually go for blonds, but there was just something about the druid.

“You grew up here, right? You would know more about who was in charge before than me,” Jason said.

“Born and raised in the Hocking Hills.” Derrek caught himself looking between the vase and Jason again. Standing this close, it was hard not to notice Jason was handsome, too, not that he’d ever say that out loud about a damn leech. The difference between Jason and Faolan was that Jason *knew* he was handsome. Derrek could tell. “When I was growing up, it was the Barneses who

were in charge. I think he killed himself, but I was in Afghanistan at that point. I might have heard wrong. I'm sure everyone here knows, though."

"Yeah, you're right. We should go tell Faolan about this." Jason looked up at Derrek, a question in his eyes. In that moment, it occurred to Derrek Jason hadn't sat on the desk to look sexy, but rather to gain a little height. He couldn't be more than five foot five. That had to be the sucky thing about immortality. The race evolved, getting taller by the generations, and Jason was stuck in Ancient Greece. "You're fascinated by something on that shelf. What is it?"

"Two things. The coin and the vase. The picture on the vase looks like you." Derrek pointed over Jason's shoulder.

"It is me. After my Olympic win, which was *akoniti*, by the way." Jason flexed his biceps.

Derrek rolled his eyes. "I don't know what that means."

"They were too afraid to fight me, so I won by default." Jason beamed, thumping his chest with his fist. "They put my face on olive oil bottles. You know, this is the oil of champions thing."

"You're shitting me." Derrek laughed. "Seriously? Athletic endorsements are that old?"

"Yep. I can't hold onto everything over the years, but I do make exceptions. Sometimes I think I should just put it in a safer place, but I like looking at it." Jason threw his hands up. "You probably think I'm vain."

"Eh, you're a vampire. I expect that." Derrek nudged him, and Jason's lips curled back, showing fang.

Jason went around the desk and picked up the box the silver coin was in, handing it to Derrek. "It's my obolus."

Derrek stared at the worn coin. Had Jason lapsed entirely into Greek? He didn't know. "Again, clueless."

"The coin they put in the mouth of the dead to pay Charon for the fare to the underworld." Jason's shoulders slumped, his face seeming more sad and vulnerable than Derrek had ever seen it. "They didn't know I was still alive. They didn't understand the change."

"It does look like you're dead, even after you wake up from the transition. Like your friend, Bob, there." Derrek couldn't imagine what it would be like to wake up and spit your fare to heaven out of your mouth. What sort of man kept

that? Then again, Derrek thought he might have done the same, but the idea of not getting to heaven was too depressing.

“Ah, Bob, not exactly a friend. An abandoned fledgling.” Jason looked up at the plastered ceiling. “Sarah is taking over his training. They live here for now so I can keep an eye on things.”

“I didn’t think that happened anymore.” Derrek handed the coin back, and Jason replaced it on the shelf.

“We still get bad vampires. The Lucerna would have less to police if we didn’t.” Jason clapped a hand on Derrek’s arm. “Let’s go talk to Faolan. Actually, let me grab a change of clothes. You can drive, and drop me off with Faolan.”

Derrek didn’t want to think about Jason spending the night with Faolan, even if he knew that was just how things were. “Fine.”

Derrek waited for Jason in his truck, surprised to discover he found Jason less irksome now that he had gotten to know him a bit. Jason didn’t take long to reappear with a small overnight bag. Once Jason strapped in, Derrek turned the truck back toward the Ridges, thumbing on the CD player. “You obviously like music, so I didn’t think you’d mind some now,” he said as the *O Brother Where Art Thou* cd started.

“I love music. Bluegrass isn’t music. It’s an assault on the ears.” Jason leveled a fierce look at him.

Derrek snorted. “You’re so wrong, but all right.” He switched from cd to a country station. “Country better?”

Jason rolled his shoulders, settling back. “I like country.”

Derrek hated silence. His grandfather always yelled at him for it. He couldn’t help it so he thought of ways to keep the conversation going. Derrek glanced sideways at Jason. “I’m surprised you weren’t at work today.”

“We know who killed them, and since I work for the Lucerna and not the police department, my role as detective is different.” Jason shrugged. “Besides, I will work. Tonight. I’m fine with daylight now, but even I get tired and need to rest. I’m better at night, anyhow.”

Derrek nodded, and they lapsed into companionable silence for most of the trip, even if the hush started to grate on him. When they finally climbed the hill to the Ridge’s parking lot, the late afternoon sun was all but blinding. The sprawling, red brick structure was actually rather pretty. He parked in the lot.

“Even in the light, this place is creepy,” Jason said, as if he could read Derrek’s mind, and naturally had to disagree. He slid out of the truck with his bag.

“Really? *This* is what a vampire finds creepy. I was thinking it’s too attractive for what it was.” Derrek locked up his truck and walked with Jason to the building. “Back when Dad was a kid, Granddad used to scare Dad with telling him if he didn’t behave, he’d drop him off at the Ridges. And now, here we are. Though what possessed the Lucerna to take over an insane asylum is anyone’s guess.”

“Big, defensible building that no one else wants to be around, they knew it was perfect or something.” Jason paused, glancing around. “I wonder where Faolan would be recuperating. Let’s start with the apartment and go from there.”

“Fine.”

They didn’t make it further than the lobby when Jason made a beeline for an old woman. Derrek tagged along after him.

“Brigid, we need to talk to Faolan. Know where your grandson is hiding out?” Jason asked.

So this was the co-head of the Lucerna that made Doug so wary. Her white hair, thick still, hung over her shoulder and her face wasn’t quite as lined as one might suspect, but she looked like any little old lady to Derrek. Still, his twin hadn’t cautioned him about her for nothing. If she was the one who trained Faolan to fight—and she probably was—Derrek could see why there would be a need for care.

“Right through to the oak out back. You know the one, Jason.” She looked at Derrek and smiled. “You must be Derrek, then.” She held out a hand to him. Her handshake was firmer than he expected.

He smiled at her. “Yes, ma’am. Nice to meet you.”

“My grandchildren are right. You are a cute one.” She let his hand go, and he could have sworn she checked him out.

Jason chuckled, then said, “You’re not the type he goes for, Brigid.”

“And I’m a million years too old.” Brigid started down the hall, going back to whatever it was she had planned to do. “Besides, I’d break a young one like him,” she added as she turned the corner, out of sight.

Derrek couldn't quite believe she had said that. "She's joking, right?"

"Doubtful. Come on, it's this way." Jason beckoned him to follow.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised you know I'm gay. I'm sure Doug told everyone." Derrek sighed. "I think he's still pretty embarrassed by that. He says he's not, but what people say and what they do aren't always the same thing."

Jason shot him a sympathetic look. "No, they rarely are. And you wolves aren't particularly forward thinking on that matter."

Derrek wanted to argue on principle, but he couldn't. He followed Jason back outside. Even he would have been able to find the oak in question without much trouble. The tree grew tall, thick, and old. Derrek's step hitched as he got a better look at Faolan. The druid had his shirt and shoes off. Roots had burst from the ground, wrapping over all four of his limbs, and the tree seemed to have softened, rounding under him like a mattress.

"He looks dead." Or like Sleeping Beauty, and damned if Derrek didn't want to wake him with a kiss. Jason was a lucky bastard to be dating Faolan. He was pale enough to resemble the marble statue Jason had in the corner of his basement. His petal-pink nipples were erect in the cool spring breeze, and Derrek wondered if Faolan was as hairless as his chest looked or if he shaved. It could be his hair was as colorless as the rest of him.

"Mages recharge in a number of ways. Nature works best for the druid types apparently." Jason reached down and wiggled a finger between the roots to tickle Faolan's bare feet.

Faolan's eyes snapped open, and he grunted at them. "What?"

"Wakey-wakey, babe. You're about ten minutes from going up in flames like the freshly turned." Jason pointed to stripe on the ground between light and shadow. "Besides, Derrek has something for you."

Faolan made a face. "I will not burst into flame."

"All I know is if we didn't arrive when we did, I'd be calling for crab crackers and drawn butter." Jason smirked. Derrek couldn't help himself, laughing.

Faolan's annoyed expression deepened. The roots started unwinding from Faolan's limbs, submerging back under the earth. "I'm ignoring you. Derrek, did you learn something?"

He nodded, fascinated by the process. He'd never seen anything like it. "Are you okay now?"

Faolan patted the tree trunk as it regained its normal shape. "She is just waking up so it took a while for her to give me some of her energy, but I feel fine."

Jason stuck out his hand and hauled Faolan up. "How's the knee?"

"Almost entirely healed. Sorcha makes good healing salves." Faolan fetched his shirt, showing his back to them. Between his shoulders was a circle of Celtic knot work tattooed in navy. Inside the circle were three lines like the rays of the sun, a dot at the top of them. He arched his eyebrows when he caught Derrek staring.

"Interesting ink," he said, since he'd been busted ogling Faolan.

"It's the symbol of Awen, a sign of my faith." Faolan scooped up his shoes and socks but didn't put them on. "Come on. Let's go get comfortable so we can talk."

"Your office?" Jason asked.

Faolan shook his head, his white-gold hair flopping into his face. He brushed it back. "I'm starving. My apartment will do." He walked past Derrek, an earthy scent wafting after him.

"You smell like the forest," Derrek blurted out, then flushed as he remembered humans didn't usually like to be sniffed.

Faolan just smiled. "I often do."

Jason wagged a finger at Derrek but said nothing. He didn't need to. Derrek already felt guilty enough.

Derrek noticed Faolan walked back barefoot with no problems. He'd make a good werewolf. They were used to barefooting it before and after their change.

Derrek had never been in the apartment part of the Ridges before. The pack didn't encourage their pups to play with the human kids so he hadn't spent much time at the complex. The halls were an unrelenting, bright white that unnerved him a bit. The apartment, once Faolan let them in, was bigger than he expected. While Faolan went into the kitchen, Derrek nosed around the living room. He stopped at one shelf stuffed with superheroes, Spock, Han Solo and several figures he couldn't even identify. He pointed to them. "Action figures?"

Jason rolled his eyes. "He's a geek. It's embarrassing."

"I can hear you." Faolan put the kettle on the stove, then dug out a bag of salt and vinegar chips. "Did you drive him here, Derrek?"

"Had to. Your staff wouldn't go find you for me," Derrek replied, eyeing a large Deathstar on another shelf.

"He's going to have a helluva long walk home then." Faolan shot Jason a look, then held up the chip bag. "Want some crisps?"

"I could go for some junk food." Derrek helped himself to the bag, and Faolan rooted around in his fridge, coming up with a piece of fried chicken that he tossed on the plate.

"Help yourself. Any preference for tea?" Faolan opened a cabinet stocked with zipper bags in an array of colors and names.

"Should have known your tea to blood ratio was off after being outside all day." Jason stretched then rolled his shoulders. "You know I never have a preference. It all tastes the same to me," Jason said.

"I was asking our guest."

Derrek peered at the stuffed cabinet, reading one colorful container after another, many of them bearing words he didn't know and assumed were Asian. He didn't know where to start. "Um, I have no idea. Mom usually made Lipton."

Jason leaned close and said, "Notice he didn't even ask if you wanted any. He just assumes everyone is addicted like he is."

"I wouldn't mind a cup. The caffeine would be good," Derrek said, noticing Faolan's slotted eyes. At least he wasn't the only one constantly annoyed by the vampire's smartass mouth.

"Earl Grey then, something basic." After fixing the pot, Faolan brought his chicken into the living room and sat on the couch. He waved a hand at the loveseat.

Derrek sat on it. "Someone has been complaining about how you and your grandmother came to take over here. Sounds like they want to do something about it, but that's all old Haney heard. No names or particulars, but still, I thought it was important. You said you were a fan of that theatre, and I thought maybe that's why the demons were sent to that target instead of one where they could do more damage. You knew some of the women who were killed in the first attack."

Faolan took a bite of chicken, chewing slowly as he seemed to think about it. "I didn't know them well, but I like the diner, too."

"If they attack Wizards, we'll know for sure they're taking out things you like." Jason flopped down next to Faolan.

"Wizards?" Derrek glanced over him.

"The comic book store." Faolan took another big bite, and after swallowing asked, "But that could be coincidence. They're rather popular places in Athens. Tell me more about what you've heard."

Derrek did, even though there wasn't much more to say. Faolan returned to the kitchen to deal with the tea. By the time he served it to everyone, the druid's expression would have made Derrek nervous if he was a Normal. This was a man he wouldn't want to cross.

"Jonathan Barnes was the leader here prior to me." Faolan settled back on the couch. "You're right. He did commit suicide. He had a seventeen-year-old son, Justin, who thought he'd be taking over for his father. Even if we let teenagers run the organization, which we don't obviously, Justin failed his own psych eval. He wasn't even going to be put in the field. He was assigned to the research department."

"Let me guess, he didn't take it well." Derrek knew this story. It had been acted out in pack history, though in that case the young alphas would have to battle it out with the older ones. On occasion, they did have a teenaged leader.

Faolan drank his tea before answering. "I only met him a few times. He was encouraged to wait, take the psych evaluation again when he was a little older and was under less strain. He quit instead, lots of rage behind it. I learned later that he'd had a pretty hard life, and his father was more than a little bit of a bastard."

"That is exactly the kind of kid who'd go off and summon up a demon hoard to exact his revenge and tack on a Mwa-ha-ha for good measure." Jason dry-washed his hands, mimicking the Hollywood idea of a super-villain.

"He'd be a couple years younger than me. I think I remember him, but really, unless we have to be here, the pack prefers to keep to itself." Derrek could count on his fingers how many times he'd been brought to the main Lucerna estate as a kid. "Why would he wait five years to come after you, if this is him?"

"He's a mage, and magic takes years to learn and control." Faolan rested heavily against the couch pillows. "He might feel ready now."

“If this is him,” Derrek said again.

“It’s a place to start.” Jason returned his mug to the kitchen. “I can look into what he’s been up to in the last few years.”

“I’ll see what magic he specialized in, and Derrek, if you could follow up on these rumors, it would really help.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll see what the pack knows about the kid. Someone might have known him then,” Derrek replied. “You might want to ask some of the younger members here if they knew him.”

“Good idea.” Faolan finished his tea, setting it on the table. His pale-blue eyes were encircled with rings that looked darker now than before when he had still been hooked up to the tree or whatever it was he had been doing.

“I’ll go talk to them now. You look like you still need rest anyhow.” Derrek stood.

“I probably do. Thanks, Derrek. This is a help. I’ll also cross reference it with the rumors of the prophecy.” Faolan walked him to the door.

Derrek said his goodbyes and retreated to his truck. If he hurried, he’d make it for the pack run tonight. He’d get some answers hopefully, and just as importantly, he’d exercise away some of his frustrations. God knew he needed to.

Chapter Six

Derrek looked around the Lucerna's library. Two stories high, and almost every bare space crammed with books. The werewolves rarely had mages among them. Hell it was rare that they even had researchers. Jason's unkind comment about them being muscle had been too close to the truth. He wasn't here to pitch in on the research, either. He wanted to know if there was anything more he could be doing to help track down the jackhole who kept calling up the demons. He had failed to learn any more than he already knew while talking with the pack.

One of the young researchers said Faolan was in the library, but so far he hadn't spotted the druid, which surprised him. Derrek half expected him to glow in the dark, Faolan was so pale. Hearing someone ahead, he turned a corner and found a woman the same shade of moon glow as Faolan. She smiled up at him as he approached.

"Hi. I'm looking for Faolan. I was told he was here." Derrek could smell a sweet, almost cotton candy-like perfume on her. He liked it. "Are you Sorch?"

"What gave it away?" She tugged at a lock of her hair, offering him a wry smile. "And you have to be Derrek. Sorry, Faolan traded me jobs, research for my shift at the clinic."

He made a face. "Really? I thought he was a medical examiner. You let him deal with living people?"

Sorch laughed loudly, as if that were particularly funny. "He does double duty. It'll be fine. It's mostly sparring injuries, magic gone awry, and spring allergies at this time of year." She patted the books in front of her on the table. "He's probably doing better than me. Want to give me a hand putting these away, or was there something urgent you needed Faolan for?"

Her blue eyes reflected her smile, as if she was amused by him. What did she think he wanted Faolan for? Was he reading too much into her question because there were things he wanted Faolan for that had nothing at all to do with work? "I just wanted to see how else I can help out, so this will work."

"Good. Take that pile." She nodded to the giant stack. "I'll show you where they go." Sorch tucked some around her, which seemed strange until he realized she was in a wheelchair. It forcibly reminded him of the attack Jason alluded to.

“Do you need me to take more?”

“That’s enough for now. Down this way.” Sorcha maneuvered her chair with more ease than Derrek would have thought possible. She stopped three rows into the stacks and surprised him by standing up to put a book back on a higher shelf. That’s when he saw the crutches on the back of the chair and realized she must be able to walk a little. He could see her legs shake, looking far too unsteady to be trusted. Sorcha sat down again and continued down the row. “Yours go down this way.”

Derrek walked down the row, then paused hearing a child-like giggle. He looked around, seeing no one. “Ghost?”

Sorcha smiled, shaking her head. “The Ridges is certainly haunted. However, show yourself, young lady,” she called out.

From around a corner, a little, dark-haired girl darted forth, giggling harder. Behind her, a harried-looking, young woman followed more slowly, twin boys holding onto her hands. The little girl all but flew into Sorcha’s lap, hugging her neck.

“Hiya, baby-girl.” Sorcha kissed her cheek. “How was she in daycare, Brittany?”

“She was great, but these two need to go take a nap.” She raised her hands slightly for emphasis.

“I won’t keep you then.”

As Brittany beat a hasty retreat, Derrek realized the little girl on Sorcha’s lap eyed him curiously. Sorcha swung her chair around, and the girl squirmed on her lap, sliding free. She trotted up to Derrek, then, pointing up, looked back at Sorcha.

“Doug lost his hair!”

Sorcha chuckled, shaking her head. “That’s not Doug. That’s his twin brother, Derrek.”

The little girl took a long look at him then back to where Brittany had gone with her boys. “Twins are trouble.”

“My mother would agree,” Derrek said, squatting down. He shifted all the books to one hand, holding out the other. “Nice to meet you. I’m Derrek.”

“Deirdre. That’s my mom.” She pointed back at Sorcha.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Deirdre. I was just helping your Mom put away books.”

"I wanna help." She pulled a book out of his hands.

"Baby-girl, all of his books go on the top." Sorcha gestured to the top shelves.

Deirdre pouted. "Aww."

"Not a problem." Derrek stood, scooping Deirdre up. She climbed around onto his shoulders, agile as a monkey. As she did, he caught her scent, stunned to realize she bore a faint wolf scent. Deirdre had to be half-lycanthrope. He was stunned. No one had mentioned Faolan even had a niece, let alone a half-breed.

Deirdre giggled in his ears as he handed up books for her to put away. It did, however, make him too acutely aware of what he was unlikely to have, a family. He tried to content himself with the idea of being the best uncle to his twin's eventual pups.

"I see you met my niece."

Derrek twisted around so he could see Faolan, standing next to his sister's chair. He still wore scrubs and a white lab coat that had some kind of mysterious stain all over it. Derrek didn't really want to know what it was. Faolan smelled rather antiseptic and a touch sour, but that was probably the mystery stain. "She's helping us with the books."

"I see. Did you need to see me?" Faolan tilted his head. "I was told you were looking for me."

Derrek knelt down so Deirdre could slither off. "I was. I just wanted to help out. I didn't get far on my own assignment."

"We can head back to my place so I can change." Faolan tugged at his scrub top, wafting up that sour smell, but Derrek's eye was drawn to that silver-bearing neck guard. It made his skin crawl, just thinking about the allergic reaction if he somehow came into contact with it. "I'll catch you up on what little we learned."

"Sure. It was nice meeting you, Miss Deirdre." Derrek ruffled her hair.

"You're nice." Deirdre's gap-toothed smile warmed him as she hugged his knees.

"Thank you." He put away the few books he had left, and said his good-byes to Deirdre and Sorcha before he and Faolan left the library.

"You have a cute niece," Derrek said as they walked.

Faolan smiled. "Thank you. She's a darling wild child."

"And half-werewolf."

Faolan cast a sharp glance at him. "You didn't say that to Sorcha, did you?"

"No, but it's not really a secret, is it?" Derrek wrinkled his brow. What could possibly be the problem? He didn't think Faolan was prejudiced against lycanthropes. That crap was rare these days in the Lucerna. "Deirdre obviously knows my twin."

Faolan studied him for a moment before asking, "So, what has Doug told you about Deirdre?"

More confused, Derrek shrugged. "Nothing. I didn't even know you had a niece. Why?"

Faolan rubbed his chin, then dug in his pocket for his keys. "You've seen the scar on my neck. I saw you looking." He opened the apartment.

"I didn't mean to stare." He followed Faolan inside.

"And since we were talking about how I came here yesterday, this relates. Have a seat." Faolan kicked his shoes off next to the door, then removed his lab coat, tossing it on the floor. He pulled off his scrub top, also stained, before picking up the coat again. Faolan disappeared into the bedroom with his discarded clothing.

Derrek tried not to look like he was staring, but he was. He wondered what Faolan would taste like? Would he smell of Jason? Why wasn't that thought putting him off? Derrek didn't mess with men in a relationship. Usually, he never gave them a second thought since it wasn't worth the heartache.

"We left New York for here after the attack on Sorcha and me." Faolan's voice was muffled by the walls, but Derrek didn't dare just follow him into the bedroom as much as he might want to. He had been told to sit, so he did. He didn't want Faolan to think he was a creeper. His inner wolf laughed at his compliance, mocking him. The Marines had taught him how to obey other alphas, even if his wolf didn't appreciate it.

"It was obviously brutal. Can your sister walk at all?" Derrek made a face. It felt horribly invasive to ask, but it was possible it had some bearing on everything that was happening. "I saw she has crutches strapped to her chair."

"Not well, and not for long distances. There was a lot of damage to her muscles and the nerves."

“What happened exactly?” Derrek shifted around on the loveseat, trying to get comfortable. He decided it was the conversation and the idea that Faolan was mostly naked in the next room causing the discomfort, not the furniture.

“We were doing rounds after a bad attack. The worst of it was over, and everyone was being patched up in the Lucerna’s hospital. We didn’t think we needed that much protection, since we were on our own ground.” Faolan padded back out wearing jeans. He carried a T-shirt. Sitting on the couch opposite Derrek, he took off his neck guard, baring the scarred side of his neck to Derrek. “We never expected trouble. It was a group of vampires and werewolves gone rogue.”

Derrek changed seats so he could get a closer look at the wound. “This was done by a vampire?”

“I knew him. We knew all of them. They were Lucerna, people I had fought with. They decided it was better to use their superior powers against the humans.” Faolan shut his eyes for a moment.

“I can’t even imagine,” Derrek whispered. How could they turn against their friends? What would he do if the pack turned on him? He had no idea.

“The werewolves savaged Sorchia. Jason led the group that saved us, mostly already wounded Lucerna members who were in the hospital. He killed the vampire who was doing his damndest to kill me.” Faolan shuddered, but didn’t put his guard back on. He set it on the table, then pulled on his T-shirt. It had a white tree on it, a crown at its top and seven stars off its branches.

“Were you with Jason before the attack?” Derrek hated himself for asking. It wasn’t any of his business, but he wanted to know exactly what kind of relationship they had.

“No. We knew each other, but he had only been there a few months at that point. My boyfriend was George, the vampire who tried to kill me.”

Derrek’s jaw dropped. For a moment, he couldn’t even form words. He put a hand on Faolan’s arm. “I don’t... wow, I’m speechless. I’m so sorry.”

Faolan raised his hand, shaking his head. “Anyhow, Sorchia was far more severely injured than I was. She was in a coma for weeks and they did many surgeries, but several of the surgeries she needed, and some of the physical therapy afterward was delayed. She ended up pregnant by one of her attackers. Sorchia chose to keep the baby.” He paused, his jaw clenching. “I’m not sure I could have made that choice, but Deirdre is a beautiful little girl.”

Derrek felt an urge to find these mangy excuses for werewolves and tear them apart. He hoped someone had done that for him. "I'm sorry."

"It is none of your doing, but thank you." Faolan's blue eyes looked wet, and he dragged a hand over them before speaking again. "That is why we came here, to get away from all that pain. Jason came with us. We didn't get involved until we got here." A sad smile moved over his face. "Though I don't think he realized how little there would be to do anywhere outside of Athens. Jason is easily bored, and that is never a good thing."

"I know it's not any of my business, but I'm surprised you'd even consider a vampire after what happened." Derrek clamped his mouth shut, swallowing hard. He could be a jerk sometimes. "Or that Deirdre obviously knows my twin. She seemed very shocked Doug shaved," he joked, running a hand over his brush cut.

Faolan's smile brightened. "Neither Sorchu nor I blame all vampires and werewolves for what happened. Just the ones who actually did it. And Sorchu wanted Deirdre to know the pack. It's rare that a half breed can change, but it does them good to know pack ways."

Derrek nodded. It wasn't uncommon for half-breeds to end up marrying a pack member. It helped keep the gene pool clean.

He liked that smile on Faolan's face. He shouldn't have moved to the couch. This close to him, all Derrek wanted to do was kiss him. He could smell only a hint of loam under the astringent scent of the medical clinic. "The pack is good people."

"We've had no trouble with them." Faolan leaned forward, and picked up some papers too near the silver medallions on his neck guard for Derrek's comfort. "This is what Jason came up with for Justin Barnes."

Derrek accepted the paperwork, looking it over. "There's not much here."

"No, outside of the initial outbursts after his father's death, there is nothing of any note." Faolan rested back against the couch. "He hasn't been in any trouble."

"But he could just not have been caught," Derrek argued, looking up from the paperwork so he could study Faolan's face. Faolan's eyes were grim under his so-pale-they-were-barely-there eyebrows. At least they were no longer dark-ringed from exhaustion. "Or we could be wrong about Justin."

“Possibly, but I’m thinking more that he was busy studying magic so he could achieve his goals.” He flicked a finger against the papers. “His specialty was with fire. That is not an easy thing.”

“Could that be why he’s hoping the demons will do you in?” Derrek shifted a little closer to him on the couch. Yep, he was definitely a shithead for flirting with someone else’s lover, even if that someone else was a vampire. They barely counted if you asked the wolves. Too bad he was starting to like Jason, too.

“If it is him. I don’t want us to get tunnel vision.” Faolan rubbed his neck over the scar. Derrek had seen him do that several times before. Was it residual pain or just an unconscious gesture? “The demons would be easier, though. Fire magic takes a lot of concentration and a source of fire to begin with, like all elemental magic. The mage can’t just call it into existence. It’s one of the reasons fire magic is the most difficult. Most things aren’t on fire at all times.”

Derrek grinned. “Thankfully.” He touched Faolan’s wrist, shocked when Faolan allowed it. Hell, was this a two way street? Maybe he’d better end it now. Last thing he wanted was to go tooth and claw with a vampire over another man. He might lose to a vampire as old as Jason. Oh, the hell with it. Derrek leaned in, brushing his lips against Faolan’s. A chaste kiss as far as that went, but it also didn’t seem to startle Faolan that much.

Faolan sat back a bit, running his fingers through the short, thatch of hair Derrek sported on the top of his head. Instead of kissing him back or saying anything, he turned his attention back to the papers as if searching for something to show Derrek. Damn, had he just fucked up royally?

The door to the apartment opened and Jason walked in. Derrek sprang back against the arm of the couch. Could he have made himself look even guiltier? Faolan’s blush wasn’t helping matters, and Derrek was sure his own face was equally bright. Why the hell didn’t the damn vampire knock? Of course, he was letting himself into his boyfriend’s home. Jason probably assumed knocking wasn’t necessary.

Jason gave them an arched look, then said, “Your grandmother found something. She’d like us to come right now and have a look.”

Standing, Faolan grabbed his neck guard. He put it on, and Derrek wasn’t sure if that made things look even more suggestive than they already did. Did Jason wonder why the guard was off in the first place? “I was bringing Derrek up to date on Justin.”

Jason didn't look like he bought into that. "Ah. And did the furball have anything to add?"

Given the things on his mind when Jason interrupted, Derrek opted to let the slight pass. "I didn't learn anything new. Guess we should go see what his grandmother found."

Derrek tried to get around Jason without looking like he had something to hide. It wasn't like the vampire caught them doing anything. Still, as Faolan locked up, Jason gave Derrek what looked like a casual nudge. With vampiric strength behind it, it bounced Derrek into the wall. He pushed off the wall, ready to pound Jason. Faolan snapped his head around, and Jason cowed a bit at his glare. Derrek barely caught that submission, but it was enough to completely change his mind about who was really in charge here. He never suspected it would be Faolan. Jason seemed dominant, then again so did Faolan. He had done what Jason warned him not to. He had underestimated Faolan.

Derrek said nothing about being elbowed. He deserved it. He shadowed them through the complex without another word.

Faolan cursed himself for not expecting Derrek's kiss, for not discouraging it. He had wanted it, and he didn't know what that meant. He loved Jason, but he couldn't discount his attraction to the young werewolf. He had almost welcomed the news that Grandmother had found something, but could see in Jason's eyes he suspected something happened. He did not look forward to the moment they were alone again.

If anything, his grandmother's office was even more warded than his own. The magic made his skin tingle as he passed through the door. The walls were all paneled, symbols of power carved into the wood. Her rosewood desk was carved in an oak leaf and acorn motif, but she didn't sit behind it waiting for him. Brigid was at the old-fashioned sideboard. On one end was a small altar with her two patronesses, her name sake, Brig, with her serpent, and Morrigan, with a wolf at her side and a raven on her shoulder. On the other end of the sideboard, Brigid attended to a tray of tea. The warm, sweet scent filled the room.

Derrek leaned over to Jason and said as an aside, "I see the tea thing is inherited."

Jason laughed.

“You don’t have to have a cup if you don’t wish.” Brigid leveled a look at Derrek that straightened him right up. Faolan knew it was wrong to be amused by how quickly his grandmother brought a werewolf alpha to heel.

“Sorry. I’d like a cup, ma’am.”

“Don’t ma’am me, boy. It makes me feel old.” Brigid gestured for them to sit in front of her desk. Faolan wasn’t about to remind her she was old. His grandmother might skin him and hang his hide as a warning and a sacrifice to Morrigan. Instead, he transferred the tray to her desk and let his companions serve themselves.

Sitting down with his own cup, Faolan tried to let the sweet, almost peachy undertones of Golden Monkey drive the guilt out of him. He failed. Brigid’s bright, blue eyes studied him intently. Did she guess something had happened? He sure as hell hoped not. “Jason said you found something, Grandma.”

She brought over a tome that looked only slightly younger than Jason, thumping the thick, leather-bound book down. Tiny billows of dust curled out around it. She had bookmarked it with a paper marker bearing the cover of some lurid romance. If Brigid had one vice, besides a little whiskey now and then, it was her fondness for trashy romances, the trashier the better. She turned the book to face him and his companions. She tapped a passage with the edge of the bodice-ripper bookmark. “Here, it refers to the Dark Summer.”

Faolan stared at it. It figured it was in crabbed, faded handwriting. On either side of him, Jason and Derrek leaned into him trying to get a better look at the book. Their breath curled hot around the line of his jaw, dragging his attention away from the matter at hand and centering it somewhere entirely inappropriate with his Grandmother looking on.

Jason tapped his hand. “Read it out loud. I can’t see it at this angle.”

Faolan squinted and did his best.

“Three to join, each a different race.

Three to join, a saving grace.

True to heart, one of blood, one of tail.

True to heart, one of magic, they will not fail.

Hold back the tide, with swords and shields.

Hold back the tide, they will never yield.”

“And always, a prophecy that could mean any damned thing.” Jason leaned back on his chair.

“Am I supposed to be the tail?” Derrek’s amber eyes darkened to the color of sherry, and Faolan would have found his annoyed expression more comical if he wasn’t on the same page as Jason as to what the hell this meant.

Jason peered over at Derrek, his gaze sweeping over the tight butt the werewolf was currently resting on. “You are most definitely the tail.”

Going red, Derrek jabbed a finger toward Brighid. “There’s a lady present.”

“A lady who already checked out your tail,” Jason said with a wicked grin. Faolan didn’t want to know about it.

“You have to admit; there is a bit of a resemblance to you three.” Brighid tapped the book, trying to bring them back on topic.

“Certainly I’m magic. Jason’s blood, and Derrek’s...” Faolan trailed off, shooting the werewolf an apologetic look.

Derrek threw his hands up. “Say it. I’m the tail. But you could find this sort of arrangement anywhere in the Lucerna, can’t you?”

Brighid took her book back. “Certainly, but not all of them join together. Do you usually work with vampires?”

“Not if we can help it.” Derrek shrugged. “Not like I’ve fought with a sword before, either.”

“You’re being a bit too literal. For vampires and werewolves, your natural weapons are your swords and mages can conjure shields.” Brighid drummed her fingers on the desk. “I do believe this is the prophecy we were looking for.”

“I’d have been happier if it told us who and how to stop them.” Faolan had known it wouldn’t. Prophecies never did. At least he knew his partnership with Derrek and Jason was a step in the right direction, even though he might have messed that all up when he indulged himself, allowing Derrek to kiss him.

“Why does that they’ll never yield comment make me nervous?” Derrek asked.

“You’re smart.” Jason shrugged. “We know this is going to be brutal.”

The phone on Brighid’s desk rang, making them all jump. She picked it up, saying her hellos. Seeing his grandmother’s mouth pinch, Faolan stood. His companions followed suit.

“What?” he asked as she set the phone down.

“Another case of possession, but this time the demon-possessed got away.” Brighid rose to her feet to walk around the desk and take his hand. “The attack was at the Wizard’s Guild.”

Faolan felt his knees start to buckle. He put his hand on the desk to steady himself. Jason jumped up to check on him.

“Isn’t that the place you said would clinch it as being about Faolan?” Derrek asked Jason.

“I was kidding.” Jason slipped an arm around Faolan. “You don’t have to go with us. We’ll handle this.”

Faolan pulled away. “Like hell I don’t. Let’s find this asshole.”

Chapter Seven

Jason wished Faolan would just leave the small comic book store. He didn't need to be here, but he proved frustratingly resistant to Jason's attempts to coddle him. Faolan examined a fallen woman, using Derrek to help him. Jason couldn't remember her name, but knew he had seen her before. One clerk was dead at the register and another by the new comic book display. At least no teens were dead.

Derrek's head snapped up, his nostrils flaring. He left Faolan's side, skirting around two dead clerks. Snatching up a backpack on the counter near the register, he darted past Jason. He decided to follow Derrek out, only to find himself confronted with the whole pack. All the werewolves but Douglas were already shifted, and, since he was fully clothed, Jason assumed he was going to be the handler.

Derrek handed his twin the backpack. "They said the boy who was possessed was wearing this. You should be able to track them from the scent."

"Then what? Can we get the demon back out of him?" Doug asked, hefting the backpack.

Derrek turned back to Jason. "Can we?"

Jason wished he could say yes. He strode back inside the shop. A couple of the Lucerna members who had come with them to deal with the disaster glanced at him. "Barb, Jim, go with the wolves." To Derrek and Doug, he added, "They're mages. Let them deal with it."

"Fine by me," Doug said, as the two mages hurried outside. "You coming, brother?"

"We could use him here," Jason said. "Unless he wants to go."

Derrek shook his head. "I'll stay. You don't need another nose."

Doug nodded, and held the backpack out to the wolves. Jason didn't wait around for them to go running off. He trusted them to do their job. He had already done his part, questioning the teens of the RPG group who had managed to run and hide from their possessed friend. The only real thing left to do was to move the bodies to the lab. He startled when a hand closed over his shoulder.

"Sorry." Derrek gestured to Faolan. "Should he be doing this?"

"No, but that boy is half-Irish, half-Scot and a hundred percent stubborn." Jason faced Derrek. "If you think you can get him to go home, be my guest."

Derrek scowled. His attention captured by something, he huffed, the tip of his nose wiggling.

"Do you smell something?"

"Grandma's coming." Derrek stepped away from the door.

"I can live another three thousand years and never get used to how keen a werewolf's nose is," Jason said, also stepping aside as Derrek rolled his eyes.

Brigid came in with three older mages. None of them were field agents any longer. Jason wondered if they were here for support or if they had a lack of confidence in Faolan after this turn of events. Knowing Brigid, it would have to be the former. Her jaw clenched, her few wrinkles deepening. "This can't be tolerated," she said, resting a hand on Jason's shoulder. "You couldn't convince him to leave it?"

"No, he couldn't." Faolan stood up over his patient's body, stripping off his gloves. Derrek's eyes widened, obviously unfamiliar with Faolan's Vulcan hearing. "And I'm not stubborn, Jason. I need to do this."

"I think it's both," Jason replied.

Faolan shrugged. "Erin was my friend. I went out to her place every other Saturday." He made a fist. "At least her daughters got out of here unharmed. Where did you take them, Jason?"

"Unsurprisingly, the Donkey evacuated like it was on fire when this went down. My men and I took the survivors there to question. They're home with their father by now." Jason pointed in the general direction of the Donkey Bar coffeehouse two doors down. "They don't remember anyone coming in here that they didn't know, but they were engrossed in the game. Luckily when Shawn, that's the kid who was possessed, went crazy, he went for the adults first." He grimaced. "Sorry, not so lucky for Erin, but at least the teens got away safe. The other two who were killed were the clerks."

"She would rather it was her than her daughters." Faolan's chest heaved, and Jason didn't give a damn any more if it was unprofessional. He put his arm around Faolan, guiding him over to his grandmother.

"Take him home now, Brigid," Jason said, and when Faolan opened his mouth, Jason pressed a finger to Faolan's lips. "You've done enough and you

know damn well you'll do at least one of the autopsies, on the clerks. You lost a friend. Go home and grieve. Derrek and I have this. We can finish up the final details."

Faolan rubbed his forehead, looking like he might argue, then he let his hand fall. "Okay."

Jason took it as a bad sign that Faolan actually agreed so easily, but he said nothing as Brighid led him out of the store. Joining Derrek, he clamped his hand on Derrek's shoulder. "Come on, we have work to do."

Derrek wanted to go home and sleep. He didn't even know what hour of *too damned late* it was. Instead, he was still at the Ridges in Faolan's office. The druid wasn't there, which was just as well. He felt awkward enough alone with Jason as they wrote up everything they knew on a couple of whiteboards so they could visualize the events. Derrek had called up a map of the area on his tablet, pinning all the locations where an attack had happened. The only pattern they saw was the one where Faolan was at the center of things.

Jason's expression grew dimmer by the hour, and how could Derrek blame him? He couldn't imagine what Faolan was feeling now. Could Jason even possibly comfort Faolan at this point? Hell, for all he knew, Jason might be a bit pissed with Faolan. Derrek felt sure Jason thought something was going on. He wasn't exactly wrong.

"We're not going to get anything more out of this." Jason tossed the dry erase pen on the desk. "We should get some sleep and come at this fresh."

Derrek loved that idea. Jason seemed pale and ready to topple over. Derrek didn't think he looked much better. "You look done in."

Jason cracked his neck, then rubbed at one of the muscles. "I'm starving."

"Oh." Derrek shrugged, then the implication sunk in, "*Oh*."

Jason smirked at him. "Relax."

He showed his teeth to Jason, figuring the gesture might mean the same to vampires as it did to lycanthropes: back off. "I didn't think your type even liked lycanthrope blood."

"No, we do. It's one of the few things we do like about your kind." His smirk deepened. "But that still doesn't mean I'm going to jump you."

“Like to see you try.” Derrek glared. He didn’t think he could take Jason if it came to it, but no sense in letting him even guess at that. If it came to a fight, Derrek wouldn’t go down easily.

Jason laughed, sauntering to the door, but not before stopping and patting Derrek’s back. “Though someone should let me have a snack after what he did today.”

“Look, I don’t know what you think happened today, but it didn’t,” he protested, jumping to his feet. He was not going to meet this thorny problem sitting down. He was at a complete disadvantage that way.

Jason looked so amused that Derrek wanted to punch his smug face. “And just what was it, then?”

“I was reading over what you found out about Justin.”

“You’re such a bad liar.” Jason tapped Derrek’s cheek. “It’s cute. Behave yourself, fuzz-butt. You might be in for more than you can handle.”

Derrek sputtered, but no words came. He was more embarrassed than worried.

Jason sailed on by, but paused in the doorway. “It’s damned late. You should just check with the night clerk and take a room here tonight. You’re likely to put that truck in a ditch, and I don’t want to have to explain that to your twin.”

Derrek rubbed his eyes. They felt like sand. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll do that.”

“Good night, and don’t let the vampires bite.”

He heard Jason laughing down the hall. “They wouldn’t dare!” he bellowed back. Derrek shut the office door and dragged off toward the lobby where the night shift would be at the front desk. It hadn’t gone as bad as he feared. Jason didn’t look overly worried that Derrek might be trying to poach his boyfriend, and that either meant he had nothing to fear when it came to Faolan’s loyalty, or something Derrek had yet to consider. And it was too damned late to be considering anything. All he wanted was a bed and a few hours’ sleep.

Chapter Eight

Knowing he'd find Faolan there, Jason walked out to the grove. It had been nearly a week without a new attack, but also without them getting closer to finding out who was behind the assaults. No comfort was taken in the lack of attacks. Everyone felt the same way: something big was in the works. Jason was crossing the parking lot to go down to the cemetery and beyond to the woods when a familiar Ford pickup drove into the lot. He waited for Derrek to climb out. "Anything to report?"

Derrek shook his head. "No, feeling all kinds of useless at this point."

"Join the club."

"Where are you going?" Derrek glanced toward the hill.

"Faolan's down there, blowing off some steam." Jason started walking. If Derrek wanted to follow, he would, and he had no doubt the werewolf would. Too bad Derrek didn't know where they were going because Jason wouldn't mind following and watching that fine ass work.

"He needs to. We all do."

"Like you didn't have a big night last night of sniffing wolf butt, and running around after hapless squirrels." Jason watched Derrek's face to see if he took the bait. "I know there was a pack run last night."

Derrek slotted his eyes. "Did not."

"I can smell the blood." It was faint since Derrek had clearly bathed and brushed his teeth, but under the mint was a hint of blood. You couldn't sneak that past a vampire.

Derrek pouted. "It was deer."

Jason chuckled, picking up his pace. Not hearing footsteps, Jason turned to see Derrek paused in the cemetery. He stared down at one grave with a stalk of corn growing next to it, blown in from some not-too-distant farm. Derrek glanced up at him.

He tapped a toe next to the headstone. "This is so sad. These people don't even have names."

"Just numbers. The code book is in the asylum files. No one wanted their disturbed relatives back for burial elsewhere." Jason shrugged. "If they even

had any relatives. A few of the newer ones have names, but yes, it is sad. Extremely so.”

“Why would he have come down here to relax?” Derrek made a face.

“He’s not in the cemetery.” Jason pointed ahead of them. “The walking paths go for miles. The grove is just up over the rise. They find it peaceful.”

“They?” Derrek lifted his chin. “Is that music?”

“It’s his band, the Art of Awen. They play at Irish festivals, the ren faire, that sort of thing.”

“Really?” Derrek caught back up with him, a huge grin on his face. “Ren faire? Does he wear those tights?”

Jason laughed, wagging his head. “Hell no.”

“Did you?” Derrek tilted his head as he studied Jason. “I mean you had to live in that time period.”

Jason climbed up the hill to the grove. “Hose and a sizeable cod piece to go with.” He swept his hands apart.

“You try too hard. I’m beginning to think it’s as small as the rest of you.” Derrek shoved him lightly.

Jason shoved back, liking the feel of Derrek’s solid biceps under his hand. “I’m *not* small. Well, I wasn’t back in my day. Not my fault the human race is getting freakishly tall.”

The music grew louder as they came upon the grove. Brighid sat under a tree, a basket of bluebells and dandelion flowers next to her. She seemed to be enjoying the music. Abby, the piper, lit up the grove with the raucous reel she blared. Beth danced with her violin as she played. Faolan pounded on his drum with enough fervor, Jason swore he was trying to summon up Pan himself. Nick, their other drummer, matched Faolan. Jason and Derrek stopped next to Brighid.

Derrek seemed to be taking stock of the scene, or maybe he was just eyeing up Faolan. Jason didn’t really blame him. All Faolan had on was his red, green and blue Fraser clan tartan and the drum strap over his shoulder. Jason half-wished everyone would just go away so Faolan could fuck him right here in grove. Well, maybe Derrek could stay. Judging by looks alone, and the way the young wolf moved, Jason figured he had to be good in the sack.

Derrek’s huge smile lit up his face. “So, no tights. He wears a skirt.”

Brighid slapped Derrek's knee. "Don't let him hear you call his kilt that."

"Yeah, your hide will be his next drum head." Jason caught Derrek's wrist, pulling him to the next tree over. He sat down to watch the group, testing to see if Derrek would do the same. One could never tell about a werewolf. They always had such bugs up their asses about vampires, and bigger bugs about following orders from anyone other than their alpha. Derrek probably had a hell of a time adjusting to the military.

Derrek folded his knees up as he sat, back to the tree. "They're good. But I can't believe you like to listen to bagpipes and not bluegrass."

Jason shrugged. "Greece had a type of bagpipes."

"You know you still haven't told me what a pankratiast is yet." Derrek shifted against the tree. His line of sight was not on Jason. He still watched Faolan.

"It's a lot like ultimate fighting today, you know, mixed martial arts. Heracles and Theseus invented it," Jason replied, thinking back on the smell of sweat and olive oiled bodies. "Basically a mix of wrestling and boxing, no holds barred except biting and eye gouging."

"And people were too afraid to fight you."

Now Derrek's attention was on Jason. He smirked, rubbing his chest. Derrek tracked the movement, his breathing accelerating a bit. "That's right. And imagine what I can do now with centuries of experience and a vampire's strength. There's always one werewolf who wants to give it a try."

Derrek didn't look away. Good boy. That made Jason want him more. "Must be hard obeying the no biting rule as a vampire." He smirked right back, then resumed watching Faolan. So much for that attempt at seduction.

Jason peered over to make sure Brighid wasn't watching them. Her attention was on the Art of Awen. He pressed against Derrek, his lips beside his ear. "You want him," he whispered.

Derrek startled, whipping around. His mouth clumsily connected with Jason's before he jerked away, nearly tipping sideways. "I don't know—"

"Yes, you do." Jason slid his hand along Derrek's denim-covered thigh and down to give his half-hard cock a squeeze. Derrek pushed him back, but Jason was difficult to move when he didn't want to be. "The question is what to do about it. I suppose calling Brighid over here would be like a bucket of cold

water.” He rubbed Derrek again. “Or I could make you climax right here. Do you know how good it can feel when a vampire feeds?” Jason flicked his tongue against Derrek’s carotid pulse point.

“Stop it!” Derrek pushed him harder this time, gaining a little distance between them.

Brighid looked over. “Jason, are you misbehaving?”

“No ma’am. You know how werewolves are. Temperamental, the lot of them,” he replied sweetly. Derrek punched Jason in the arm. The boy had a good deal of strength.

She harrumphed at them before returning to the music.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Derrek’s pained voice was so soft Jason barely heard him over the pounding drums.

“I think you’re mostly doing it to yourself.”

Derrek closed his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be more angry about it? Why are you treating it like a game?” He took a deep breath before opening his eyes and fixing that amber, lupine gaze on Jason.

“You know what I am. You know the stories they tell about vampires.” Jason felt uncomfortable under Derrek’s scrutiny, but it was his own damn fault. He was the one who started them on this path. “We’re fickle. We’re experimental. We’re freaks. We’re this and that. Some of it is true. Do I love him? Yes, I do. But I’ll close my eyes, and when I open them, Faolan will be as old as Brighid, if he’s lucky. I’ll close them again, and he’ll have been gone for fifty years. And I will not have changed. In a few hundred years, I’ll be lucky to remember his name.”

Derrek hunched his shoulders, grimacing. “That sounds horrible.”

Pity from a werewolf? Who would have guessed? Jason rolled his shoulders. “It sometimes is. I keep journals just to remember the things I don’t ever wish to forget. But I’m also a realist. A vampire might not ever be the best choice for a human. Of course, we’re not a good match for other vampires either. Too much time together might sound romantic, but not many can make centuries together as a couple.” Jason scowled. “Faolan likes us. He likes to learn about all the history we’ve lived. But he also likes you. I’m fine with sharing him from time to time.”

Derrek’s eyes were comically wide, so Jason decided to go one step further. “Or better yet, he brings his new friend along with him when we’re together.”

Derrek twisted away from him, his pulse pounding. Jason could see Derrek's carotid bouncing. Jason moved with him, lathing his tongue over Derrek's neck. He got a nose full of the spiciness unique to lycanthropes. Derrek shuddered, but didn't push him away. A cell phone rang. Derrek jumped up, nearly clobbering Jason's nose, and he fished the phone out. "Sorry," he said, before darting back up the path to take his call.

The music stopped, and when he saw the musicians putting their instruments away, Jason sauntered up to Faolan. His chest glistened with sweat, but he didn't unsling his drum. Damn, Jason really regretted there were so many people here.

"Why did it look like you were molesting Derrek?" Faolan waved goodbye at Nick, who was already halfway out of the grove with his drum.

"Saw that, did you? I was just messing with him." Jason leaned forward, his next words for Faolan's ears only. "And telling him I didn't care if you two hooked up, and that I might join you."

Faolan took a hurried step back, his drum nearly unbalancing him. Jason caught his wrist, hauling Faolan closer. "You tell me that here!" Faolan hissed. "Where there are other people! What is wrong with you, Jason?"

"Honestly, I assumed you already knew that I don't mind a threesome. Besides, no one heard me." He swept his hand around to the women remaining. Abby and Beth had already started up the path, but Brigid was still seated, watching them. "You, they heard, but not me. Zeus knows what your granny is thinking."

"You make me insane, sometimes. You know that, right?" Faolan wagged his head.

Jason grinned. "Yes, naturally, but it's also true about Derrek."

"We can talk about this later." Faolan put a hand on Jason's chest, giving him a gentle push.

"Is there anything else to say? I meant it. Unless the idea makes you angry." Jason studied his lover's face. Faolan seemed more annoyed than angry. "It's not like I've forgotten human morality since it's shoved in our faces so often, but I definitely have a different view on the matter."

"I'm well aware of that." Faolan inclined his head toward his grandmother. His cheeks had pinked up.

Jason snuggled up against Faolan the best he could with the bass drum in the way. "I'm saying if you want to fuck 'the tail' go ahead," he said, referencing the prophecy.

Faolan rapped him on the head with his drumsticks. "You mean that?"

"You know I do."

Faolan scanned the grave. "Where did Derrek go?"

Jason scowled. "I didn't mean here in the grove right now, unless I get to stay."

Faolan rapped him harder with the sticks this time. "Honestly. Grandma would just love that."

"Tell her you're celebrating Pan." Jason gave Faolan's butt a squeeze, though the wool tartan probably didn't make that quite as pleasant as either man would have liked.

"I keep telling you that, yes, horns are associated with Pan and Cernunnos, but no I'm not sure they're the same god." Faolan started up the path just as Derrek reappeared.

"Sorry to interrupt like that. I forgot the ringer was on," Derrek said, stopping next to Brighid. She looked up at him expectantly. "That was just Doug."

"Anything helpful?" Faolan asked.

"Not unless you count a grocery list he wants me to get at the Kroger's on my way home." He held out a hand to Brighid. "Need a hand up, ma'am?"

She clasped it and let Derrek help her up. Brighid collected her flower basket, saying, "I was hoping for something more useful. We haven't gotten anywhere in days." She didn't wait for them to keep up with her. Jason thought she was pretty damn spry for her age.

"We've been working together just like the prophecy said to do," Derrek said, walking beside her. "It hasn't helped any."

"The Lucerna has always had mages, Norms, vampires and werewolves working together. I think you boys are misinterpreting the three to join." Brighid patted Derrek's arm, then put on a burst of speed. "I wish someone had a prophecy about me like this back when I was young. It'll be great *craic*, boys," she called over her shoulder. Her laughter filled the grove.

“Grandma!” Faolan shouted his irritation.

Derrek stopped, and Jason came up even with him. Derrek looked at Jason. “Does she mean what I think she means?”

“A fun threesome, yes, I think she does.” Jason gave Derrek’s ass a squeeze. If anything, it was tighter than Faolan’s, and Jason couldn’t wait to hang on to it. To his surprise, Derrek didn’t pull away.

Derrek pushed Jason away, then swiveled around to face Faolan. “Was she raised by him?” He nodded toward Jason.

“Grandma has always been feisty and that’s all I’ve ever wanted to know about it.” Faolan started walking again.

“So, I vote we do this,” Jason said, figuring neither of the others would go there without a little more prodding. It would hardly be the first time he’d had a ménage à trois.

“Of course you do.” Derrek took off up the path without him.

“I don’t hear you saying no,” Jason shot back, but before either man could answer him, Jason’s phone rang with its 911 tone. “Damn it.” He yanked his phone out of back pocket and answered. “Hello? Sarah, what’s wrong? Well, fuck. I’m going to kill him myself. I’ll be right there.”

“What is it?” Faolan asked as Jason ran off.

“Bob has been talking about finding his girlfriend and bringing her over. Apparently, all the warnings about fledglings being unable to do that didn’t sink in. Sarah thinks he might have conned a friend into giving him a ride to Columbus in the trunk of the car.” It would have to be that way since it would be decades before Bob aged into being a daywalker. “Damn him.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Faolan called to him.

Jason didn’t reply. He didn’t want to be talking about it later. He wanted to go back to Faolan’s apartment and follow the natural progression of this. Instead, he had to chase down a brat. Maybe it would be better this way. Not for him, but for Faolan and Derrek. Jason had centuries of experience. Threesomes weren’t new to him. He knew they were for Faolan, and Jason had to think they were utterly foreign to Derrek. Let them get to know each other. If the gods wanted them to be together, well, Jason believed in fate. He was hardly going to argue the point.

Faolan unslung his bass and carried it into the second bedroom of his apartment. It doubled as an office and music room. He heard Derrek shuffling around in the living room, and his mind coupled that with Jason's explicit permission to play. Surely that's why Derrek had followed him to his apartment. They had gotten to a state of limbo with finding Justin Barnes—if it was indeed Justin behind this—with no fresh leads, so Derrek hadn't hung around to discuss business. But did Derrek really want this? Vampires and werewolves were notorious in their not getting along.

Hell, did he even want a threesome? Faolan loved Jason, but thoughts of Derrek naked under him made his cock stir under his kilt. He'd never get his answers hiding in the computer room. He set the drum on its stand and padded back into the living room. The cheap rug that came standard with the place felt like a wire brush to his feet, his whole body already sensitizing. He regretted kicking his shoes off at the door like he usually did.

Derrek was studying Faolan's vintage Millennium Falcon that sat on a shelf near the bookcase. The main characters were ringed around it except for Darth Vader, of course. He was by his TIE-fighter. "You're a geek," Derrek said without turning around. Naturally, a werewolf would hear his footsteps, even on carpet.

"Always have been. Sorcha's worse, and don't get Grandma started on *Star Trek*."

Derrek faced him, his eyes sweeping over Faolan. He felt almost naked under the intensity of that amber gaze, but with the exception of a swatch of wool, he was. The strength of Derrek's gaze only served to make Faolan want him more. His cock twitched and started to harden.

"What do you think of what Jason said?" Unless Faolan missed his guess, there was a hint of fear in Derrek's question.

"I'm pretty sure I remember you kissing me the other day."

"I didn't mean that." Derrek slashed his hand in the air. "You already know I'm attracted to you, and I'm pretty sure you're attracted to me. But all three of us?"

Faolan closed the distance between them, resting a hand on Derrek's shoulder. "No one is going to force you into anything you don't want, Derrek. Jason may tease you, but he'd never do anything like that."

"I thought I was going to be his midmorning snack." Derrek rubbed his neck. "And the weird part was I didn't even mind it. That's just wrong."

"I'm sure the pack wouldn't approve, but he really wouldn't hurt you."

Derrek snorted, slipping away from him. He ran his hand over a book shelf. "I'm a gay Alpha. The pack is used to being disappointed by me." The bitterness in his tone made Faolan wince. "I don't know what to think about the whole prophecy. Forgetting for a moment how embarrassing it was to have your *grandmother* point out we should be together as lovers, I don't like this fate stuff."

Faolan nodded, feeling his ardor ebb away. "It does go against the idea of free will."

"Yeah."

"Consider it this way, seers see the future and report it. They don't make it happen. It was always going to happen."

Derrek furrowed his brow. "That's the same damn thing. It's not that I don't really want to be with you. I just don't know..." He shook his head.

Faolan wanted to go to him, pull him into his arms, but the look on Derrek's face made him doubt it would be welcomed. "If you don't want it, it won't happen. We will stop this one way or another. You don't have to sacrifice yourself and do something you don't want to do."

Derrek laughed, managing to make it as sarcastic a laugh as Faolan had ever heard. "Yeah, but as far as sacrifices go, partnering up with two fucking hot guys is hardly the worst thing that would ever happen to me. I know dudes who'd give their left nut for something like that." He made a face. "Though that might make things difficult later."

Chuckling, Faolan took Derrek's hand. "You have a point." He tugged Derrek closer. "Jason is very pliable in bed. He usually will do what you want."

"And you?" Derrek's voice was tight.

"Me? I'm the one in charge, but open to suggestions."

"Have you ever done this before? Three?" Derrek's pupils were fully dilated, his breathing rate ticking upward.

"No. Jason has. I doubt there is anything he hasn't done, really." Faolan smiled, cupping his hand over the back of Derrek's neck. He pulled him into a kiss far less chaste than their first, his mouth hard and demanding over Derrek's.

Derrek didn't pull away, his tongue easing into Faolan's mouth, tentatively exploring, as he pressed against Faolan. Closer to Faolan's height, Derrek was easier to kiss than Jason. As the kiss heated up, Faolan brushed his hips against Derrek, his cock awakening. Nothing about this felt wrong, surprising Faolan. He expected it might. There was something to that prophecy, after all.

As their mouths warred for dominance—something Faolan could tell neither of them gave up quite as easily as Jason—Faolan rubbed a hand over Derrek's crotch, feeling the heat of him. Derrek groaned against Faolan's lips.

"We don't have to wait for Jason, do we?" Derrek pressed into Faolan's touch.

"He won't be back until late if at all." Faolan interlocked his fingers with Derrek's, pulling him toward the bed room. "He can catch up later."

Derrek nodded. Faolan relished the idea of getting to know Derrek on his own first. He had no idea what Derrek might like in bed, and with the three of them, it might have been too confusing. Faolan let go of Derrek so he could draw the curtains against the noon sun. Derrek caught him from behind, wrapping his arms around him as he nibbled Faolan's neck. Werewolves were just as mouthy as vampires and Faolan liked that.

Derrek's attempt to get a hand up Faolan's kilt was a bit clumsy, but once he managed it, he trailed his fingers along Faolan's cock's length, exploring. Faolan pushed into Derrek's hand, encouraging him to take a firmer grip. Faolan reached behind his back so he could fight Derrek's zipper down. He circled his palm over Derrek's cotton covered cock. Derrek leaned against him, increasing the friction.

Finally, Faolan wiggled free of Derrek's hands, turning around. Lust plainly evident in his eyes and now very red lips, Derrek watched Faolan for a cue. Faolan tugged Derrek's shirt up, leaving his arms still captured over his head so Faolan could plunder Derrek's mouth. The alpha squirmed a bit, obviously not used to having someone take control over him. This could make it very exciting or very awkward if neither of them was willing to give up control.

Freeing him, Faolan tossed the shirt and skimmed his hands along the muscular planes of Derrek's torso. He snuck his hand down Derrek's boxers, toying with the coarse curls growing in a thick thatch there. Faolan nipped Derrek's chin before taking a step back. He wanted to see how Derrek took simple commands.

"Finish getting undressed," Faolan said.

Derrek did, in a rush, no finesse or seduction in his movements. Still, he was young, at least five years Faolan's junior and no doubt nervous. Besides, finesse and werewolf didn't usually go together in the same sentence. His skin was paler than Jason's, but he had a similar walnut hue to his hair. Compared to him, Faolan almost glowed. His sizeable cock was cut. It had been years now since Faolan had dealt with a guy who'd been circumcised. Faolan rimmed his thumb around the edge of the shaft just where the head joined it, making Derrick's thighs quiver.

Faolan pulled Derrek close with his other hand before exploring his way down to cup one firm buttock. "Tell me what you want," he whispered to Derrek.

Derrek's eyebrows rose and he started to say something then stopped. "I... no one's ever really asked before."

"Too bad. I want to feel your mouth around me." Faolan stepped back again so he could ditch his kilt. The wool was doing no one any favors. His own cock, nearly as red as the kilt thanks to his overall lack of skin pigment, jutted forth. Faolan feathered his fingers up it. Derrek tracked the movement like the hunter he was. Faolan took a few more steps back until he felt the press of the mattress against his legs. He twisted around and flung the bedding aside. "And I want to taste you."

Derrek stretched out on the bed, holding a hand out to Faolan. "I'd like that."

Faolan smiled. "Gods, you're beautiful."

Beaming, Derrek spread his legs more, stroking himself. "Yeah? No one's ever said that before."

"They've been doing you a disservice." Faolan joined him on the bed, pinning him to the mattress for another breathless kiss. He considered it a win when Derrek didn't fight against him. Derrek was an alpha even if he was used to having to share power with his twin, and follow Douglas's lead. Faolan hoped it hadn't disheartened him too much. Of course, he should enjoy it in this case.

Derrek broke the kiss so he could kiss his way down to Faolan's erect nipples. He sucked on one while caressing Faolan's belly. He let go, canting his face up to Faolan. "Been wanting to do that since I first saw you communing with that tree."

Faolan rubbed Derrek's shoulder. "Lucky me."

Derrek turned his attention to Faolan's cock, licking along its length and raising his hand up it at the same time. Faolan sprawled on the mattress and let the wolf's hungry mouth do its work. Any fears he had about the three of them working out started to fade. Any guilt he might have had about cheating on Jason was long gone. This didn't just feel fantastic; it felt right.

Faolan tapped Derrek's shoulder, then signaled him to roll onto his side. When Derrek complied, Faolan changed positions so he could help himself to Derrek's fine, fat cock. The musky smell of him was different than Faolan expected; the scent of his wolf nature perhaps. With his tongue, Faolan chased the bitter pearls of moisture at the tip of Derrek's shaft before taking him inside his mouth. Derrek moaned softly, his breath hot on the hypersensitive skin of Faolan's cock, making him shudder.

Faolan caressed Derrek's fuzzy balls as he sucked on him. He wanted more than this, as great as it was. If Derrek had wanted to play with his nipples since the day Faolan recharged, Faolan had been thinking about the young wolf's ass since the moment he had stalked into the office. As he bobbed his head over Derrek's shaft, Faolan swept his fingers up it until he caught them in his mouth as well. He transferred the wet fingers to the cleft of Derrek's ass, sliding them down to circle his entrance. Derrek's stroking hitched for a moment but didn't stop. He gasped a little as Faolan sank a finger into him. He flicked his tongue quickly on the sweet spot under the head of Derrek's cock.

Derrek hesitated, looking down at Faolan. "Do you want me to stop?" Faolan pulled his finger back out and Derrek shook his head. "Will you let me inside you?" When Derrek didn't answer instantly, Faolan added, "You don't have to if that's not your thing."

"No, I've thought about it." Derrek wet his lips. "I want to try."

The hesitancy in those words made Faolan pause. Did he really mean it? Had he tried before and someone hurt him? Had it been disappointing? Faolan doubted Derrek would simply tell him. He pushed up on one arm so he could see Derrek better. "I'm not trying to pressure you."

"I really have thought about it. I trust you."

Faolan's throat tightened with the rush of emotion. Trust was not something werewolves did easily outside of their pack. He twisted so he could kiss Derrek on the lips. "Thank you."

"How... how do you want to do this?" Derrek flushed.

“We can... uh, oh, this is awkward.” Faolan grimaced. “I’ve been with Jason for the last handful of years, and vampires can’t catch or transmit mortal diseases. I don’t have any protection.”

“Werewolves aren’t so lucky.” Derrek scooted to the edge of the bed, standing slowly as if unsure his legs would hold. “I have some.”

While Derrek fetched the condom, Faolan fished the lube out of the night stand. It had been so long since he’d worn one, Faolan let Derrek help his fumbling fingers get the damn thing on. Afterward, Faolan pressed Derrek back against the mattress, locking his mouth over Derrek’s. He brushed his body over Derrek’s, luxuriating in the heat of him.

Derrek ran his fingers through Faolan’s hair. “I love it when you kiss me.”

Smiling, Faolan planted a kiss on Derrek’s lips. “Then we’re already in the best position for us.”

Derrek moved his hands down over Faolan’s back. “Yeah.” He fumbled in the sheets, trying to come up with the lube. Derrek slicked up Faolan’s cock, as Faolan did the same with Derrek’s entrance, and in between, grabbed quick kisses. Once that was done, Faolan moved in for a longer kiss, and Derrek guided Faolan’s cock into position.

Derrek gasped against Faolan’s lips as Faolan pushed inside him. Starting slowly, Faolan thrust more deeply, Derrek softly begging for more. As they kissed, Derrek locked his legs over Faolan’s hips, letting him in as deep as he could go. Face to face, Faolan loved it this way almost better than any other. He felt so close to Derrek now. It didn’t take long before Derrek’s body tensed under him. His back arched as Derrek came with a loud, wolf-like howl Faolan didn’t know could come from a still-human throat. Slightly stunned, Faolan paused.

Derrek wrapped his arms around Faolan’s shoulders, squeezing tight. “More, gimme more.”

Faolan gladly complied, feeling the tension building inside him. It didn’t take him much longer to reach climax, senses-clouding swirl of bliss. When it slowly cleared, the first thing Faolan was aware of was Derrek rubbing his back and shoulders. Faolan was in no hurry to move, enjoying every bit of Derrek’s touch.

“I almost said no to all this. It scared me,” Derrek said finally, his voice sleepy. “I’d be stupid to miss this.”

“It’ll get even better from here.” Faolan had no doubt of that now.

Derrek smiled in answer, continuing to caress Faolan’s back. Soon enough they’d have to be back to work, but for now, Faolan had no intentions of going anywhere.

Chapter Nine

Sweat poured down Faolan's aching back. Maybe he should have remembered he'd promised to help turn over a new garden for his grandmother before he engaged in a day of strenuous activity. Jason never returned, calling to say he'd rounded up Bob and was headed back to his place to deal with him. Derrek had never left, and the afternoon loving turned into evening and nighttime sessions, very athletic ones at that. Faolan had tried to beg off gardening, but when Grandma asked why, he decided it was better to suck it up than explain.

Derrek had abandoned him at breakfast, saying he had to go finish the chores his twin had set for the day before. Faolan didn't blame him. Shopping for groceries sounded better than digging in the hard ground. When his shovel hit another rock, he gave up and sat next to his grandmother and sister in the shade. Brighid sorted dried, pressed plants into two piles, faded yellow flowers in one and equally dulled purple in the other. Agrimony and Betony, Druid's sorrow and cure-all, so he could guess what she'd be brewing. Fresh ferns lay in a pile of their own. While Sorcha was theoretically helping their grandmother, she seemed more interested in watching Deirdre play in the far side of the garden where he had finished. Next to her, her crutches rested against the bench. Deirdre broke up clumps by hand, looking for worms and whatever else that might catch a child's eye.

Faolan flopped over in the grass, pushed his robe's hood back to let his head breathe. Sweat plastered his hair to his scalp. His back instantly stiffened up. Tonight would suck if his back didn't start feeling a little better. He might have to ask Sorcha for more healing salve, but at least he could blame the shoveling.

"Someone looks exhausted." Sorcha poked him with her crutch.

"Shoveling is hard work."

Sorcha glanced around to check that Deirdre wasn't in earshot before adding, "And it has nothing to do with that werewolf howling in your apartment."

His face felt hotter than the sun. "Sorcha!"

She snickered. "I wish someone would have warned me before I went down there looking to see if you had made any progress." Sorcha tossed a sprig of betony at their grandmother.

"I didn't see you, or I would have," Brigid replied, not looking up from her sorting. "I'm just surprised they made it out of the grove before ripping off each other's clothing."

He gave his grandmother the evil eye. "I'm not talking about this with you."

"All I'm saying is the werewolf sure sounded like he was enjoying himself." Sorchá smirked.

"Lookee!" Deirdre rescued him, running up with a palm-sized hunk of limestone. "A dragon egg."

"Oh, I don't think so, sweetie." He sat up, taking the vaguely egg-shaped stone from her.

"Is to! I know it is." Deirdre stomped her foot at him.

"You might be right. You know who collects dragon eggs? Your mom. Why don't you give it to her?" Faolan surrendered the rock.

Beaming, Deirdre presented it to her mom with a flourish.

"And I bet you can find her more," he said. Deirdre squealed, and raced back to the turned earth.

"She's going to bring me every dirty rock in the world. Thanks for nothing." Sorchá made a nasty face at Faolan.

He arched an eyebrow. "Shut up about my love life, and I won't put evil thoughts into your daughter's head."

"Children." Brigid chuckled to herself. "That garden isn't going to turn itself over, Faolan."

Faolan hauled himself back to his feet. "Why can't some of the druid initiatives do this?" He knew he couldn't argue with her for long. Grandma was likely to call lightning strikes in to make her point.

Her answer was a flat look. Sighing, he picked up his shovel and pushed his hood back up over his head. It shielded his pale skin better than a hat. The smell of the freshly turned earth was the one bonus, but it didn't really make up for having to break through roots and dig out rocks.

"Someone's hard at work and looking like he belongs in the middle ages."

At the sound of Jason's voice, Faolan straightened and turned around.

Jason jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at Derrek and Doug. "Look what I found in the parking lot."

“Doug!” Deirdre came flying out of the garden, and wrapped her dirty arms around his leg, only to abandon him nearly as quickly for his twin. “Derrek!”

“You’ve been playing hard in the mud, pup.” Doug ruffled her hair.

Deirdre studied him and his shoulder-length brown hair and long beard, then looked at Derrek. She tugged on Derrek’s jeans. “I like this face better, not shaggy.”

“Deirdre! We don’t say things like that,” Sorchá said, appalled.

Derrek scooped Deirdre up and spun around with her, making her squeal in delight. “That’s okay. One of us had to be the handsome twin. I’ve always said it was me.” Doug swatted his arm, and Derrek put Deirdre back down. She ran back to her dragon egg search.

“So what is up with the monastic robes there?” Derrek asked.

“This one is light cotton so it’s cooler than jeans. It’s not one of my ceremonial robes,” Faolan replied. “I use them when I have to be out in the heat.”

“Nah, the truth is, he’s in the sun. A simple hat won’t do. Without those robes, Faolan will burst into flames.” Jason smirked, pushing Faolan lightly.

Faolan rolled his eyes. “I can replace you, you know.”

“Sounded to me like you already had.” Sorchá leveled her gaze at Derrek.

He flushed brightly as his brother looked at him, eyes wide. Doug’s eyebrows slowly climbed, looking between the three men.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Derrek said, not backing down from his brother, but unless Faolan missed his guess, Derrek sounded nervous.

“No wonder you were so quick to volunteer to stay behind.” Doug rolled his eyes. “That’s why I stopped by. We’re going for a pack run, getting too close to the full moon, and we’re getting restless. Derrek has a cell phone that will hopefully get reception where we’re going. At least in the base camp, we’ll have reception if something happens.”

“How does a werewolf even carry a cell phone in wolf form?” Faolan jammed his shovel into the ground, turning over another patch.

“Hooked to a collar.” Doug shrugged. “We tag it on the young ones.”

“I can’t imagine too many wolves want to be collared.” Faolan stabbed with the shovel again, very glad he couldn’t read Doug’s mind at this point.

“Just the pervy ones,” Jason pointed out with a laugh.

“We’re not pervy.” Derrek slapped Jason’s arm.

“I’m amazed you can say that with a straight face.” Doug shook his head.

“Don’t you have a bunch of werewolves in a van to get back to?” Derrek glared, snapping his jaws at his twin’s neck. Doug cuffed him.

“Boy, I hope someone cracked a window so they can get their heads out.” Jason lolled his tongue for emphasis.

“Jason.” Faolan shoved him, ricocheting Jason toward Derrek.

“You suck.” Derrek pushed Jason back to Faolan

Jason flung his arms out to either side to ward them off. “Of course. I’m a *vampire*.”

“On that note, I’m out of here. Derrek, call us if you need us.” Doug shoulder bumped his brother.

“If you need to go and run Derrek, we’ll manage,” Faolan said, wondering what he looked like as a wolf. Probably like his twin, dark, solid and handsome.

He shook his head. “I’m fine. I can always just run around here.”

“Better get a tennis ball so you can play fetch with him, Faolan.” Jason beamed, and Derrek’s hackles went up.

“Jason, I’m digging a damn big hole here. I can bury you in it,” Faolan warned. He’d miss Jason, but the silence might be blissful.

Jason shrugged. “He’ll probably be too busy chasing cars and licking himself, anyhow.”

Derrek balled up his fists. “I’m going to—”

“Pick up a shovel and get to work,” Brigid finished for him. She leveled a look at the men. “The three to join can get this garden done in no time.”

Jason waved her off. “I’m not doing manual labor.”

“I wonder if it’s too late to catch up with the van.” Derrek made a show of looking in the direction his brother had gone.

“Come on, I’ll get you some shovels,” Faolan said, annoyed no one followed.

“How about I provide you with a tintinnabulum made with *fascinus*? It’ll watch over the garden.” Jason smiled.

Derrek wrinkled his nose. "A what?"

"A tintinnabulum is a wind chime that we used to put in gardens to protect us of evil and the *fascinus* was the most powerful symbol we had for doing that," Jason replied. "It's a phallus."

Derrek's jaw dropped for a moment, before snapping closed. Shaking his head, he asked, "You want to hang a wind chime made of dicks in the garden?"

"It's great magic. We wore them as charms, a fist over a phallus, especially in battle." Jason used his hands to demonstrate the design. "You stroked them for luck. I know I've always found it particularly lucky if I get to stroke a phallus."

Derrek put a hand over his eyes. Faolan didn't blame him.

On a roll, Jason added, "It's where the word fascinate comes from."

"Of course it does, because you men are fascinated with those little things from before you can even walk." Brigid flipped a dismissive wave Jason's way. "This garden isn't going to plant itself. Hop to it boys." She clapped her hands together.

Derrek trotted after Faolan to get the shovel, while Jason protested his phallus wasn't little. "I think she's the real alpha here," Derrek said once they were out of ear shot.

Faolan snorted. "She is."

"And if your boyfriend doesn't knock it off, I might just see how good of a stake a shovel handle is." Derrek's smile was pure predatory wolf.

Faolan reached over and patted Derrek's arm. "You let him get you too easily. He'll just keep it up if he sees it's annoying you."

His feral grin broadened. "And after I tear out his throat?"

"He'll just heal and start all over again." Faolan shrugged.

"How am I supposed to..." Derrek shook his hands as if he could make the words fall out of them. "He drives me nuts, but at the same time, I'm attracted to him. I just don't know how the three of us can possibly work."

"I think Jason will end up surprising you, Derrek, and the prophecy never promised being fated for one another would be easy. Nothing about Jason is ever easy," Faolan said woefully as they reached the shed. He fetched two shovels. "But since I did warn him if he continued to be an ass, I would tell you

his real name. I'm sure he was proud of it back in the day but now, not so much."

"How bad is it?" Derrek took one of the shovels, his eyes gleaming.

"Dioxippus."

Derrek snickered. "Really? That's rather horrible."

"I know. We better get back there before he escapes Grandma. Jason will definitely try to get out of digging."

"Who said I'm not going to do the same? This is not my garden."

Faolan tapped Derrek's butt with the flat of his shovel. "Oh, you'll shovel. Trust me."

Jason was sitting in the shade next to Sorcha when they got back, and not a single iota of dirt had been turned over in their absence. He looked over, hearing their approach. "You probably didn't need another shovel, Faolan. Fuzzy could just transform and make like a Jack Russell." He made doggie digging motions with his hands.

"Got a knife, Faolan? I need to whittle the tip of this into a stake." Derrek brandished his shovel.

"Do I have to knock your heads together?" Faolan sighed.

"Save that for later." Jason pointed to his crotch, and Sorcha slapped his stomach.

"Just get over here and help." Derrek pointed at Jason with his shovel. "Zippy."

Jason's jaw dropped. "You told!"

"I said I would if you kept being a jerk." Faolan beckoned him to join them.

"Boys, I'm busy working on potions to help you three in the battles to come. I will be supremely annoyed if it all goes to waste because I'm forced to kill you all, and have to search for a new mage, werewolf, and vampire who can get along." Brighid stabbed a boney finger at them. "Now quit being as useless as chocolate teapots and get to work."

Faolan knew better than to mess with his grandmother when she used that tone of voice. Mindful of where Deirdre was still digging for rocks on the other end, he started to turn over the garden. His companions joined him without another word.

"I know about two million better ways to wreck my back than how we did it today." Jason flopped on Faolan's couch.

"I almost believe that." Derrek sagged into the chair. "Now I see why Doug is afraid of Brigid."

"Always wise," Faolan called on his way to the kitchen.

Jason got up, stretching. He sauntered over to Derrek, then in one smooth move, straddled his lap. Faolan blinked in surprise. Derrek didn't look any less shocked. "He's probably going for tea over there, so if we don't start soon, we'll be swimming in lapsang souchong or something."

"I was getting us beer, smart ass." Faolan didn't move toward his fridge. Mostly he hated his open concept kitchen since grease got everywhere, but tonight it was coming in handy. He wanted to see what Jason did and how Derrek handled it. It might be good for them to start without him. Jason worried Derrek far more than Faolan had.

Jason kissed Derrek. From his angle, Faolan couldn't really see Derrek's expression but saw his muscles tense. He expected for Derrek to push Jason away, but instead, his shoulders softened. Derrek looped an arm under Jason's, resting his big hand on Jason's back. The kiss looked tender, and Faolan almost wanted to join in. He didn't expect it to be quite so hot watching these two. Jason sat back, giving a little wiggle of his ass over Derrek's lap.

Derrek's chest heaved as he glanced at Faolan. "You said he'd ask first."

He shrugged. "For biting. Kissing is another story."

"I might need that beer," Derrek said, but his hand didn't leave Jason's back.

"Hmm, maybe I did that wrong." Jason moved in for another kiss.

Faolan didn't go for the beers. He tried willing his body to behave itself, but the autonomic nervous system was just that, autonomic. His penis reminded him of that as it stirred. The way Jason cupped Derrek's cheek as they kissed made Faolan doubt his legs' ability to reliably hold him up. Jason might enjoy teasing the living hell out of Derrek, but the tenderness with which he handled Derrek—knowing the young man was nervous about all this—made Faolan melt inside. Derrek's grip on Jason tightened.

When he broke the kiss, Jason said, "Last chance to back out."

Derrek curled his fingers in Jason's shirt. "Not leaving, but this means you have to stop provoking me."

“Sure thing, fur bag.”

Derrek released Jason so he could thump him on the back. “Damn vampire.”

“You just going to watch, Faolan, or are you going to join us?” Jason didn’t turn to look at him.

“Watching is quite enjoyable, but I was about to move you both from that chair.” Faolan sauntered over so he could hug Jason from behind. He kissed Jason’s cheek and Derrek arched up to kiss the angle of Faolan’s jaw. “Because it won’t survive the three of us.”

Jason nodded, giving Faolan a gentle push back. “Especially since you two are new to this. The bed would be safest. If one of us strains something, your kin will never let us live it down.”

“If that happens, they would take pictures for prosperity provided they could manage it.” Faolan gave Derrek a hand up.

Derrek closed the distance between them, his lips touching Faolan’s. He felt that first mingling of their breath, a promise of what was to come. Faolan palmed Derrek’s erection, hidden by his jeans. Jason pressed against Faolan’s back, the heat of him stoking Faolan’s fires. Faolan broke the kiss, locking fingers with both men. They followed him into the bedroom. Faolan let go of their hands so he could play with Jason’s hair.

“You should probably start with Derrek,” Faolan said.

“Already taking charge.” Jason circled his hand over Faolan’s belly, making him wish he hadn’t just opted to be the last man in. He pulled Faolan close, whispering a plan in his ear.

Faolan grinned. “I like that idea. Go on.” He caressed Derrek’s back. “If that’s all right with you, Derrek. If you rather it be with me first, we can do that.”

Derrek eyed Jason, and for a moment Faolan thought he’d bolt after all. “What does he have in mind?”

Jason put a finger through Derrek’s belt loops, pulling him closer. “Let me show you. If there’s anything you don’t like, don’t be afraid to say so.” He rucked up Derrek’s shirt. “I think I’ll start with sucking you until you howl.”

Derrek’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Hard to argue that idea.”

“Thought so.” Jason tugged Derrek’s shirt off, trailing the wide plane of his tongue down to Derrek’s left nipple. As he sucked on Derrek, who swirled his fingers slowly in Jason’s hair, Faolan couldn’t stop from joining in. The only other thing he could do was stand by his dresser in the small room. Watching was fun, but there was no reason he couldn’t do both. He slowly took down Jason’s jeans, planting a kiss on the backs of both of Jason’s knees.

Faolan stood, hearing Derrek yelp. Jason teased Derrek’s nipple with a finger, a red pearl of blood forming at the tip where Jason obviously simply couldn’t help himself. Jason licked the drop of blood away.

“Mmmm, you’re as delicious as I’d hoped,” Jason murmured, sucking again on the pinprick wound.

Faolan sandwiched Jason between him and Derrek so he could lean in and steal another soft, slow kiss from him. He rubbed his own cock against Jason’s backside, wanting to take him now. Waiting would be better, but sometimes the animal inside didn’t agree. Instead of giving in, Faolan worked Jason’s boxers down.

“Oh.” Derrek stared down at Jason’s erection.

“Ah, never seen a foreskin before?” Jason plucked at Derrek’s nipple.

“Not in person.” Derrek stroked up the length of Jason’s cock, tracking its upward, right-curved length. Faolan assumed that it had been damaged back in Jason’s mortal, pankratiast days, giving it that slight bend.

Derrek touched the foreskin briefly, as if testing it.

“I don’t break,” Jason said.

Derrek stroked Jason more firmly. Faolan put his arms around Derrek, nuzzling his neck. Derrek arched his neck, giving Faolan better access. Jason reached past Derrek’s hip, rubbing Faolan’s crotch. Faolan lost track of how long they spent just touching each other, learning through their fingers and lips.

“Derrek, you need to lose those jeans,” Jason said finally.

“Yeah.” Derrek stripped in a hurry only to find himself bowled over onto the bed.

Faolan watched Jason pin Derrek crossways to the bed, kissing him hungrily. As they kissed and stroked each other’s muscular body, Faolan undressed. Jason had shared his idea of how this should go, not exactly taking dominion over it all, but rather offering up his vast experience. Faolan

concentrated on being patient when his body wanted to dive in, slowly stroking himself to keep his fire going.

“I promised to suck you until you howled.” Jason nudged Derrek to move more fully onto the bed.

“You did.” Derrek looked at Jason with undisguised lust.

Faolan wished Jason's smile was for him. Jason straddled Derrek, positioning himself so he could take Derrek deep into his mouth, and affording Derrek the opportunity to do the same for him. The heat rose in Faolan as he took in the amazing view of his two lovers pleasuring each other with tongue, lips and hands. The soft sounds they made formed a gratifying symphony.

Faolan couldn't wait forever. He fetched the lube before joining them at the edge of the bed. Derrek's coarse brush cut tickled Faolan's thighs. Derrek let Jason's cock slip free of his mouth, reaching up to bring the tip of Faolan's shaft down to where he could ring his tongue around its head. Faolan took a deep breath in, losing himself to the moment. When Derrek turned his attentions back to Jason's cock, Faolan slicked his shaft before caressing Jason's ass. Faolan admired his lovers, their enthusiasm for each other driving him nearly out of his mind. He slipped a couple fingers inside Jason, pumping them.

Jason moaned, letting Derrek pop free. “Don't play games, Faolan. Fuck me.”

“As you wish.” Faolan grinned. Derrek paused for a moment as well, as if waiting for Faolan to fully join them.

Faolan thrust into Jason, eliciting another delightful groan. Once Faolan found his rhythm, Jason turned his attention back to Derrek's cock. Derrek returned the attention with interest, sneaking his hand up to caress Faolan's balls as they slapped against Jason's ass. Faolan had never planned for something like this, but now he couldn't imagine why not? He couldn't read minds but he didn't have to. Faolan couldn't be the only one who felt so connected to the others that he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to go back to the way things were. Was it love? Faolan didn't know. Whatever their connection was, it ran deep.

Derrek let Jason's cock go as his body shuddered. Howl he did, loud and resonating in Faolan's chest. Derrek looped a hand around Faolan's leg as he rode his orgasm to the end. Jason pulled Derrek's cock out of his mouth, licking his lips. Faolan paused deep inside Jason.

“Told you I’d make you howl.” Jason grinned.

Derrek panted, stroking his hand up and down Faolan’s leg as he started up his slow rhythm again. “Damn vampire.”

“Time for you to make me howl.” Jason slapped Derrek’s thigh and pressed back, meeting Faolan’s thrust. Jason made a soft, happy sound. Derrek took Jason’s cock back into his mouth. “Won’t take me long, so close.”

Faolan caressed Jason’s back as he pumped into him. Leaning forward, he kissed Jason’s sweaty shoulder, tasting his salt. Derrek rimmed the head of Jason’s cock as he swiftly circled his hand up and down the length of it. Jason knew Faolan’s body well. Faolan’s hips shuddered as Jason came, catching Derrek on the lips and chin. Derrek continued to lick Jason’s shaft, as Faolan picked up his pace.

“Come on, babe.” Jason writhed his hips.

Faolan couldn’t hold on. Like a bowstring pulled taut, the release was quick; forceful. Faolan cried out softly, his hips breaking rhythm. He wrapped an arm around Jason’s belly, using him to steady himself. Derrek’s fingers caressing Faolan’s backside were the first thing to break through his bliss. Faolan pulled out of Jason, his senses still whirling.

Jason rolled off Derrek, coming up in a sitting position. He pulled Faolan down onto the mattress with them. Faolan flipped onto his back and Jason snuggled up alongside him. Derrek curled around Faolan’s left. Jason and Derrek clasped hands over Faolan’s belly. He put a hand over theirs. No words were needed in this moment. It was perfect.

Chapter Ten

The Yunnan Gold did nothing for him. Faolan was almost face down in his tea while his laptop seemed to mock him. He shouldn't be in his cramped medical office trying to write a patient note. He should still be curled up in his big bed with his lovers even if Derrek did growl a little in his sleep.

He was so tired he didn't even hear Sorcha approaching on her forearm crutches, but he didn't miss her snicker, however. He twisted on the task chair so he could glare at her. Like him, she wore blue scrubs and a lab coat, but unlike him, she was bright eyed.

"Did someone fall under a couple of buses last night?" Sorcha hobbled in and sat in the worn chair in the corner.

Faolan deepened his glare and took a big drink of his tea.

"I can't believe you got those two to stop provoking each other long enough to go along with sleeping together." Sorcha grinned.

"The trick is finding something else for their mouths to do."

Sorcha made a face before threatening him with her crutch. "Oh, I don't want to know that. You keep that stuff to yourself."

He cocked up his eyebrows. "My love life is nowhere near as kinky as you think."

Sorcha's grin broadened. "Think about what you did last night and say that again with a straight face. I dare you."

He shrugged. "Fair point."

"I don't want to know what my little brother gets up to when he's naked." Sorcha gave an exaggerated shudder.

He snorted, but it turned into a yawn. "I will pay you a million dollars to write this patient note for me."

"You don't have a million dollars. Besides, I have to take Deirdre to the dentist soon." She held up her hands. "You're on your own, brother."

"Then why did you even come in here?" Faolan drank more tea, but if he was expecting a miracle burst of energy, it wasn't happening.

"Just to see if you survived." Sorcha slapped his knee.

He gave her the finger. "If you're not going to help, let me sleep in peace."

"You have patients."

He slipped down further on his chair. "Tell them I'm dead."

"I'll tell them the vampires and werewolves ate you from the hips up." Sorcha beamed.

Before he could form a response, Amy, one of the nurses, poked her head in, her face ghost-pale. "Dr. Fraser, your grandmother just sent word. Building Blocks was just attacked. The day care workers are dead, and the kids were taken!"

Faolan smashed his knee into the desk as he jumped up. He swore loudly, rubbing his knee.

Sorcha gasped. "That's Deirdre's daycare." Her crutches rattled from her nerves. "She should have been there!"

"She's not. She's safe." Faolan hugged his sister, then pulled out his cell, calling his grandmother first. "Any clues where they took the kids, Grandma?"

"They left a note on the chalkboard. 'Catch us if you can. We're waiting in your favorite place in the Hocking Hills.' We're assuming they're talking to you, Faolan," Brigid told him, her voice brittle. "I'm mobilizing half a dozen units with dogs since the pack isn't at home. You take Jason and Derrek. Put Sorcha on the phone. I know she's with you."

Faolan handed the phone to Sorcha. She nodded at whatever Brigid had to say, then gave the phone back, struggling to her feet. "Amy, get me a spare chair. I need to get something from my room. Robyn, one of the girls who's gone missing left her nightie when she stayed over with Deirdre last weekend. The dogs and Derrek will need it. Round them up and meet me there, Faolan."

"Of course." As Amy helped Sorcha into a wheelchair, which she could go faster in than with her crutches, Faolan made a call to Jason first.

Jason had been asleep and had no idea where Derrek was, but he wasn't in the apartment. Luckily, Derrek answered his phone, but he had to call Faolan back. Faolan had forgotten Derrek hadn't been in his life for long. He had no idea where Sorcha lived.

Jason met Faolan in the family wing of the huge Ridges complex. "Did they get our baby, Faolan?" He sounded out of breath from running so hard.

"No. Deirdre's here. She had a dentist appointment, but they don't know that. Justin probably doesn't know what she looks like, and they might want the

kids for more reasons than just to hurt me. In terms of bad magic, little kids and their innocence is gold,” Faolan replied. “I wish I knew where Derrek went.”

“Probably out pissing on stuff to make it his,” Jason said, as Faolan knocked once then opened the door to his sister’s place.

“I was not!” Derrek rounded the corner in a tank top and shorts. His earphones dangled around his neck. “I was out running. Is the pup okay?”

“She’s fine,” Sorchia said, coming out of her bedroom. She had a bag on her lap. “Here’s the nightie. I’ve cut it up so all the teams can get a piece.”

“Thank you. You take Deirdre and get to the safe house, Sorchia. I’d say take Grandma, but she probably won’t go,” Faolan said.

“I will. You get those kids back.” Sorchia shoved the bag at him.

“We will.” Faolan took it and spun on his heel.

None of them spoke as they ran for the garage to get a ride. Faolan stopped at his apartment just long enough for his messenger bag full of weapons. He already wore his neck guard. The SUVs would be fully stocked, but it felt more comfortable to have his own weapons. They were the last to arrive at the garage, the teams waiting by the sleek black SUVs. Faolan handed off the bits of nightgown so everyone could get started. It wasn’t a close drive to get to the Hocking Hills.

“Where is your favorite place?” Derrek asked once they were underway.

“I don’t know. I love it all, but the falls, if I had to choose, especially at this time of year when the snow melt makes the falls beautiful,” Faolan said, pushing the SUV as fast as it could safely travel. On the roof of the SUV, their bubble light flashed. They had as much leeway as the highway patrol to speed. No one wanted between the Lucerna and the demon hoards. “Did you get a hold of Doug?”

Derrek shook his head. He rode shotgun, claiming motion sickness if he was in the back. The last thing they needed was a dizzy, vomiting werewolf tracker. “I left a message. They’ll get it. But without a scent trail, I’m not sure they’ll ever find us. Cell phones will be spotty at best. All we can do is try to get to them there. At least you guys keep bloodhounds to help out.”

“Your pack is too small to rely on exclusively,” Faolan said in explanation. “Jason, we didn’t have time to gather your Murder. If we don’t get him now, we’ll need their help.”

"I'll call Ollie and get him to round them up. I have too many who are nightwalkers only. This is a young clan." Jason sat up against the back of Derrek's seat. "It will have to do."

"Why are they doing this? Everywhere else they just came in and killed everyone. Why take the kids? I'm not sure I really want an answer." Derrek tugged at his seatbelt shoulder strap.

"I'm sure they targeted the daycare because of Deirdre. They'd have no way of knowing Sorcha kept her home today." Faolan tightened his grip on the steering wheel, swinging the vehicle around a slowpoke in the damned left lane. "Justin and whoever he's working with—"

"Because he would have to be working with someone to pull this off," Jason said.

"Right." Faolan nodded. "They might want to spoil the energy of the area by doing something big and bad."

"Or draw us away from the compound so they can attack there," Jason said.

Faolan scowled. "This is why we have you doing detective work, Jason. You have a horribly devious mind. Call Brighid and suggest that."

"Knowing your grandmother, she's already thought of it." Jason made the call anyway.

The drive to the hills seemed to take forever. Faolan chose the parking lot closest to the falls. It wasn't very crowded, being in the middle of the week. Derrek stripped off his shirt and shoes as Faolan parked. Derrek opened the door, using it as a shield as he removed his pants.

"Someday, we need to come back out here. He looks good naked in the woods." Jason jerked a thumb at Derrek before bailing out of the SUV.

Faolan rolled his eyes, though he appreciated Jason's attempt to lighten the terrible mood. He pulled his messenger bag on, stuffing in some of the water bottles from the back of the SUV. They'd be warm, but they'd do the trick. Jason helped himself to some of the guns.

"No, to the woods. I'm not a fan of twigs and bugs." Derrek stretched. "And contrary to popular belief, not all werewolves are into doggy style. Ugh." The grunt accompanied a loud crunching noise. Derrek's form changed, shrinking in, rearranging as his humanity submerged, and the wolf came out.

“Faolan knows a spell to repel bugs,” Jason said, as Faolan handed the remaining strip of the little girl’s nightgown to Derrek, letting him sniff it. “And we can talk positions once we get these kids back.”

Derrek curled his lips away from his thick fangs.

“Was that enough to get the scent?” Faolan asked.

Derrek howled, trotting over to a white van that might have been a plumber’s once based on the faded logo. He growled at the door.

“I’m taking that as we were right about your favorite spot, Faolan.” Jason peered in one of the windows. “Nothing’s in there now.”

“You sure?”

“Vampires know when a warm body is around. Do you know how many kids they took?”

Derrek head-bumped Faolan’s leg and took off toward the trail. They followed.

“No, but it’s a small daycare. There are only a dozen kids, so no more than that. That means if this is Justin, he simply cannot be alone.”

A coolness descended on them the moment they entered the woods. The deciduous trees hadn’t leafed out yet, but hemlocks dominated this forest. The dappled sunlight couldn’t abate the cool touch of shade. The soft dirt path led down into the valley through walls of limestone and lines of trees. It would have been the easiest way to get kids into the woods, but how anyone could control a pack of two to four year olds Faolan didn’t know. He wondered if drugs or a spell had been used to make them docile.

Derrek moved more swiftly than his two-legged companions could manage. Jason handled the woods better than Faolan expected. He remembered being surprised by that the first time he had taken the vampire into them years ago. That’s when it really hit home, just how old Jason was. He grew up in times where there were more woods than anything else. Once they were down to the valley floor, Derrek started loping along faster. Thankfully Jason and he were in good shape and could keep up.

“He has to be a complete idiot to try and attack a druid in the woods.” Jason leapt over an exposed root.

“That worries me. He has to know that. That means he’ll have planned for it.” Faolan reached out to the trees, stretching his essence into them, tapping them for strength as he ran.

“Or he’s just flat out bonkers and didn’t think it through. You did say he failed the psych test.” Jason panted a little as he ran, adding to the noises of the woods. Birds and insects kept up a constant stream of sound as did the wind through the hemlocks.

“That would be the best case scenario.” Faolan cast a glance over at the tannic creek meandering through the valley floor. “Or maybe he just picked it because he knew I liked this place and didn’t know why. Hell, he could have just been using the creek to make a statement.”

“Not following.” Jason’s foot skidded on a twig, and he flailed his arms to stay upright.

Faolan pointed at a turtle sunning itself in the creek. “That’s Queer Creek.”

“Really? We’ve been coming here five years and you never mentioned.”

“You never seemed particularly interested in the wilderness, Jason. It’s not our kind of queer, but like I said, it could be a statement.”

Derrek barked at them, looking back to see if they were following. He left the path, climbing up the hill. This was slower going for Faolan and Jason. Needles and dry leaves were everywhere, and the hemlock’s little cones were underfoot, making it slippery. Hefty limestone boulders, covered with mosses and ferns, at least made convenient handholds.

Faolan slowed before Jason or Derrek. He listened to what the wind and trees had to say. It wasn’t a voice per se, nor words, but the sensations were there. “Derrek,” he whispered bringing the werewolf to heel. “Slowly now. They’re ahead.”

Jason took out his modified gun. It shot a “bullet” of holy water and silver flakes in a thin shell. It would take a demon out, and certainly slow down any vampires or werewolves that might be helping. Mages were human, and humans didn’t do well when punctured by any high velocity projectile. Faolan readied his wand but he’d barely need it in a setting like this.

“We know you’re there, Fraser. You had to come. The wolves can smell you,” a voice called, giving them information that the person probably should have kept to himself. Though, Faolan had already suspected other supernaturals were helping out.

Together, the trio made their way to the top of the ridge. A large, flat hunk of limestone adorned the top of the hill. A small tree split the stone, growing up out of it, its roots wrapped around it. The children were ringed around the rock, sitting there like little dolls, not moving one iota. Definitely drugged or

bespelled. Closest to them was a thin young man with close-cropped honey-blond hair. He looked like he should be an OU student, but his eyes said something different. They spoke of a fever, of something broken in him. Faolan thought it was Justin, but he wasn't entirely sure. He had no idea who the other half-dozen men were. He only saw two werewolves, but there could be more.

"Justin?" Faolan asked.

"Oh, good, I wasn't sure you'd have figured it out. At least you aren't an idiot. I'd hate to see my father's group in the hands of a fool." Justin beamed, spreading his hands wide.

"They're vampires," Jason hissed in Faolan's ear. He nodded. He knew better than to doubt Jason's senses. At his knee, Derrek growled, his hackles standing up. He hoped Derrek wouldn't just charge in. Werewolves were known for that.

Faolan spread his hands, trying to project a calm and, hopefully, quieting figure. "Why are you doing all of this, Justin? Why would you hurt the kids?"

"As you can see, the kids are just fine." Justin leaned over, patting a little girl on her head. She still didn't move. "As for the other attacks, well, things happen to bad people, Fraser, people who steal. I didn't really do anything. I just enabled it." He snapped his fingers, and a teenager popped up from behind the rock.

Faolan knew the boy, Shawn, from the gaming circle. "You still have him possessed."

"You know how it is. Once a demon moves in, they don't like to move out." Justin chuckled. "Of course, today didn't go quite as I planned. Good help is hard to find." He glared over at the vampires, but they seemed unimpressed. "I missed picking up your little niece."

"You leave her out of this." Faolan pointed his wand at Justin, unsure of what spell he could use that wouldn't hurt the kids, since Justin stood so close to them. He hoped Justin couldn't see the hesitancy on his face. Of course, he might have already guessed that, which was why he stood where he did.

"Why? You stole from me. Why shouldn't I take something that matters so much to you?" Justin took a lighter out of his pocket.

Faolan's breath hitched. It was all Justin needed to make the spark for his fire magic. He could burn down the entire damned forest if he wanted to. He hoped Jason and Derrek remembered what he'd said about Justin's powers. "No one stole from you, Justin. You know the succession as a Lucerna leader isn't

naturally all in the family. You were far too young at seventeen. Hell, at thirty, they didn't trust it to me to completely take over without my grandmother staying on for years. You could have become leader once you had more experience. Instead, you decided to quit."

"Should you be pissing him off?" Jason asked just loud enough for Faolan to hear.

Faolan slashed his hand at him.

"As if you would ever have let me lead!" Justin spat, taking a few steps away from the kids. That's what Faolan was hoping for. "They said I was unfit for the field."

"At that time. You had just lost your father. You were encouraged to be retested later." Faolan didn't think he was getting through to Justin, but he had to try.

Justin's face went pale, then blotchy red. "It wouldn't have changed things. You'd still be in charge."

"I have to agree after seeing this." Faolan gestured to the kids with his wand.

"Want us to fuck up this asshole now?" one of the vampires asked.

Justin smirked. "By all means."

Derrek howled a call Faolan hadn't heard before and charged. Faolan hoped Derrek stayed out of the direct line of fire. Justin flicked the lighter on and sent a wave of flame their way. Faolan managed to draw up a line of earth to block it, but some of the dead leaves caught fire. Most were too wet from the heavy snows which had just melted, making the fire sizzle.

He tried to ignore the growls and yowls as Derrek took on two of the other werewolves. Jason's gun roared, sending the other werewolf rolling on the ground, yipping in pain. Jason shot two of the vampires before they could move.

"Tell them to stand down, Fraser!" Justin pointed his lighter toward the kids. "Think you can stop me before they die?"

Faolan clutched his wand so tight, he nearly snapped it. "They're babies. Leave them out of it."

"I had hoped to, but since this is going sideways, why not? I could use them to call up something to wipe the Lucerna out." Justin laughed at the idea.

Faolan felt something coming up behind him, destroying his ability to deal with Justin. He whirled and shot a bolt of concentrated energy straight through the vampire's head, dropping him. Faolan whipped back around, hoping he could at least disarm Justin. He had no idea what Justin's shielding abilities were.

Justin had stepped even closer to the kids. None of them had an easy shot at Justin. The wind brought in a new sound: a chorus of wolves. Derrek howled back to them, but when he took his jaws away from the wolf he'd pinned, the other werewolf bit him, scoring a hit on his arm. Snarling, Derrek bit him right back.

Justin scowled, his hand holding the lighter, dipping down. "I didn't expect the whole pack."

"You should have." Faolan set a wave of force at him, not really wanting to kill the deluded young man, but what choice did he have?

He quickly learned what kind of defense Justin had: a good one. The force didn't cut him in half, or even touch him. It bounced off his shield. The collision threw Justin several feet, landing him under a tall hemlock tree. His lighter went flying. Faolan ran after him, calling on the hemlock, trying to use its roots to ensnare Justin. Justin came up with a second lighter, setting the tree ablaze.

"Damn. Better retreat," Justin called to his men. Faolan didn't look to see if any were still able to run for it. Justin chanted something, and the brush moved. Several large, shaggy man-like things crashed out of the tree line. "Have fun with them."

Faolan drew on the strength of the woods around him. He summoned up a little rain cloud for the tree. As he tried to contain the fire, he realized the new combatants headed right for the kids. They were as immobile as ever. Whatever Justin had done to them had yet to wear off.

"What the hell are those?" Jason bellowed.

"Grassmen," Faolan shouted back.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Next it'll be sheepsquatch!" Jason leapt on the nearest grassman as Derrek raced off after Justin.

Justin whirled, sending a streamer of fire right at Derrek's face. Derrek turned, catching the flames with his side. He fell onto the loam, rolling and making a sound like a dog hit by a car. The flames were out by the time he

scrambled to his feet. Justin was out of view. Faolan started after the mage himself.

“Derrek, guard the kids. I’ll deal with Justin.”

Shouting orders might not have been his best idea. The Grassmen seemed to understand, trying to surround him. Faolan shot one with the gun while firing the concentrated energy from his wand at another. By the time he was free, Justin had vanished. Swearing under his breath, Faolan staggered back to the big boulder and the kids. He flopped down next to one little girl, ostensibly to check out if she was okay, but damn, going into this fight as exhausted as he had been and using so much magic, Faolan’s strength had failed him.

“Are they all right?” Jason asked.

Faolan shrugged. “I’m not sure if this is a spell or if they’re drugged. Whatever it is, they are utterly docile. I think we might be able to get them back to the SUV under their own power once we figure out if they’ll follow us. If not.” He looked off into the distance. “I’m not sure how far the pack is from here. I’m no judge of wolf howls.”

“At this point I’m doubting your own ability to climb around on rocks to get out of here, babe.” Jason sat next to him. “Hey, fur bag, are you all right?”

Derrek’s body shuddered and stretched into his wolf man form. He backed around the rock some. “Yeah. Bleeding some, but nothing bad.”

“You could help me carry some of these kids if they won’t walk. Faolan could stay here, worse comes to worse, and watch the ones we can’t carry on the first trip,” Jason said.

“One problem. In this form, something is sort of dangling free, if you get my meaning,” Derrek said, clearing up why he had backed up behind the rock.

“Oh. We should have put his pants in your messenger bag.” Jason slapped Faolan’s arm.

“Noted for next time.” Faolan wiped his sweaty forehead. “Derrek, is the pack far off?”

Derrek pointed his still-elongated snout into the wind, sniffing. “Yeah, not as close as Justin thought.”

“All right. I’ll try to call the other teams. They can help, too,” Faolan said. All he wanted to do was sink into the loam and recuperate. At least the kids were safe. That was more than he dared to wish for. Now all they had to do was

get them home and find some way of getting ahead of Justin before he hurt anyone else.

Chapter Eleven

Still connected to the oak in the smaller grove closest to the Lucerna complex, Faolan listened to his grandmother's chanting at her altar just a few feet away. He wore only a light cotton kilt, and even that had been rucked up to a barely decent length. He saw Derrek, a bit battered and bruised from the fight yesterday, enter the grove with Jason. Derrek watched him curiously. Jason had seen the lustrations before. Brighid washed his hands and feet with the blessed water laced heavily with the agrimony she had prepared. He prayed as she poured it over his head and body.

Brighid set the bowl aside and picked up another one. She sprinkled some of its contents over his head as well. She beckoned Jason and Derrek closer. "I'm glad you came, boys. I wanted to bless you with this."

Derrek eyed it, his discomfort plain on his face. "What is it?"

"A mix of fern to help you slip past your enemies unseen, and betony, a cure-all. It will protect you in battle." Brighid dipped her hand into it and anointed Jason's head.

"I don't know. It seems... sacrilegious for me." Derrek scowled.

"Think of it as spilling some tea on yourself. That's about what it is. Just herbs and water," Jason said. "A little magic."

Derrek bit his bottom lip, nodding. "Okay."

Brighid brushed the water over his brow as well, before setting the bowl back on the little altar. Faolan disconnected from the tree and padded over to where he had folded up a change of clothes. He pulled on boxers and trousers up under his kilt before taking it off, then tugged on a shirt. It stuck to his wet torso in a few places.

"Is everyone here?" he asked his lovers.

"The pack is waiting outside the conference room and the murder of vampires is inside." Derrek eyed Faolan's wet hair. "Was she putting the most invisibility stuff on you?"

"No, that was the *Mur-druidhean*, the Druid's Sorrow," Faolan replied, hanging the wet kilt over a tree branch. "We better go before everyone gets antsy."

“Druid’s Sorrow?” Derrek asked, as they walked back toward the main complex. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

“It means to dispel sorrow,” Brighid said in explanation. “It is powerful.”

Derrek widened his eyes. “And only you get it because?”

“Because like holy water, it requires faith. The fern and betony was mixed with faith, but the *Mur-druidhean* acts on the faith of the person it was administered to. I can’t make Christian holy water, and you can’t activate the *Mur-druidhean*.”

Derrek nodded, satisfied with that answer. “And did your sister and the kids get away from here safely?”

“Sorcha and several of the other parents are in one of our safe houses. Sorcha might not be able to run and fight, but she has enough magic to keep the kids safe,” Faolan replied, angry they had to displace so many from their homes, even for what would hopefully be a short time.

Doug was leaning on the door to the conference room when they got there, eyes locked on a vampire with the skin the color of the perfect cup of coffee. Ollie watched Doug just as intently. Both of them broke off their staring match, and Doug opened the door. Jason swept his finger at Ollie who went right inside.

Doug sniffed at Derrek. He wrinkled his nose, probably trying to figure out the smell of fern and betony. “What did you do?”

“I dunno. It’s something out of a six-demon bag so I can see things no one else can see and do things no one else can do.” Derrek shrugged.

Faolan’s jaw dropped. “Did you just quote *Big Trouble in Little China*? I think I’m in love.”

“That’s a good thing given how much of you I smell on my little brother.” Doug showed his teeth to Faolan, who ignored the threat, knowing it wasn’t real.

“I’m younger than you by like two minutes,” Derrek protested.

Doug cuffed Derrek on the back of the head. “And don’t you forget it.” He made an odd little noise like a fussing wolf-bitch at her cubs. It had about the same affect. All of the werewolves entered the conference room, looking like they’d be more at home at a potluck social at the Baptist church than they did in a room filled with mages and vampires. From what Faolan remembered, most of the pack was Baptist or Lutheran.

The room was already packed with other Lucerna members, the ones who made the Ridges and the surrounding housing areas their home. Mages, researchers, nonmagical warriors all intermingled toward the left side of the room. The vampires were in the middle, except for a few in the shadows who probably weren't old enough to day-walk comfortably yet. The werewolves took the window seats. Doug and Derrek made a unified front as they prowled in tandem to the head of the room. Faolan and Jason did likewise, with Brighid following them.

Faolan looked to the werewolf twins first, then to Jason, getting a silent acknowledgment from them all. He took a step forward, raising his voice. "You all know why you're here. Some of you know Justin Barnes well. You grew up with him. I did not, but I regret that one of us could go so tragically wrong, and for so little reason. His hatred is not targeted just at me, unfortunately, but on the things I love. He means to strip everything from me, and that puts all of you in danger. I need us all to work—"

A shrill alarm went off, several in fact. It took Faolan a moment to even figure them all out. One was magical, and the more frightening because it meant something evil had breached the defenses around the complex. The other was the fire alarm. He didn't have to tell the Lucerna what to do. Everyone who could go out in the sun spilled out of the building in a swell of bodies.

Faolan's heart thudded when he saw several buildings on fire, including the family wing, hospital, and library. Some Lucerna members scrambled for the garage, where they kept fire trucks. They might not be quick enough. Several red monstrous-sized, black-spotted, salamander-like creatures crawled through the complex. He saw Justin just behind them, whipping the fire demon's flames even higher. Other demons, like the imps at the Athena Theatre, raced about, dozens of them.

"How do we fight something like this? What are those things?" Derrek ripped his shirt off so he'd be free to shift forms.

"Fire demons. I have to get the flames out." Faolan fumbled for his wand. Not a single Lucerna member had attended the meeting unarmed. Transformed wolves and pissed off vampires met the imps head on while the mages tried to figure out a way to stop the fire demons.

"I have the hospital," Brighid shouted to him.

Faolan twisted around seeing his grandmother, wand held high, calling up a massive storm. Several younger Lucerna members made a protective phalanx

around her. "I'll do what I can for the rest." Faolan charged toward the library and the salamander circling it.

"Stay in wolfman form," Jason rasped out as they ran after Faolan. "We can't fight magic, but we can fuck up these imps and keep them off Faolan's back. The holy water would be better than our teeth."

"Right." Derrek already had his water gun out in one furry hand.

Faolan dropped to all fours once he was close enough to the library, and thrust a huge burst of his power into the ground. The dirt and rock rose up like a cliff, then dumped all over the library and the salamander. Without oxygen, the fire smothered, and the demon was stunned. Derrek ran in and blasted its head clean off with the holy water. Faolan caught his breath, digging in deep, but before he could get up, an imp slammed into him, bowling him over.

Faolan grunted in pain. Dirt clouded his eyes. Something caught him in the gut, but the weight was lifted off of him. A gout of foul-smelling ichor drenched him as Jason tore the imp's throat out with his teeth. He shot holy water into its chest. Spitting, Jason reached down and dragged Faolan bodily to his feet, giving him a shake. "Don't give up all your power in one go," Jason said.

"I didn't!" Faolan took his own water pistol, and shot himself in the eyes until they were cleared. "Besides, it was the library."

"If you die over books, I swear the furbag and I will piss on your grave, dumbass." Jason turned and spat again, clearing the purplish ichor.

"What the leech said." Derrek loped past, charging after another imp.

A clap of thunder from his grandmother's storm all but deafened Faolan. Through the smoke filling the air, he saw the fire trucks at the family housing. They could deal with the last fire. He had to put a stop to Justin. It had to end here. He suspected the young man had the same idea. Faolan wasn't sure if Justin was sane enough to understand the danger he had put himself in by attacking the Ridges head on. Maybe Justin thought the hoard of demons would be enough and it could well be true.

"Derrek, I can't see through this smoke. Can you pinpoint Justin?" Faolan moved away from the library and the other buildings and closer to the trees around them. He saw flames blazing toward the small grove and wondered if a salamander had crawled in there.

"I can't smell shit." Derrek sounded congested. Faolan could only imagine what all the smoke was doing to the werewolves' keen senses.

Faolan had no choice. He didn't want to use his energy to create a wind to blow the smoke away, but the smoke limited his vision. He raised his wand, and it burst into flames. Startled, Faolan dropped it, and dowsed it with his water gun. "Dammit!" Another ball of fire hit near his feet, making him jump back.

Justin laughed loudly, standing at the mouth of the grove. Imps ringed around him, shielding him with their bodies. "You're not so hot in a fight, pun intended."

"Razing this place to the ground won't get you what you want, Justin." Faolan took a step toward his wand only to get another fire ball shot at him. Derrek edged closer to Justin, but came up short when Justin pointed his lighter in Derrek's direction. He obviously remembered what happened last time all too well.

"Actually, since that is what I want, yes it will." Justin's skin gleamed with sweat.

"Fuck him up already, Faolan!" Jason bulled his way right into the two nearest imps, startling Justin. He probably thought no one would be so bold.

Derrek rushed in after Jason. Faolan tried for his wand again, but Justin was ready for that. Changing tactics, Faolan followed his hot-headed lovers' examples. He advanced directly on Justin, reaching into his bag for a gun loaded with the holy water and silver bullets. It wouldn't kill Justin, but it might stop him. Stalking Justin, he fired. One of the bullets hit Justin in the leg. Screaming, Justin spun around, hobbling deeper into the grove, using the oak for cover.

Faolan grinned, dodging as Derrek, and an imp nearly crashed into him. Derrek's eye glinted as he shredded the thing, the man in him almost completely gone over to the beast. Faolan had to trust Derrek and Jason to keep the imps out of his way. He kicked off his shoes and struggled with his socks, nearly falling over as Justin shot another fire ball at him.

"You don't have your wand, Fraser. What do you think you can do to me now?" Justin's voice didn't sound as brave as his words.

Drawing himself up to his full height, Faolan felt the force of the grove's magic driving into him. He couldn't help but brag. "You're in *my* grove, my sacred space. You let me corner you in the worst possible place."

As fear flared in Justin's eyes, Faolan pressed his toes against the soft loam, connecting instantly with the old oak. He had never tried what he was about to

do before. In principle, he knew it was like how he moved earth, but the earth wasn't living. The tree was.

"You're still without a weapon." Justin waved a line of fire at him, and Faolan brought up another small wall of earth. "And trees burn."

Perhaps trees also understood. Faolan tapped into the oak, feeling its strength fill him, taking him to a space he usually only went to when with a lover, that sacred, blissful spot of deep still waters inside of himself. His magic radiated out, touching the grove. Creaking loudly, the tree's branches dipped down even as its roots surfaced. It wrapped around Justin, tighter than an irritated python, slamming him back against its trunk. Justin grunted, his lighter toppling from his hand. Faolan knew he could keep tightening those branches until Justin was crushed. It might even be what he deserved.

But it wasn't in him to kill a man if he didn't have to. Faolan punched Justin hard on the jaw, rocking his head against the oak's trunk. Justin slumped, held up only by his branchy confines. Faolan hit him again for good measure. Resting his palm against the oak, Faolan grew two strands of bark up from its trunk. He wrapped one over Justin's mouth and the other over his forehead, pinning him just in case he regained consciousness before Faolan could summon the guards to take Justin to the prisons the Lucerna used for their more dangerous enemies.

"You should kill him, you know."

Faolan rotated around to face Jason, shocked to see how coated with demon blood he was. Derrek stood next to him, chest heaving, seemingly unaware bits of demon flesh were stuck in his lupine teeth. Faolan's breath caught, seeing how many imps they had kept from his back while he had summoned his deep magic. "I know, and the Lucerna may still go that route, but for now, he gets to live with the hell inside his head."

"Fitting he chose to attack here. It's like the last psychotic break at the Athens Lunatic Asylum," Jason said. "You up to rejoining the battle?"

"Yeah... only where are my socks?"

They never found them, but Derrek came up with Faolan's shoes. They didn't wait for him, running off to rejoin the group. Faolan felt remarkably unaffected by his outlay of power. He paused before the oak, and thanked it before following the others.

It took another hour for all the demons to be dealt with. The guards came and removed Justin. He'd regained consciousness, but had been completely

unable to move or utter a sound. Faolan returned to the grove to watch them take Justin away. Afterwards, he slumped against the tree, in a different spot from where he had imprisoned the mad fire mage. Derrek put an arm—a human and unfurry arm—around Faolan's waist. Jason did likewise, leaning his head against Faolan's shoulder.

"We did it," Derrek said. "We stopped him, and we didn't die. Guess there's something to fate, after all."

"And Grandma's special potion." Faolan smiled.

"That, too."

"I hate to say it." Jason kissed Faolan's neck with his crusted lips. "We need to go back and address the troops."

"I know." Straightening up, Faolan patted the tree. Side by side, they went back into the complex's heart, soot streaked, bloodied, but unbroken.

Epilogue

"I have a better appreciation of the power of a trio." Derrek downed another of Jackie O's ales. "I mean, it's big in Christianity, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, but I guess I never really thought about it much."

"Trios were huge in my day, the fates, the *horae*, the *moirai*, the muses, you get the point." Jason sat back to let the waitress slide another porter in front of him.

"It's a triskelion. We are a triskelion." Faolan finished the remains of his stout before starting in on the next one the waitress handed him. "Threes have always been important. Who knows, this trio might go down in Lucerna history, if nothing else."

"I've already gone down in history." Jason grinned, thumping his broad chest. "But I'm all for doing it again."

"It still seems unreal to me. This was my first big battle with the Lucerna. It's sure as hell different than being in the Marines." Derrek shook his head. "I don't know what comes next."

"Hopefully, some relaxation." Jason leaned back on his chair.

"Yeah, well that, but that's not what I mean. I don't know where I go from here." Derrek tapped his chest.

"You don't plan on leaving us, do you?" Faolan's voice hitched a bit at the thought.

"No, that's still not what I mean. Look at you, Faolan." Derrek gestured to him. "You and Sorcha aren't just Lucerna. You're doctors. Jason's so damn old, he's probably been everything at one point or another."

"Pretty much." Jason nodded.

"I'm now out of the military and sure, I'm pack and Lucerna, but isn't there more I can be doing?" Derrek took another big swallow of beer.

"Take it easy on that. I plan on taking you home and doing any number of unspeakable things to you." Faolan circled a finger on the back of Derrek's hand.

"Gods, speak some of them please." Jason ran the toe of his shoe up Faolan's leg.

"In a minute." Faolan held up a hand to Jason. "Derrek, think of it this way. You're in an area with a fantastic university. If OU isn't your thing, there're Hocking College and the University of Rio Grande, all within forty miles. You can do whatever you want. Train for the police or fire department. I know some of your kin have farms in the area."

"No farming." Derrek wrinkled his nose. "I know you're right. It's just... I want it done now, I guess."

"Nothing happens overnight. You've barely been out of the military a month. Take your time. For now, just relax, spend some time with us. Hell, we still barely know each other as well as we should." Faolan waved a hand at Jason.

"He has a point there, furball."

"I know, leech." Derrek smiled. "I get what you're saying. I've never done patience well."

"Perfect. Neither of us does, either. We'll probably make the Lucerna implode." Faolan chuckled. "Beltane is in a few days. Come with me and see what that's like. I'm not looking for you to convert, but it will give you an insight into me. I'll be conducting the ritual."

"Okay, and yeah, I just joined the Athens First Christian Church since the one I grew up in was a bit too much of a jackass about gays." Derrek shrugged. "I like the reverend at my new church, but yeah, I'll come see your ceremony. I might even go to a con with you since no one with that much geek stuff in his apartment misses a con."

"He goes in costume." Jason shook his head woefully.

"Listen, Dioxippus, you keep whining about that, I will fill Derrek in on all the dumbass shit you do." Faolan finished his beer.

"Please." Derrek's eyes lit up.

"How about we just finish these beers and get to know each other back home with a lot less clothing on?" Jason tossed back his beer and stood.

"Better idea." Derrek fished out his wallet.

Once they settled up, they headed out into the cool night air. Hand in hand, they strolled toward home. They didn't get across the street before the window broke out of Buffalo Wild Wings as a college student and one of the imps tumbled out.

“Guess we missed a few,” Derrek said. “We can’t catch a break.”

“Oh, he’s going to pay for ruining our night.” Jason grinned, cracking his knuckles. “Faster we do this, the faster we get home.”

Faolan dug his wand out of his bag. “Let’s do this thing.”

The End

Author Bio

Jana Denardo's career choices and wanderlust take her all over the United States and beyond. Much of her travels make their way into her stories. Fantasy, science fiction, and mystery have been her favorite genres since she started reading, and they often flavor her works. In her secret identity, she works with the science of life and gives college students nightmares. When she's not chained to her computer writing, she functions as stray cat magnet.

Jana is Queen of the Geeks (her students voted her in) and her home and office are shrines to any number of comic book and manga heroes along with SF shows and movies too numerous to count. There is no coincidence the love of all things geeky has made its way into many of her stories. To this day, she's still disappointed she hasn't found a wardrobe to another realm, a superhero to take her flying among the clouds or a roguish star ship captain to run off to the stars with her.

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TRUNK'D

By Tam Ames

Photo Descriptions

Two pictures of two men—one, a young man with a sleeve of tattoos and thick hair wearing a dress shirt and suspenders; the other, an African-American man with a goatee. The African-American is a police detective, and the young man is an accountant who found a body in the trunk of his car.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

There is a dead body inside the trunk of my car...

I can't believe this—I leave my car at the airport and when I return from my 3-day trip and am going to put my luggage, there is a dead body in it. It is the body of a senator's son who has been kidnapped several days before. Suddenly, I have a homicide detective asking me questions and reporters trying to get a story from me and the senator making grief phone calls—and not to mention the kidnappers who somehow think I could help the Police Department break this case. How this is my life? I'm just a boring accountant. How the heck could I get out from this mess?

And how can I land a date with the brooding homicide detective who works this case? Uhm, yeah, so this last one, might be a wishful thinking but darn, he's dreamy...

Notes:

I imagine this would fall in the lighter or with humor contemporary story, despite the dead body. Please make the detective African American. The accountant should be white, nerdy guy. No insta-love, please.

Sincerely,

JustJen

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: interracial, police, accountant, murder mystery, tattoos, HFN

Word Count: 13,520

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TRUNK'D

By Tam Ames

Steven muttered and swore to himself as he tried to push the luggage cart through the snow to long-term parking where he'd left his car three days ago. He now had two document boxes full of random papers and receipts, thanks to a client who had no clue what record keeping meant, and the strap on his carry-on had broken. To top it off, his flight was three hours late, and it was now well past midnight, and also well below zero.

He finally found his car, managed to dig the key out of his bag, and popped the trunk. Without really paying attention, he pulled it open and bent to pick up one of the document boxes. As he turned, he froze. He blinked twice, and remained unmoving. There was a guy—in his trunk. His first thought was a hobo had taken up residence in his trunk. Then he realized that no one would take refuge in the trunk of a car in the freezing cold. He put the box back down, slowly reached out his arm, and poked at the guy.

With a jerk, he pulled his hand back. The man was solid. Calling on his extensive experience watching *CSI* and *NCIS*, he was pretty sure if you were stiff that meant you'd been dead for a while. But, then again, didn't you get unstiff after? Maybe he was just frozen. Finally his brain kicked in and he pulled out his cell phone to call 9-1-1. He realized he should have probably been more freaked out by the fact there was a dead guy in his trunk, but all he could think of was he'd be home even later now, and his boss was expecting him in the office first thing in the morning to discuss the trip.

After hanging up, he yanked open the back door, shoved the boxes and his luggage in, and got in the front. He didn't know how long the police would take but figured he may as well be comfortable. He started the car and put the heater on high hoping sooner or later the engine would produce some heat.

As he waited, he rested his head against the seat and starting working up a plan to get the client's documents in order. The man had tossed every receipt he'd received in the last three years into plastic bags. Now Steven was expected to get his ass out of the fire, since the IRS had come calling. He wondered idly if his boss hated him, and that's why he'd been assigned this particular client.

Two police cars with lights flashing, an ambulance, and another car pulling up behind him startled Steven out of his thoughts. As he reached for the door, he was surprised to see one of the police officers leap out of his car, gun pointed at him. The officer screamed, "Step out of the car!" Puzzled, Steven opened the door and stepped out, hands in the air.

"Who are you?" The cop never lowered his gun.

"I'm the guy who called you. About the body in my car." Steven waved his hand in the direction of the still open trunk.

The cop lowered his gun, and another man without a uniform came striding up. Even in the dim glow of the parking lot street lamps, the new guy drew Steven's attention. He was the definition of tall, dark, and handsome. His hair was short, he had a trim goatee, and beautiful brown skin. However, when he spoke, his deep voice snapped Steven out of his ogling.

"What the fuck is going on here, Sergeant?"

The cop turned to the man. "This is the guy who called in the body. He was in his car."

"Why is the car running?" He turned to Steven. "Was it like this when you got here?"

Steven gave him a look he saved for idiots at the office who couldn't understand Excel. "Right, I came back from a trip to find my car running, with the trunk open, and a dead guy in there." That seemed to fluster the guy, and Steven couldn't help smirking.

"Then why is the car running?"

"Have you checked the temperature? I wasn't going to stand out here and freeze to death waiting for you."

"Well, maybe you should have thought about destroying my crime scene. Unless, of course, you are the murderer."

"Excuse me?" Steven's voice squeaked. "Murderer? Are you insane? *I* called you. If I murdered someone, do you really think I'd leave them in my car at the airport and then phone you? Wouldn't it have made more sense for me to dump them in a ditch or throw them in the river? I'm not an imbecile, you know."

"No, I don't know. I don't know anything about you. Perhaps you are a highly functioning sociopath."

“And perhaps you’re an asshole.”

“Do you want me to arrest you right now?” The detective had his hands on his hips and looked ready to do battle.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I? You don’t know me.”

“Obviously.”

Before the guy could retort, an Asian woman approached, and put her hand over the man’s mouth. “Terry? Maybe you better go and check the body that got trunk’d.” She looked between the two of them, and Steven crossed his arms defiantly. It wasn’t his fault. The cop had started the whole argument by accusing him of being a murderer. The very concept was insane.

The man, whose name was Terry, evidently, stared at him for a moment, then turned on his heel with a huff and went to the back of the car where some people, Steven assumed were the crime scene guys, were poking in his trunk.

The woman turned her focus on Steven. “I’m Detective Angela Tran. That’s my partner, Terry Anderson.” She nodded her head in the direction of the surly dude.

She held out her hand, and Steven took it on instinct. “Steven Wright.”

“Okay, Mr. Wright, why don’t you tell me what happened.”

“Happened? Nothing happened.” He looked at the trunk. “Well, obviously something happened. But I came back from my trip, opened the trunk, and there he was.”

“So he wasn’t there when you left?”

“Of course not, you’d think I’d notice.” He paused. “Oh, well, I didn’t open the trunk when I came to the airport, I’d just put my carry-on in the back seat. So, I guess... I guess maybe he was there. Is that possible?”

She looked at him placidly. “You tell me.”

“What?”

“When was the last time you opened your trunk?”

“Oh.” He chewed on his lip as he thought. “Last Thursday, I think. When I moved some stuff for my brother.”

“And it was empty then?”

He raised an eyebrow. "No, it was full of table lamps and bed linens. But there was definitely no body. I think we both would have noticed."

"Angie!" The guy yelled at her from the trunk. "Bring him over here."

"Sir." She held her hand out for him to precede her. Steven didn't really want to go near the trunk again. The guy was dead after all, and that was just gross.

The detective scowled up at Steven. "Do you know this guy?"

Steven glanced at the body. They had twisted the man so he could see the corpse's face. The guy was young, probably early twenties with short brown hair. "I don't think so. I mean, he's kind of average looking, so maybe, but I don't think so."

"Humph."

He shivered. "Can I get back in my car now? I'm freezing."

"No!" the detective practically yelled at him. "You've already contaminated the crime scene." He looked around, and then nodded to one of the police cars. "You can wait in the patrol car." He indicated that the uniformed officer should escort him to the car.

The officer opened the back door, and Steven got in. He shuddered, realizing he was stuck where the criminals sat, and who knew what kind of diseases they had. The seat wasn't even upholstered; it was hard plastic. As the door shut, he wondered if they'd just tricked him into giving himself up. No, he knew Detective Anderson would have taken great delight in slamming him against the car and cuffing him if they wanted to arrest him. Well, actually, that sounded not all bad, if it wasn't so damn cold out. Who didn't have the cop/criminal fantasy once in a while?

He watched them wrestle the body out of the trunk and winced when the guy's head bounced off the bumper. Steven supposed a dead guy didn't feel the smack, but it still looked painful. He really hoped his trunk wasn't full of blood, because that would be just doubly gross. They loaded the body into the ambulance, and he looked on in shock as a tow truck pulled up and proceeded to get ready to tow his car.

He panicked. He needed those files to get to the office first thing in the morning. He pulled on the door handle, and realized he was in one of those cars you couldn't get out of from the inside. He looked for a button to roll down the window and there was nothing. He banged on the glass shouting for someone to let him out.

Finally, the uniformed officer who'd put him in the car came and opened the door, just as the tow truck was driving away with his car. He raced up to Detective Anderson. "Wait. You can't take my car."

The detective's lips thinned. "It's a crime scene."

"But I need my files, my overnight bag; everything is in the car."

"Well, you shouldn't have put all that crap in there after you found the body."

"Excuse me? I need my stuff. This is not my fault." He stomped his foot and glared at the detective who started snickering. "How am I supposed to get home? Walk? My boss is going to kill me."

His brows drawing down, the detective stared at him. "Is your boss a violent man?"

"Jeez, no. That's just a phrase. You need to lighten up."

"There was a dead young man in your trunk. I don't really think this is the time for levity."

Steven looked down and blushed. He'd forgotten that part. "Sorry."

"The patrol car will take you home. You can come to the station tomorrow and claim the contents of the car that are not deemed to be evidence."

Steven nodded. He had no choice, and it was already closing in on three in the morning.

When his alarm went off at seven, Steven groaned. He rolled over, and the memories all came flooding back: the dead body in his trunk; the files being confiscated; his car being impounded; that sexy-as-hell detective. Oh, yeah. He gazed off into space for a moment remembering the man's intense gaze.

With a sigh, he sat up and reached for his phone. He'd leave a message for his boss. Maybe that would avoid him being chewed out for not having the files. After leaving the voicemail, he showered and got dressed. On his way to the police station, he realized it was unlikely the two detectives would still be there this morning, which was a shame. He'd love to have another gander at the hottie, but his higher priority was getting the file boxes back.

The taxi dropped him off outside an older brick building. He watched the police officers coming and going and was hit by an attack of nerves. He knew it

was stupid. He hadn't done anything wrong, but it was like being sent to the principal's office. With a deep breath, he went up the three stairs and entered the precinct. There was a reception desk to the left of the door.

"Can I help you?"

The woman behind the glass looked him up and down, and Steven was pretty sure she was assessing whether he was a criminal or not. "Um, I, uh, I found a body last night."

"Excuse me? Where did this happen? Did you call us when you found it?"

"Oh, yeah. I phoned 9-1-1 and the police came and they took my car and I need my file boxes back." She just stared at him. He fumbled in his pocket, pulled out the business card and thrust the small piece of paper toward her through the slot under the glass. "I'm supposed to see this person, but I doubt she's here." He looked around frantically. How in the hell was he going to get those files and receipts?

"Let me call and check. What is your name?"

Her voice startled him back to the situation at hand. "Steven Wright."

"You can wait over there." She waved him towards some cracked and filthy vinyl chairs and shoved the card back over to him. He grimaced, but found one that looked the least like it was stained with body fluids.

A few moments later, she spoke. "You can go up to the second floor, and Detective Tran is on the left."

He popped up like he'd been electrocuted and looked down at the chair one more time. "Thanks." He was pretty sure she was looking at him like a criminal again, but he made his way up the stairs. At the top, he entered a large room that reminded him of one of those police rooms you see on TV. Maybe TV shows weren't all fake.

"Mr. Wright," a voice called out from across the room, and he saw Detective Tran waving him over. She looked like she hadn't been to bed, and her hair was up in a crazy bun with some colored pens sticking out. Finally, he saw Detective Anderson sitting at a desk near where she was standing. He nearly stumbled. The man looked even hotter when he was exhausted. He began to imagine what he'd look like naked and well rested.

"In there." The man snapped out the order so sharply, with a wave in the direction of a room behind him, that Steven winced. Obviously the guy was still an asshole, despite how he looked.

They entered a small room with a mirror on one wall, and Steven realized he was in an interrogation room. He whirled to face them. "Do you think I killed him?" He was certain his disbelief came through loud and clear.

Detective Anderson shut the door with what Steven felt was a sense of finality and gestured towards the chair. "Did you?"

Steven slumped down in the chair. "No. I don't even know who the man is."

"Really?" Detective Anderson sat in the chair opposite him and slid a picture across the table. It was the young man from the trunk, obviously dead and with marks around his neck.

Steven closed his eyes and looked away. "No. I still don't know who that is."

Finally Detective Tran spoke up. "It's Kyle O'Haleron." Steven looked at the picture of the man blankly. He wasn't sure if that was supposed to mean anything to him or not. "Senator O'Haleron's son?" Steven shook his head slightly. "He was reported missing and on the news?"

"I don't watch much news. Creeps me out." Steven shrugged. Detective Anderson closed his eyes and appeared to be counting.

"Where were you on Saturday night?" Detective Tran continued as she sat in the other chair at the table.

"At home, getting ready to leave. I had an ungodly early flight on Sunday."

"Was anyone with you?" She wrote something on a pad of paper.

"No. Look, do I need a lawyer?"

"That's up to you." Detective Anderson sat back and crossed his arms. Steven wanted to smack that smug look off his face, and then lick him all over.

"Look. I didn't even know this kid, or that he was missing. I've never seen him before and never met the Senator or anyone in his family. Why in the hell would I want to murder him?"

"Maybe a sex game gone bad?" His eyebrow arched, the detective tapped the marks on the neck of the dead man which were evident in the picture.

Steven looked at Detective Tran who also had an eyebrow arched, but was looking at her partner, not Steven. "Seriously? Eww. That's disgusting. And dangerous. Hasn't anyone told you not to do that? Don't, just don't." He glanced at the picture again. "Besides, what is he? Nineteen? I'm not into robbing the cradle."

“He’s twenty.”

“Oh, well then.” Steven rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say I prefer my dates to be... more mature.” He couldn’t help it, his gaze slid over the detective who was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt that was tight in all the right places. Detective Tran’s snort of amusement shook him out of his ogling.

They spent the next hour going over his movements in detail since Friday, as it appeared the young man had been killed sometime late Saturday. Since Steven had been at home asleep from eleven to six, anyone could have stashed the body in his trunk. He was relieved the detectives had decided he was not, indeed, the crazed killer.

“So when can I get those files?”

“You’ll have to go to our compound on McArthur and sign for them there.”

Steven gaped at them. “McArthur? That’s across town. I’m already three hours late.”

Detective Anderson shrugged as if he had no concern. Steven glowered at him. A commotion across the room distracted him from his urge to smack the detective upside the head. An older man, wearing what was obviously an expensive coat, was rushing across the room toward them, an ultra-thin, young, blonde woman trailing behind.

“Is this him? Is this the man who killed my Kyle?”

Detective Anderson stepped in front of Steven to shield him from the man. “Senator, please. No. This is the man who found your son. We’ve cleared him of suspicion.”

The Senator stopped, and his mouth fell open. “Oh, my God! You’re the one? You found Kyle?” He flew forward and wrapped his arms around Steven and started sobbing on his shoulder.

Steven looked helplessly at the two detectives who were staring awkwardly at them. “Um.” Steven patted the Senator’s back in a manner he assumed was meant to be a soothing.

The blonde came forward and gently pulled the Senator away from Steven. “I’m so sorry. He’s been devastated, ever since we heard the news.” Her voice had that cool, sophisticated sound only women who attended boarding school managed to obtain.

“I’m Bunny Claythorn. Kyle was my fiancé.”

Steven and Detective Anderson turned to each other and mouthed, *Bunny?* They both turned away, snickering.

When they looked back, Steven raised an eyebrow at the way the woman was clinging to the Senator's arm and petting his head. The whole situation was weird.

Detective Tran gave Steven and Detective Anderson a dirty look and turned back to the upset man. "Senator O'Haleron, this is Steven Wright. Your son was found in the trunk of his car." Steven shook hands with the man. After someone has wiped snot on your shoulder, it seemed rather formal. "Mr. Wright works for Carlton-Heights Partners. Have you ever done any work with that firm?"

The Senator, still sobbing in Bunny's slender arms, shook his head. "I've never heard of them."

"And you, Miss Claythorn?"

She shook her head and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. Steven was pretty sure the tissue was dry when she pulled it away. He looked at Detective Anderson whose lip was quirked as he watched the young woman.

"I should go now."

The Senator stepped forward. "How can I reach you?"

"Uh." Steven looked at Detective Anderson who shrugged. Steven pulled a card out of his pocket and handed it to older man. "Sure, here. And, good luck?" He looked at Detective Anderson.

"Yes." The detective grabbed Steven's arm and walked with him toward the door. He also pulled a card out of his pocket. "If you think of anything that might shed some light on this, or remember anything, call me."

He was staring into Steven's eyes as he said the words. Steven blinked. Was that *call me* or call me? "Sure, yeah, okay." With a glance over his shoulder, catching Detective Anderson staring at his ass, Steven left with a spring in his step, not quite as worried about his boss's reaction to his tardiness.

After two hours of arguing with the evidence clerk about his boxes of files, Steven finally got to the office and explained the situation to his boss. The man was not happy, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Steven began the painstaking task of separating the receipts, the vast majority of which had no

indication of what they were actually for. They could have been an important business expense, or a snack from the local corner store.

He stayed until after nine, hoping to appease his boss who, of course, was long gone. He called for a cab, as he'd been told his car would be impounded for at least three weeks, and headed home. When Steven arrived at his apartment building, he was nearly run down when a large black SUV pulled into the parking lot, moving far too fast for the turn. The car screeched to a halt, and he stared as the door opened, and a man jumped out, yelling something incomprehensible at whomever was driving.

The man stalked past him, pushing him aside with his shoulder and entered the building, letting the door slam in Steven's face. The guy didn't look familiar, but he wondered if he was just paranoid now and suspected everyone of being a killer. He hadn't noticed the guy before, but with twenty-six apartments, he certainly didn't know everyone who lived there. He wasn't that social.

After eating a dinner of toast, since he had no other food in the apartment, he stood and looked out the dining room window. He could barely see the corner of his parking space. He moved to the bedroom and could see about half, the rear half. If only he'd have looked out the window, maybe he'd have seen whoever put the kid in his trunk. Of course, he had no idea what time the murder had happened.

As he stood gazing out, the black SUV, at least he assumed it was the same one, screeched back into the parking lot and pulled into a spot. He watched a slim woman get out, but he couldn't tell what she looked like. She had on a long black coat and a scarf over her hair, but given the temperatures, that wasn't suspicious. He didn't recognize the woman, but maybe she was the wife of the guy—they'd been having a lover's quarrel, and she finally came home. He watched her until he lost sight of her around the corner of the building.

He lay in bed, unable to sleep after a day spent at the police station, and then sifting through reams of receipts. A goodly portion of that time was spent thinking about Detective Anderson. He'd looked at the man's card. Terrance. That was a good name. He looked like a Terrance. Or Terry, he supposed, as the man's partner had called him. He was exactly Steven's type—tall, dark and handsome.

Ideas of how to call the man without coming off as stalkerish ran through his head. He could claim he remembered something, but he'd have to come up with

some kind of evidence. He was afraid of retaliation? That was stupid, since he didn't know who'd killed the kid. He could just ask the man out for coffee, he supposed. Maybe just to get an update on the case. But he couldn't call too soon, that would look desperate. He developed a plan to call in the morning. Was that too soon? Maybe. He would wait until the afternoon.

He finally fell asleep, with dreams of a hunky detective, turning into nightmares of being chased by screaming receipts demanding he file them.

The next morning, as he waited on the sidewalk for the cab to pick him up, the black SUV once again roared past, and this time, he was certain the gas-guzzler had swerved toward him. He jumped back as it passed him by. He swore at the car, but the dark windows meant he couldn't tell who was driving. For a moment, he turned into his grandmother and muttered, "Damn kids these days."

He'd been at the office for about an hour when his cell phone rang. The number was blocked, but he answered it with the faint hope the caller was Detective Anderson. "Steven Wright."

"I can't believe he's gone." A man began sobbing on the phone.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"My Kyle. He was my legacy."

"Senator O'Haleron? Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. I'll never be okay again." A noisy nose-blowing followed. "You found him. You found my Kyle. You must know something."

"Really, I don't. I'd never met your son. I'm sorry."

"Who's going to help me?"

"I'm sure Detectives Anderson and Tran are doing their best to find his killer. You should check with them." He started wondering how he was going to get the man off the phone. The experience was awkward, and Steven thought the man needed a therapist, not an accountant.

"Can I see you?"

"I'm very sorry, but I really need to be at work. Maybe you could call Bunny?" Steven closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He never expected this.

"She's been a rock. She's kept me together."

Steven raised an eyebrow. Yeah, seeing the way she was fawning over him, he could imagine. "Yes, call Bunny. I'm sure she'll help."

"Thank you, thank you so much, Mr. Wright."

"Sure. Anytime."

"Oh, thank you, thank you." The phone went dead, and Steven stared at the device. Well, that had been disturbing. He hoped it didn't mean the man was going to call back. That was all he needed.

He left the office late again, exhausted from the filing. He thought he had the thing pretty much figured out, though. Of course, the additional four calls from a sobbing senator hadn't helped improve his day. Once he got home, he ordered a pizza and put his phone on mute. He was not prepared to deal with more calls. Where the hell was Bunny? Why wasn't she doting on the old dude? He obviously needed someone to take care of him. Didn't senators have people to do that? People to tell you "yes" all the time and bring you Starbucks?

The next day was more of the same on the phone call front. Steven finally stopped answering, but the man never stopped calling. Each time he did answer, all the man did was ramble on about Kyle and sob. He'd done a bit of research, and it looked like Kyle had suffered from typical rich-boy syndrome. The kid didn't do much but attend some snooty college that didn't even allow Jews, which Steven was pretty sure was illegal, and run around with Bunny. There were lots of pictures of Kyle, obviously high as a kite or drunk, out on the town with Bunny. In each picture she looked perfectly poised, and if truth be told, a little disgusted with the whole thing.

Steven left work on time and managed to grab a few groceries on his way home. He struggled up the stairs with the bags and stopped short in front of his door. There were scratches all around the lock. His first instinct was to rush inside and see if he'd been robbed, but he paused. What if they were still in there? What if he was the next target?

He dropped the bags and slumped against the wall. He pulled out his phone and saw another three calls from the Senator. He pushed the speed dial for Detective Anderson, knowing programming the man's number into speed dial was slightly presumptuous, and waited, hoping the man was at work.

“Anderson.”

The man's terse reply startled Steven. “Oh. It's Steven Wright? From the, uh, airport?”

“Yes?”

Steven frowned. “There's no need to be testy.”

The man sighed. “Sorry. What can I do for you, Mr. Wright?”

“Oh. It's just Steven, but I think someone either broke into my apartment or tried to.” He glanced down the hallway. “Maybe he's still in there,” he whispered into the phone.

“You didn't go in?” Suddenly, the detective's voice took on a less aggrieved tone.

“No, of course not. There could be a killer in there.”

“Okay, leave the building, don't touch anything, and wait for me outside. I'll be right there.”

The man hung up before Steven could respond.

He gathered up his grocery bags and went back downstairs. He opened the door, and when the cold wind hit, he decided to wait in the lobby. About fifteen minutes later, Detective Anderson came striding up the walk, looking around. Steven opened the door for him, and the man frowned as he came in.

“Didn't I tell you to wait outside?”

“It's cold out there.”

The detective looked like he was about to argue, and then shook his head. “Where's your place?”

“Three-oh-nine. I have no elevator.”

“I noticed.” Steven was sure the man rolled his eyes, but he chose to ignore him and gathered up his grocery bags again. “What the hell is that?”

“Groceries? Duh.”

“You brought them back down?”

“I bought expensive ice cream, which is probably melting. I wasn't going to leave the good stuff there for some robber to eat.”

Detective Anderson sighed, and Steven scowled at him. “Did anyone come in or out before I got here?”

“Nope, no one.”

When they reached the top of the stairs, the cop held his arm out and stopped them. “Give me your key and stay here. Don’t come around the corner until I call for you.”

Steven dug his keys out of his pocket and identified the apartment key, then gulped as the man pulled a gun out of his holster and flicked the safety off. This was getting real and totally freaky. Accountants did not get involved in murders, at least not regular-Joe accountants like him. Maybe if you were in the mob, but he was pretty sure his firm wasn’t involved in organized crime. He couldn’t imagine Mr. Levine sitting around with a bunch of thugs. But who really knew? He’d seen that episode of *Law & Order* where the kindly old man had been a serial killer.

“Okay. Clear.” Detective Anderson’s voice rang out in the hallway.

Hoisting his bags, he walked to his apartment while the detective held the door open, and Steven put his groceries in the kitchen. He paused to look around, and then shoved the bag with the ice cream into the freezer.

The detective raised an eyebrow. “The whole bag?”

Steven shrugged. “It was on sale. So, did they trash the place?” He was afraid to look.

“Doesn’t look like it. The door was locked, so I’m assuming they didn’t actually get in. But you should look around and make sure.”

Steven walked through the apartment. Everything seemed in place, nothing was obviously missing. He was glad he’d picked up his dirty laundry before Detective Anderson went nosing around.

“Looks okay.”

“Have there been break-ins in your building?”

“Never that I’ve heard of. I’m sure Mrs. Bellinski on the first floor would have made sure we knew about it, if there were. She’s a one-woman neighborhood watch.”

“That’s not a bad thing.” The detective seemed a little at a loss as to what to do next.

When Steven heard the man’s stomach rumble, he grinned. Here was his chance. “Do you have to get back to the office?”

The man tilted his head to look at him. “No, I’m off.”

"I was going to make myself some dinner. You're welcome to stay and, I don't know, fill me in on the case or whatever."

"I really can't discuss an active case."

"Well, you still need to eat."

He continued to stare at Steven, who just raised his eyebrows in question. "Yeah, okay."

"Great." Steven hoped his grin wasn't coming off as predatory. "I'm just going to change, and then I'll get started. You're not a vegetarian, are you?"

"No." The detective snorted.

"I'll be right back." Steven practically sprinted to his bedroom and peeled off his dress pants, shirt and tie. He hesitated for a moment, then pulled out a pair of dark jeans and a red T-shirt, which he'd been told worked with his coloring.

As he walked into the bathroom to check his hair, he called out. "If you want something to drink, Detective Anderson, help yourself to anything in the fridge."

"It's Terry."

Steven grinned at himself in the mirror. First names were a good start. He wondered if the man had handcuffs on him. Mmmm. Handcuffs. He cleared his throat and adjusted himself in his jeans.

"Chicken Alfredo okay?"

"Sure."

"I have wine or beer. Some soda and water too."

"Beer would be good."

Terry was staring at him in a way that made Steven want to squirm. He was glad he was no longer on the receiving end of the detective's interrogation techniques. "What?"

"I thought you were an accountant."

"I am." Steven had no clue where this was going.

"With a sleeve?"

Steven looked at his right arm and the tattoos that went from wrist to shoulder. "Is that a problem? Accountants have tattoos as well, you know. It's not just the domain of the criminal set."

The man cleared his throat. "I know. I just didn't expect it."

"Why? Do I look that straitlaced? Boring?"

"No." Terry practically shouted. "You're not boring. Oh, God." He ran his hand over his goatee and looked away. "I didn't mean anything. It was just a surprise. Not a bad one."

It looked like the man was blushing. Steven couldn't help a smirk. This was going better than he could have imagined. Maybe the guy was interested, and gay. Terry certainly knew Steven was, because you couldn't miss the giant nude artwork of a man over the couch. And he'd agreed to stay for dinner, so he wasn't running. He had the urge to rub his hands together and laugh like an evil scientist. The man was falling into his trap.

He cleared his throat and turned to the fridge, discreetly adjusting himself. He didn't want to give away too much too soon. As Steven pulled the beer from the fridge, his phone started ringing. Again. He'd forgotten to turn it off after Terry had arrived. He banged his head on the fridge. Not now.

"Problem?" He turned to see Terry looking at him with an eyebrow raised.

"The Senator."

"What? Why is he calling?"

"You told him he could have my number. This is the," he quickly checked his missed calls log, "eleventh call today."

"Really? What does he want?"

Steven continued the preparations for dinner. "I have no clue. He mostly cries and blubbers about his son. I try to get him to call Bunny. Seriously, what kind of name is Bunny? Does she have a sister named Kitty?"

"Uh."

"You're shitting me!" Steven turned, packet of noodles in hand.

Terry blinked a couple of times, and then burst out laughing. They both started laughing so hard, Terry was leaning against the wall. "God, I needed that." The detective took a swig of his beer. "It's been a hellish week."

"I imagine so. Why don't you go and relax, watch TV or something. I'll get dinner going."

When he smiled, Steven thought his knees wouldn't hold him up. Damn, the guy was gorgeous. When the man left the kitchen, Steven took a deep drink of

his own beer and then inhaled deeply, holding it for a moment, before blowing it out. He wanted to run in there and tackle the man, but he'd be good. The way to a man's heart was through his stomach. Well, he wasn't sure he wanted the man's heart yet, he didn't really know him, but into his pants would be good.

Forty-five minutes later, Steven went into the living room only to find Terry out cold on the couch, a sitcom rerun playing on the TV. He stood staring at the man who had removed his leather jacket and had his feet up on the coffee table. Steven had that schmoopy moment where he was sure a unicorn shitting a rainbow would fly across the room.

He leaned over and gently shook the detective's shoulder. Terry woke with a start and reached for his gun. Steven jumped back, hands in the air. "Whoa, whoa, easy. It's just me."

Terry flopped back on the couch and ran his hands over his head. "God. Sorry. I didn't plan to fall asleep."

"Hey, no problem. You probably needed a nap. But dinner is ready."

"Great. I'll take my gun off."

They sat at the small dining table, and Steven thought he was going to come in his pants, Terry was making such amazing sounds as he ate. It was aural porn. He squirmed and tried to eat his own dinner.

"This is amazing. After three days of prepackaged sandwiches and chips from a machine, I'm in heaven. You'll make someone a great wife someday." He looked up and grinned, and Steven nearly moaned out loud.

Suddenly, he changed the subject. "So, have you noticed anything strange around here? Anyone you haven't noticed before? I mean besides the fact that someone was messing around with your door."

"No. Not really." He thought about the black SUV that had nearly run him down that morning.

"What? There's something."

"There was just this big black SUV that's been screaming in and out of the parking lot. I would have sworn the beast tried to run me over this morning, but I'm sure I'm just paranoid."

"Did you see who was driving?"

"No. I did see a man get out the night before, and then later I happened to be looking outside and saw a woman get out. I couldn't tell anything about her

though. I didn't recognize the guy, but we aren't really that kind of building where we socialize with our neighbors."

"Huh. If you see the car again, get the license number, and we'll double-check it just in case. Given it's likely the boy was killed near where they dumped the body, and it was probably while you were parked here, I'm thinking it's someone nearby."

Steven's eyes grew wide. "Really? You think one of my neighbors is a murderer?" Okay, the whole *but they seemed like such nice people* thing went through his mind. That's what the neighbors of serial rapists always said.

"It could be someone who lives here, or maybe in the neighborhood, and your car was just convenient." He shrugged. "Hard to say."

He started thinking about looking for a new place to live. He didn't want to live in a neighborhood with rampant murderers everywhere.

Terry's voice startled him out of his calculations of how much rent he could afford in a better part of town. "Relax. I can see your brain working. This is a good neighborhood, and we doubt the murder was random. We're pretty sure the killer was someone who knew him. We just have to figure out who and why."

"It creeps me out."

"It should."

Well, discussing murders was a buzz kill. Steven's horniness had diminished with the talk of murder and mayhem. Well, murder anyway.

"I should go."

Steven jerked his head up when Terry spoke. "Oh. Okay." He watched as Terry put his gun holster back on and then his jacket. He walked toward the front door.

"Keep your door locked."

"Duh." Terry gave him the look scolded children got. "Sorry."

He noticed an envelope on the floor at the front door. "What's this?" He bent to pick the paper up, assuming one of his neighbors had received his mail by mistake and had simply slipped the lost document under his door.

Terry grabbed his arm before he could reach it. "Don't touch it!"

"It's an envelope. Probably some of my mail." He thought Terry was going overboard.

“Just wait.” The detective pulled a pen from his pocket and flipped the envelope over. The front was blank, with no stamp or return address.

“Junk mail?” Steven hoped it was.

“Maybe.” Next Terry pulled out latex gloves and slipped them on. He picked up the envelope and eased open the flap. He pulled a piece of paper out by one corner. When Terry shook the folded paper open, Steven gaped. There were a series of tiny letters glued on, just like an old-time ransom note. He was surprised anyone even did that.

When Terry walked back to the table and laid it down, Steven could read the words. *KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU OR WE'LL SHUT IT FOR YOU.*

“What the hell? I don’t even know anything.”

“Well, they obviously think you do.”

“Oh, crap. I have to move now. I can’t stay here. Shit. I have nowhere to go.”

“Okay, take a deep breath. I’ll stay here tonight, and in the morning we’ll take this to the lab. Maybe they can find some fingerprints or something.”

Steven raised his eyebrows. Terry would stay here? All night? The two of them alone? Perhaps having murderers in your building wasn’t all bad. Okay, he felt slightly guilty thinking that given a dead kid had shown up in his trunk. But silver-linings were everywhere.

His phone started ringing again. “Oh, God. I have to answer it. He’s never going to stop.”

As he went to pick up the phone, Terry snatched it out of his hand and answered. “Hello?”

Steven could only hear Terry’s side of the conversation, but he could hear the sobbing of the Senator on the other end. Terry tried to get him to calm down. When he mentioned Bunny, the dead boy’s fiancé, it made the man even more distraught.

Terry finally managed to hang up, and then immediately pulled out his own phone and made a call. Steven stood watching him curiously.

“Miss Claythorn, I think you should contact the Senator. He’s quite distraught, and I wasn’t sure who else to call.”

He paused. "Great. Thanks so much." With a sigh, he turned to Steven. "Wow. That was something. I'm not sure what, but something."

"Exactly. And I blame you."

"What?"

"Hey, you said I could give him my number."

"No I didn't."

"Well, you didn't stop me."

"You're a grown-up aren't you?"

A door slamming, and heels stomping down the hall outside his apartment door, stopped them both in their tracks. Steven shrugged. It wasn't long before an engine roaring in the parking lot sent them both to the window, and the black SUV went screaming out of the parking lot, very nearly hitting a motorcycle parked near the entrance.

"Huh. That's the car. The one that almost hit me. I think they have road rage issues."

"Woman driver, huh?" Terry mused aloud.

"I guess."

"Hmmm."

"What?" Steven was curious now.

"Nothing." Terry crossed his arms in a defensive pose.

"Tell me."

"No."

"Oh, my God, you make me crazy." Terry's refusal to say what he was thinking was making Steven more and more frustrated.

"Me? You're the one who keeps arguing."

"You started it."

"Are you twelve?" Terry frowned.

Steven had moved closer, until he was standing toe to toe with Terry. "Do I have to call my mother?"

Terry frowned, laughed, then suddenly grabbed Steven by the shoulders and laid a hot kiss on him. Steven was startled, but it didn't take him long to wrap his arms around Terry's neck and try to wind one leg around his thigh.

They started moving toward the living room, when Terry wound his fingers in Steven's hair and pulled his head back. "We shouldn't do this."

"Fuck it. Or me." Steven pulled Terry in for another kiss. He wasn't paying attention, but Terry had changed direction, and they were now heading down the short hall to the bedroom.

The pair of pants Steven had discarded on the floor tripped him up, and he nearly landed on his ass, but Terry caught him before he could fall and hauled him up against his chest. Steven nearly swooned right there when Terry lifted him up and tossed him on the bed. That was hot.

He propped himself up on his elbows and watched as Terry let his jacket drop to the floor, and then removed his gun and holster and placed the weapon on the dresser. Steven wasn't a fan of guns, but he had to admit knowing Terry was *packing heat* was kind of a turn-on.

"Do you have handcuffs?" The question popped out of his mouth before he could think about it. His face heated, as he realized what he'd let slip.

Terry stopped unbuttoning his shirt. "Not here."

Steven shrugged. "Just askin'."

"Have you ever?"

"No. Have you?" Terry looked away. "You have! Are you a naughty detective?" Steven laughed.

"You're kind of a brat."

"Uh huh. Come on. Finish. I wanna see."

"Next time I'm bringing the cuffs, and you'll get what you get when I'm good and ready."

"Promises, promises." Steven wasn't sure throwing his arms in the air and shouting *yes* was appropriate, so he gave his best, what he hoped passed for, sultry smile.

Terry kicked off his shoes and unbuckled his belt.

"Show me," Steven said.

Terry just raised one eyebrow and snorted and pushed his pants and underwear down in one move.

Steven was pretty sure his jaw nearly hit the floor. The man was hung, to say the least. For a moment, Steven was a little self-conscious about his own

normal size, but the idea of getting up close and personal with the monster in front of him soon had him pushing his insecurities back in the closet. He figured a guy Terry's size was used to being with someone smaller than him, because Steven was pretty damn sure there weren't too many bigger.

"Wow." Steven swallowed, his eyes glued to Terry's crotch as he moved forward.

"Huh. I finally found a way to shut you up."

"Wha?" Steven looked up, blinking, and pouted as Terry laughed.

"You next." Terry nodded his head, indicating Steven's clothes. He just stood at the side of the bed slowly stroking his dick. Steven was pleased to see he was a show-er, and not a grow-er, because that would have been truly frightening.

"Yeah. Okay. Um... I... I'm not..." Suddenly the insecurity was back.

Terry stopped, placed his hand under Steven's chin, and tipped his head up until their eyes met. "Hey. I don't care about your size, and if you'd rather, we can switch it up, or do something else. Whatever you want."

In that moment, Steven's insecurities fled. "No, no. I want to, it's just..." He licked his lips and stared at Terry's cock. "Damn, you are hung."

"So I've been told."

Steven looked back up. "It does fit?"

Terry huffed out a laugh. "Well, it has in the past, and I don't think I've grown any, since about tenth grade." He smoothed his hand over Steven's hair, and then wrapped the thick strands around his fingers and leaned in for a hard, wet kiss. "Don't worry, I'll take my time. You tell me what you want or need."

"Yeah, okay." He was ready to get this show on the road. He wasn't sure this was going to work, but he wasn't going to throw in the towel without giving it the old college try. He pulled his T-shirt over his head and started working on the zipper of his jeans. They soon followed, along with his underwear and socks.

He lay back, and for a moment, wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with his hands. Put them under this head? Maybe that looked too casual. Fold them on his chest? That felt too much like he was in a coffin. Cover his junk? That was dumb, since they were going to have sex. He didn't have much time to deliberate, as he was distracted by Terry kneeling on the bed beside him.

“Pretty.” He ran his hand up the tattoos on Steven’s arm.

“Men aren’t pretty.”

Terry’s smile was wicked. “You are, with all this thick hair, colorful tattoos and,” he paused, and suddenly his hand wrapped around Steven’s cock, “this is very pretty.”

He leaned down and sucked on the head. Steven’s back arched off the bed. “Holy fuck!” His hand scrabbled to get a hold of Terry’s hair, but the cropped curls meant there wasn’t much to grab. He settled for grabbing his shoulder. The man had a talented tongue. It was doing amazing things to the head of Steven’s dick, and his worries about his size, or Terry’s for that matter, soon fled under the onslaught of pleasure.

After a few minutes, Steven tugged on Terry and pulled him up for a kiss. He soon managed to get him shifted around until he was lying on top of Steven, their cocks grinding against each other as they kissed. Their hands roamed, grasping, touching, and kneading. The feel of Terry’s goatee against his face was a delicious contrast to the soft lips and hot tongue. He was looking forward to the feel of it rubbing all over his sensitive skin.

Terry propped himself up on his elbow. “Lube?” The man’s pupils were blown wide, and his eyes looked almost black. Steven waved toward the bedside table where the bottle was sitting next to a box of tissues. Terry raised his eyebrows. “Keeping it handy?”

“You never know. Sometimes you get a need, and I used to be a Boy Scout. Always prepared.”

Without asking, Terry pulled open the drawer in the bedside table and dug around inside, coming up with a condom. He looked at the wrapper for a moment, and then frowned. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

Steven blushed. He was pretty sure the condom was a regular, and Terry definitely needed the extra-large. And despite the guy being a cop, which Steven considered a fairly trustworthy job, he wasn’t going bareback. “Shit.”

“No problem, we’ll just switch it up. Unless you’re an exclusive bottom?”

“No, switching is good.” Steven’s heart kicked up a notch, and his cock got even harder. “But first, I want a taste.” He grinned at Terry, who smirked and flopped onto his back beside Steven.

“Have at it.”

Steven didn't waste any time. Terry didn't seem quite as big as he'd feared, once he got his mouth on the man, but he was still larger than Steven was accustomed to. He started licking around the man's balls, and before long Terry had his legs spread and was moaning and tugging on Steven's hair. Steven opened wide and took as much of Terry's length into his mouth as he could. He knew he was going to have a sore jaw if he did this for long. He wondered if practice would make giving Terry a blow job more comfortable. He wasn't going to complain, though, the stretch of muscles kept him in the moment and completely aware of what was happening.

A strong tug, with both hands on his hair, finally got his attention. "You better move on unless this is all you're interested in. I'm not going to hold out much longer."

Knowing he'd brought Terry close to the edge gave Steven an ego boost. He reached for the lube on the side table and squirted some onto his fingers. Terry pulled back his legs with his hands under his thighs, and Steven didn't waste any time in getting the lube where it was meant to go. He ripped open the condom and quickly rolled it on.

"Ready?"

"Oh, yeah."

Steven placed his hands on Terry's thighs and gently pushed forward. His gaze shifted between Terry's face and watching his prick stretching the man's hole beneath him. He didn't want to hurt the guy, but it was hard to hold back. Once he was all the way in, he paused and tried to steady his breathing. He felt like his heart was going to beat out of his chest.

Terry's hand touched his arm. "Are you okay?" He had a little furrow between his brows.

"Yeah. Damn. Tight. Hot. Fuck. Oh."

When Terry laughed at Steven's inability to string two words together, Steven groaned. "Okay, this might be fast."

"Fast can be good." Terry then wrapped his legs around Steven's waist and pulled him in even closer.

Steven leaned down and kissed Terry, their tongues tangling. Terry wrapped his arm around Steven's neck, holding him close while he wedged his other hand between their bodies and wrapped it around his cock.

The sensation was more than Steven could handle. He undulated his hips and tried to hit Terry's prostate as he drove forward. He wasn't sure he was successful. Between the kissing, the moans, and Terry's hand moving on his cock between them, it was driving Steven over the edge. Soon he scrunched up his nose, closed his eyes and pressed his face against Terry's neck as he shuddered and came.

Terry held him for a moment, then nudged him. Steven pushed up on one arm and watched as Terry started stroking his cock faster, giving a small twist when he got to the head. He suddenly went silent, and his eyes opened wide as the cum shot over his stomach. Steven moaned at the contractions around his still sensitive cock.

Steven gently pulled out and flopped over on his back. "Wow. Sorry about the speed thing."

"Hey, I'm not complaining."

The sound of a phone ringtone disturbed their state of blissful silence. "Not mine." Steven got up and headed for the bathroom, peeling off the condom. Terry moaned behind him and was scrambling to find his pants and his phone when Steven closed the bathroom door.

When he came out, Terry was dressed and putting on his coat. "Hey. What's going on?"

Terry refused to meet his eyes. "It's a call. I have to go. Angie is waiting on me, and uh, I'm not sure this was such a good idea. I mean the case is still ongoing and you're involved, and I shouldn't have done this."

He finally looked at Steven. Steven didn't know what to say. He certainly wasn't prepared to beg, since it was obvious the man was having regrets, and who needed that kind of drama? Steven simply crossed his arms and knew his mouth was probably a thin line, but he wasn't about to smile and say "Yeah sure, see ya around," as if it was all fine and dandy. Terry was blowing him off.

"Look, I'll let you know if we find anything and, well, keep your door locked. If you get any more notes or anything suspicious happens, call me."

"Yeah. Sure." He didn't move from where he stood near the front entry.

"Okay. I... I have to go."

Steven didn't respond. What did Terry want him to do? Throw his arms around him and thank him for the pleasure? That wasn't Steven's style. The

door closed behind Terry. After a few seconds, Steven finally moved. "Fucking asshole." He locked the door, then went into the kitchen and grabbed a beer. He looked at the pile of dirty dishes from their dinner and wanted to just toss them all in the trash so he didn't have to think about what had happened. Instead, he just ignored them and threw himself on the couch, where he flipped on the TV and pulled out his laptop. He figured between the two of them, they'd manage to distract him. That and another beer or two, or seven.

The next morning, Steven woke to elephants stampeding through his head. He had a doozy of a hangover, and the noise outside his apartment wasn't helping. He supposed the pounding wasn't elephants, but there were definitely more people than usual running up and down the stairs. He covered his head with the pillow and hoped whoever they were would be gone soon.

When someone started hammering on his door, he threw the pillow across the room and swore. This was obviously not meant to be his weekend. First the blow-off by Terry, now a hangover and assholes in his building.

Whoever it was banged on the door again. "Jesus Christ. Give me a minute!" he shouted. He winced, as his head throbbed. He pulled a pair of old sweats and a T-shirt out of the drawer and put them on. He took a deep breath to settle his stomach, ran his hands through his hair which, when he glanced in the mirror, looked pretty scary. He didn't really care. Whoever had decided to wake him up at noon on a Saturday deserved his "mad scientist" look.

He yanked the door open and froze. Terry was standing there looking exhausted. For a moment, that's all he could focus on, and then he noticed his partner standing behind him, and the flow of cops in uniforms and others who moved back and forth in the hallway behind them.

"Can we come in for a minute, Mr. Wright?" He blinked and looked at Detective Tran who had spoken.

"Oh. Yeah. Of course. It's Steven." He stepped back to allow them in.

As he ushered them into the living room, he became aware of the empty beer bottles, chip bags and empty containers of ice cream on the coffee table and floor around it. Steven blushed, and grabbed some of the bottles. "Have a seat, and I'll be right back." He tried to gather more in his arms and practically ran to the kitchen. He dumped everything in the trash. He stood with his arms braced on the counter and took his time breathing in a steady rhythm.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Steven literally yelped and spun around when Terry spoke from behind him. The man held the rest of the garbage in his hands. He dumped everything in the trash, and looked at Steven with a frown.

“Of course. Why would you think otherwise?” He grabbed a glass out of the cupboard and the orange juice from the fridge. “You don’t have to worry. I won’t tell your partner about your little mistake.”

“What?”

“What?”

“What is wrong with you?”

“I believe I’m suffering from what is commonly called a hangover.”

“That’s not what I meant. Why are you behaving this way?”

“Excuse me? Behaving this way? Like someone who got fucked and dumped within fifteen minutes? Like that?”

“You know last night was a mistake.”

“I know nothing. Obviously. Since you made the decision entirely on your own.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“No. You are.”

“You are.”

“Ahem.”

They both spun around toward the open entryway to the kitchen. “What?”

“If you two are finished having your little lovers’ spat in here, can we get on with the job?”

“We’re not.” Terry looked at Steven, who simply crossed his arms. Steven might not tell the man’s partner the dirty details, but he wasn’t going to deny the truth either, like Terry was obviously prepared to do.

“Whatever. Move it you two.” She glared at them, and they both winced.

“Wow. She’s tough.” Steven downed the rest of his orange juice.

“Yeah, she’s great.”

Steven snorted. “Do you want any juice? Does she?”

"I think we're good. Let's go."

In the living room, Steven sat in the chair, while Terry sat on the couch next to his partner. "So, what's going on?"

Detective Tran took the lead. "How well did you know your neighbors next door?"

"I don't. I'm not sure I've even see them."

"The lease is in the name of a George Cooper. Does that ring a bell?"

"No. Should it?"

"His body was found last night in a park near the river. He'd been strangled."

"Seriously? That's freaky." Neither detective spoke for a moment. "Wait. You don't think I murdered him do you? I thought I was cleared."

Detective Tran just raised an eyebrow. Steven looked at Terry who said nothing. The unspoken allegation was the last straw. He sprang to his feet. "Oh. Fuck you, *Detective Anderson*. Fuck you with a cactus sideways." He vaguely heard someone snort, but he started pacing.

"What was last night? Some kind of plot to get me to spill my guts? Did you hope to fuck the truth out of me?"

"Steven!" Terry jumped to his feet and nearly tripped over the coffee table.

"Don't *Steven* me. I didn't kill that kid, and I sure as hell didn't kill my neighbor." He spun to face the other detective. "When was he killed?"

"Sometime between eight and eleven."

Steven turned a withering gaze on Terry. "Well, I'm sure Detective Anderson will be happy to provide my alibi. Should I give her a blow by blow account of what I was doing during those hours, Detective?"

"Oh, yes, please do." Detective Tran's grin was a mile wide.

"Angie!" Terry's outburst only caused her to start laughing.

"You, madam, are a perv. I will not give you the pleasure of hearing the details from me. He can tell you."

"I will not."

"You're ashamed of me."

"I'm not ashamed of you."

“Then why are you pretending this didn’t happen?”

“Oh, my God. Will you two shut up? You’re like twelve-year-olds.”

“Sorry.” They both answered in unison.

They sat down, Steven chastened by Detective Tran’s reprimand. However, he was sorely tempted to stick his tongue out at Terry just to make his point. He resisted, and looked at the file folder the detective placed on the table. She flipped it open and pulled out a picture of the man Steven assumed was his neighbor.

“Is that him?”

“Yes. Have you seen him?”

He stared at the picture for a moment, and then it hit him. It was the guy who had been having the fight with someone in the black SUV. He looked toward Terry. “Remember when I told you last night about that SUV that was driving erratically in our parking lot? Well, two nights ago, the thing pulled up, and this guy got out. He was arguing with someone inside, and he stormed past me into the building. Later, I saw the SUV come back, and a woman got out, but I couldn’t tell who she was. I assumed they were just a couple having an argument.”

Detective Tran spoke up. “You didn’t see him before?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay, we’re going through his apartment to see if we can find any clues to who killed him. If we have any further questions, we’ll let you know.”

“Sure.” Steven stood up with them. Terry turned to him at the door as if to say something, but Steven held up his hand. “Don’t. Just go do your job.”

Before he could say more, someone pushed Terry aside and rushed into his apartment and threw his arms around Steven. He recoiled, trying to get the man off, but he was like an octopus that refused to loosen his grip. When he could finally focus, he realized the man at his door was the Senator.

“Senator? What are you doing?”

“I heard about the killing on the news. I had to come and see you.”

“Why?”

“You were the last one to see my Kyle.”

“Not exactly. I just found his... him in my car.”

The Senator spun to the two detectives who were still standing slack-jawed in the hallway. "Is it a serial killer? Was my son killed by some psychopath?"

"We have no evidence, as yet, that the murder of this man and your son are related." Steven thought he heard Detective Tran muttering about the Goddamned press as she stood behind Terry. "I thought you were with Miss Claythorn."

"She left me last night. Said she had to take care of something. She never came back."

The older man looked like a lost child. Steven wondered where his handlers were. He thought rich politicians had people who did things for them. He was pretty sure Senator O'Haleron should not have been let out on his own. The man had obviously tipped over the edge, if his behavior was any indication.

Terry looked at Steven. "Is it okay if he stays here with you until I can track down Bunny?"

Steven sighed. He couldn't kick the man out. "Sure, no problem." He gave the Senator a tight smile, then hoped the look he gave Terry was *you owe me*. Although when Terry mouthed *Bunny*, they both started giggling, and Steven couldn't help but laugh out loud when Detective Tran smacked Terry on the back of the head.

"Twelve. Twelve, I tell you." She grabbed his arm and pulled Terry down the hall.

When Steven shut the door, he offered the Senator coffee. After he'd made a pot, he made his excuses and had a quick shower and dressed in jeans and a button-down shirt.

For the next two hours, they sat awkwardly, the Senator moving between tears and staring off into space. It was the most uncomfortable time Steven had ever spent alone in a room with another man, including when he'd lost his virginity to his math tutor in the eleventh grade.

He couldn't jump to his feet fast enough when someone knocked on his door. He opened it to find Terry standing there. "How's it going?" the detective asked.

"Oh, my God. The man needs a psychiatrist, or a keeper, or something. This is brutal. Where's Bunny?"

"I don't know. She's not answering. Can I show you some pictures we found?"

"Okay." He stood back and let Terry walk past him. Terry entered the living room and did a double take when he saw the amount of ruined tissues around the Senator.

"Senator." Terry nodded his head in the direction of the man on the couch, in acknowledgement.

He turned to Steven and opened the folder again; this time, there were several pictures of the man who'd been killed, taken with a woman. "Have you seen this woman? Is it possible she's the one you saw getting out of the SUV that night?"

Steven flipped through them, laying each one on the coffee table. "I couldn't say. I couldn't see her face or hair, and she had on a long coat. She was thin, but that's about the only thing I can say is the same."

"Why do you have pictures of Bunny?"

Both Steven and Terry looked at the Senator in confusion. The man tapped a couple of the pictures, frowning. "This is Bunny, with this man. But her hair is different."

They picked up the pictures and examined them more closely. Steven had never seen Bunny smiling, but if he imagined the woman in the picture with blonde hair, it would definitely be her.

Terry sat on the other end of the couch and focused on the older man. "Senator, have you ever seen Bunny with the man in the pictures? Could he be a relative?"

"He's not a relative. She said she has no siblings, and her parents live in Europe."

"What about her sister, Kitty?" Steven asked looking puzzled.

Terry rolled his eyes. "I was kidding." He turned back to the senator, leaving Steven blinking in surprise behind him. "Have you met her parents, Senator?"

"No. They were going to come for an engagement celebration this spring." He burst into tears again.

Steven and Terry both sighed, and Steven rose from the chair in the living room when Terry got up from the couch. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I have no idea. We have to find Bunny." Steven walked Terry towards his apartment door and stepped outside into the hallway with him.

Detective Tran came toward them from the other apartment. "We found a name, Gloria Sanderson. Based on the pictures, they seemed to have been in a relationship either currently or in the past."

"It's Bunny." Steven blurted it out.

Detective Tran stood blinking at him, then finally looked at Terry, obviously hoping he would clarify.

Terry nodded towards the still open door of Steven's apartment. "The Senator noticed the resemblance. The woman is Bunny, but with a different hair color. Although, how she became Gloria, or how Gloria became Bunny, I have no idea. She's not answering my calls."

"Okay, we need to put in a call and put out an APB. Something funny is going on."

Steven couldn't stop the grin on his face. The action was just like a TV cop show. He certainly didn't get this kind of excitement in his job as an accountant.

Before Detective Tran could even get through to the station on her phone, the click of heels on the stairs alerted them, and they turned to see Bunny herself coming around the corner. She froze for a moment and looked at them, then visibly swallowed and came forward. "The Senator left me a message that he's here and needs me."

Her appearance stunned them all into immobility. Finally, they jerked back to reality as one, and Detective Tran spoke first. "Yes, he's in here." She waved her hand at Steven's apartment. "We also need to speak to you."

A fine blonde eyebrow was raised. "Oh? About what? Have you found Kyle's killer?"

Steven snorted, and Terry elbowed him in the ribs. "We have a very strong lead that maybe you can help us with." Terry had used what Steven had already come to recognize as his *serious cop* voice.

He followed the detectives into his apartment and watched as the Senator leaped to his feet, calling out Bunny's name when she got in the living room. He then threw his arms around her, sobbing. She stroked his head and murmured soothing words, while turning up her nose at the sheer number of tissues on the couch.

Steven and Terry looked at each other with raised eyebrows. *Creepy* was the only word Steven could think of.

“Why don’t you sit down, Miss Claythorn.” Detective Tran stood with her arms crossed, staring at the woman. Steven shuddered. He hoped he’d never be on the receiving end of that look again, because it was terrifying.

Bunny delicately flicked a few tissues aside and sat down, the Senator in her arms. “So what do you think I can help with?”

Steven thought she looked pretty cold. She didn’t even flinch when Terry took a step closer and loomed over her. “Did you know someone called George Cooper?”

She simply raised an eyebrow in response. “No. Should I?”

“What kind of car do you drive?” Steven watched in amazement as Terry and Detective Tran started to do a back and forth questioning routine.

“An Escalade.”

“What color?”

“Black. Kyle bought it for me.”

Steven wanted to say something, but he figured if he ever wanted to convince Terry to see him again, he’d better keep his mouth shut.

Detective Tran pulled a picture out of the folder and put it on the table. It was a picture of the dead man. Steven had to admire the way she was keeping the pictures of Bunny/Gloria back. “So you’ve never seen this man before?”

“No.”

“Have you ever been to this building before?”

She looked around Steven’s apartment and wrinkled her nose. “No.” Once again, he wanted to speak up, but he caught Terry looking at him, and he had to settle for glaring at Miss Snooty Bunny.

He watched Detective Tran pull out one of the other pictures, and he waited in anticipation. “So this picture doesn’t look familiar?”

Bunny’s face grew white. “N-n-n-o.”

Terry and his partner looked at each other. “Or this one?” Detective Tran threw another one on the table. “Or this one?” Another picture hit the table.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." It was the first time her ice-princess exterior had cracked even the slightest.

"Really." Terry almost growled and leaned in closer. "So you're *not* Gloria Sanderson?"

The Senator shook his head sadly. "Oh, Bunny. What have you done? Why did you do this?"

Like a flash, the Bunny-facade vanished, and Gloria was there, Long Island accent and all. "Do? What did I do? I had to put up with your imbecile of a son!" She turned on the politician and waved a finger in his face. "Do you know how stupid that boy was? Seeing this," she waved at the sea of tissue, "it's obvious the apple didn't fall far from the tree. How you ever got elected, I'll never know."

She turned to the two detectives, spittle flying from her lips as she snarled. Both of them stepped back out of the line of fire. "The little dipshit found out who I was and was going to turn me in. Who'd have thought he'd be smart enough? I spent two years cultivating Bunny—Bunny, what a stupid, fucking name." Steven and Terry looked at each other and nodded. Detective Tran smacked Terry on the back of the head again.

"I wasn't about to let George destroy what we'd worked for. We figured I should move on to this idiot." She indicated with her thumb at the Senator, "But then George decided he wanted us to get out. I wasn't about to let all this work go to waste, so..." She crossed her arms and shrugged.

Steven pulled back. He was shocked to see that kind of coldness in another human being. Maybe the whole murder mystery thing wasn't all it was cracked up to be in real life.

"Turn around." The woman snarled at Detective Tran but did as she was told. The detective snapped the cuffs on and spun her around.

Steven looked from the cuffs to Terry and grinned. As Detective Tran walked past him, she smacked Steven on the back of the head.

"Hey!" He rubbed the back of his head. "What was that for?"

"You two are going to be the death of me. Move it, Anderson."

Terry shrugged and followed her out, leaving Steven with the Senator. "So." He had no clue what you said to someone after he'd just had what was left of his world upended.

“Well.” The man cleared his throat. “I should go, and I apologize for everything.” He was out the door and gone before Steven could even respond.

Steven sighed, and started to clean up. He was kind of creeped out by the tissues as well, so used a plastic trash bag as an improvised glove. After gathering all the trash, he realized he hadn't eaten since he'd gotten up. He made himself some cereal and ended up falling back into bed. Sadly, he was unable to ignore the smell of sex that still lingered.

All day Sunday, he kept expecting Terry to come back, but he didn't. The case was closed, so the man couldn't use the excuse of Steven being involved in an active case anymore. When there was no sign of him, Steven decided the guy really wasn't into him, and he needed to move on. Not that they'd been together more than a few hours. At least, he could check off his life list that he was with a super-hung guy.

Monday, he got a call saying he could pick up his car. It had been pure chance, and the fact he'd forgotten to lock his car that resulted in a body in his trunk. He had all the luck.

He ran out at lunch to pick up the car and was just entering his office building when he heard someone say, “I'm looking for Mr. Wright.”

When the receptionist responded in a flirty tone, “Aren't we all, honey,” Steven wanted to tell her to back off. That gorgeous black stud was his. Instead, he cleared his throat and crossed to where Terry was leaning on the desk.

“Detective Anderson. Can I help you?”

Terry gave him a look of disappointment. “Steven. Can we talk for a moment?”

“About what?”

“Can we do this in private?” Terry looked at the receptionist who was hanging on their every word.

“Oh, please don't.” She fluttered her eyelashes at them.

Steven glared at her. “Fine. This way.” He led Terry to his office.

When they got there, he shut the door and turned to face the man, arms crossed. “So. What did you want to tell me?”

"I wanted to apologize."

Steven's mouth fell open and his arms dropped. An apology was the last thing he expected. "Why?"

"Because I was a dick."

"Yeah. But why apologize? If you're not interested, you're not interested."

"Who said I'm not interested?" Terry tilted his head like a curious puppy.

"Well, you ran out of there like your ass was on fire, and I remember a brush-off conversation in my kitchen."

"That wasn't a brush-off." The implied "duh" tone in Terry's response had Steven bristling.

"Yes, it was." Steven glared at him.

"No, it wasn't."

"Why do you do this?" Steven wanted to bang his head on his desk.

"Do what?"

"Argue with everything I say." This time, he did bend over and smack his head on the pile of papers laying there.

"I do not." Before Steven could say another word, Terry yanked him into his arms and silenced him with a kiss. His tongue plunged in Steven's mouth, and Steven's knees went weak.

Terry pulled back, but kept his arms wrapped tightly around Steven. "I suppose that's one way to shut you up." Steven opened his mouth to retort, then Terry put a finger on his lips. "Shhh." After a moment, Steven nodded.

"I came because, well, I'd like to see you again. Maybe go out on a real date."

Steven's cheeks hurt, he smiled so hard. "Okay."

"No arguments?" Terry laughed.

"Nope. Not this time. You just have to tell me things I want to hear. Solves the problem."

"Indeed." Terry snapped Steven's suspenders. "I like these. Very dapper."

Steven laughed. "Thanks. They're my thing."

"I think you could become my thing."

“I promise I’ll work very hard at doing so. Starting tonight.”

“Deal.” Another smoking hot kiss in the office was a very good start in Steven’s opinion.

The End

Author Bio

Tam Ames is a newly empty-nester with a daughter in university and currently lives in Ontario, Canada. She is currently in the process of uprooting her life and starting a new adventure in the Middle East for her job. It was the encouragement and dares of some friends that inspired her to start writing m/m romance, and she's grateful for their continued support. Traveling as much as possible, reading, writing, and playing around online keep her busy, in addition to her day job.

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TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU

By N.J. Nielsen

Photo Description

Two guys asleep on a train one lying on top of the other's lap. They're both dressed in torn jeans and T-shirts. One has bluish/green coloured hair. They look to be like they're in a grunge rock band or possibly are on their way home from a concert. The guy with the coloured hair is using the thigh of the guy lying on him as a pillow. They look comfortable with each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Who are they? Are they band mates heading home after a gig? Buddies after a long night out? Fans post-concert? Is this the night that changes everything? Or just a night like any other they share? How have they become so comfortable, with themselves, and each other? Is it new and fresh, or solid and steady?

HFN/HEA preferably. Other than that head where the muse insists you go!
=)

Sincerely,

Calila

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, first time, friends to lovers, gay for you, close bonds

Content Warnings: interfering family and friends

Word Count: 27,529

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Dedication

Dedicated to Calila for such a great prompt. I hope you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU

By N.J. Nielsen

Chapter One

The sound of the crowd cheering was almost deafening as the final chord of “Red Flag Burning” died away. Ross was out in front of the crowd winding down from strutting his stuff all over the stage. Cooper had just hauled back and thrown his drum stick out over the crowd’s heads, but Alistair’s gaze was all for one person—Keagan. They had been best friends forever. In fact, the whole band had grown up knowing each other since high school. He was the eldest at twenty-three, then Keagan came in at twenty, while Ross and Cooper were both only nineteen. Alistair and Keagan had started DeRanged back when they were in school. After a year of just the two of them jamming non-stop, they grudgingly allowed his brother Cooper, and Cooper’s best friend, Ross, to join them. Luckily for them, Ross had a decent voice and took to the roles as lead guitarist and singer like a duck to water.

As the house lights slowly came back up, Alistair smiled when he saw Keagan checking to make sure his studded armband was still in place after one fan got a little too close during their last encore. They were lucky the damn keyboard was still standing after the scuffle which had ensued as security removed the young woman from the stage. Alistair knew the armband had been the last gift from one of their die-hard followers, and also one of Keagan’s colleagues from the aged care facility where he worked. Meg and her husband Benny attended all their gigs if they were close to home. Hell, she even volunteered to help set up the promotion side and quite often stood behind a counter or two selling the promotional items, such as T-shirts, hoodies, beanies, and surplus other little items. For all her help, she and Benny always got free entry into each show.

“How you feeling?” he asked as soon as he got into hearing distance of Keagan.

They thanked the stage hand who had handed them both towels to remove some of the sweat. God, he couldn’t wait to get back to the dressing room and take a shower. Sweating like a pig was the downside of being in a band, but for fame and fortune you sometimes had to put up with the shitty parts as well. Not that DeRanged was all that famous, though to be fair they had been starters for quite a few excellent headline bands. It was the truth to say DeRanged wasn’t in it for the fame, or the fortune. They did what they did because they were four guys who liked to play together. It took their minds off their real jobs. Alistair

was an author, Keagan worked in aged care, Ross worked as an assistant manager for one of the bigger music store franchises in Australia, while Cooper still worked part-time for their father at Krunckstone Construction. The best part was their respective bosses were lenient when it came to their band. They never had any hassles getting time off when needed.

"I'm fine. For a moment there, I thought she was going to knock me on my arse," Keagan said as he finished running the towel all over his arms, face, and hair. Without thinking, Alistair reached out and used his hand in an attempt to control his friend's wayward locks. Keagan grinned at him as Alistair let his hand drop away once semblance of order had been reinstated.

"I'm so glad this is the last show for a while. I'm bloody ready for a break," Alistair said.

"What are your plans?"

Alistair shrugged his shoulders. "Same ol'—same ol' I guess. Go home and make nice with Lauren for a while. Go see the folks. Hang out at your place... just the usual. What about you?"

"I've got work and I'm gonna tinker with some of the lyrics that have been floating around inside my head for the last couple of weeks. I wanna see if they have any merit to them."

"Sounds cool."

By the time they made it back to the dressing room, Ross and Cooper were already sprawled on the two couches the room had. Cooper sat up as they entered and tossed a bottle of water to each of them.

"So, are we spending the night in the motel and driving home first thing in the morning? Or do you wanna pack up now and drive through the night until we hit home?" Cooper asked. "I'm good with either one."

He didn't know about the rest of them but he was abso-fucking-lutely knackered and didn't have the energy to even contemplate having to drive home. Home was nine hours away, and right now all he wanted to do was crawl into a nice clean bed and sleep for at least six solid hours.

"I'm too fucked to drive home tonight. I vote we crash here one more night and then head home in the early hours." Alistair was relieved when Keagan agreed wholeheartedly that they spend another night away from home.

They collected all their gear and made arrangements to have their merchandise packed up and sent back to their home base, which was his and

Cooper's parents' house. Alistair had a case of the yawns as they made their way back to the motel they were all booked into. They were supposed to spend the last night hanging out with the headline act, Incredicon, but had begged off. There were only so many nights you could spend drunk off your arses and live to tell the tale of your adventures. As they pulled into their allotted car space, they said good night and parted ways to the separate rooms. Ross and Cooper were sharing, as were he and Keagan.

Alistair vaguely recalled promising Keagan he wouldn't snore too much, before the darkness hit him over the head as soon as he climbed into the room's queen-size bed. He couldn't have even told anyone if Keagan had replied to him or not.

The heat pressed up against Alistair's side felt good when he awoke the next morning—maybe a little too good. Turning slightly, he took the time to truly study his friend while he slept. The midnight-black hair set off the long, dark lashes, which framed what Alistair knew to be forest-green eyes. Through the years, he'd often teased his friend about his lashes, saying they were more suited for a girl. Keagan usually flipped him off, but it was true. The part he never added in his teasing was the fact that the lashes and the colour of his eyes suited the coffee-coloured skin to perfection. His own pale blue eyes were plain in comparison.

The different shades of tan on their skin looked surprisingly good together. He was slightly paler than his friend, but not by much. All over they were roughly the same size. Neither of them had muscleman body types, and maybe the both of them carried a few extra pounds around the middle. The truth was they were both extremely comfortable in their own skins. When Keagan had come out at the age of fourteen to family and friends, never once did it cross Alistair's mind to be disgusted or throw his friendship with Keagan away. In some ways the whole thing seemed to make them closer. Their friends and such knew that if they had a problem with Keagan's sexuality, they'd have to deal with Alistair himself. On the very day Keagan stepped out of his self-induced closet, Alistair silently vowed that he'd protect his best friend at all costs.

For his part, most of the people around his age couldn't, for the life of them, understand why Alistair's best friend was three years his junior. Alistair would always smile and tell them that once they got to know Keagan they would understand. Keagan had this whole mischievous side to him that seemed to draw Alistair in a little more with each passing day. Honestly, he never cared

about what other people thought of their friendship, and as his dad had once told him, not long after Keagan came out, *If it ain't broke, don't fix it*. This was a rule he'd lived by for the last six years. He'd been in more than a few fights when someone thought it would be funny to push Keagan around, but they soon found out that Keagan had more than a few friends, both male and female, who were ready to back him up.

Alistair stilled as Keagan sighed deeply and moved closer to Alistair, going so far as to wrap his arm around Alistair's side as he snuggled closer still. The weird part was being this close to his friend never seemed to worry Alistair in the slightest. Sliding his arm down his friend's back, Alistair held Keagan gently to his side. A shiver arced through him when the still-asleep Keagan placed a kiss against his flesh. It made Alistair wonder who his friend was dreaming about.

Lately, Alistair had gotten the feeling that there was someone special in Keagan's life. The other day he'd picked up Keagan's notebook, where he wrote out his lyrics, and noticed a change in how he usually worded things. Whoever it was, Alistair wasn't sure whether the relationship—if there was one—was good or not. All the lyrics on the first couple of pages came off as sad... heartbreaking even. Lying there in bed, one particular passage came flooding back to Alistair's mind.

Picking up the pieces of my heart.

Putting back together what you broke apart.

Don't wanna be lost in memories of days gone by,

'Cause everything you told me turned out to be a lie.

You walked away even though you promised to stay.

In the blink of an eye you said good-bye.

Those lyrics didn't sound at all like Keagan was in a happy place. Alistair was probably the only one in the band who realised how all Keagan's lyrics came from things the man had actually experienced. If this was still true, why had Alistair never realised his friend was hurting this bad. The best friend's code stated there should be no secrets, yet this was all new to Alistair. Once they were back at home and having a well-earned break, he would broach the subject and get Keagan to open up and tell him what had been going on in his life. Right now Alistair thought his friend would need some extra special attention... this was one thing he could do for Keagan, and he didn't care what

Lauren had to think about it all. Sometimes best friends came before girlfriends if the situation warranted it, and right now, he believed it did. There was probably going to be a shitstorm of a fight between him and Lauren, but hell, it would be worth getting yelled at if helping his friend made Keagan happier.

In the darkness, Keagan mumbled in his sleep and for one heart-clenching second, Alistair thought Keagan had called his name out, but that couldn't be possible, could it? There was no way his friend was having a dream about him, especially one that involved kissing. Keagan was way too smart to fall in love with him, but then why was the man trying to get closer still? The feeling was almost like Keagan was trying to burrow under his skin.

"Shh, it's all right." Alistair soothed as Keagan whimpered beside him.

Without thinking about the consequences, Alistair placed a soft kiss on the top of Keagan's head. The action instantly quietened the man in his arms. If Ross and Cooper could see him now they would never let him live down the fact he was sharing a bed with and holding a very out and proud gay man in his arms. Not that either of them had a problem with Keagan's sexuality—if they had, neither of them would be still in the band. On the other hand, if Lauren could see him now, there would be hell to pay. For as long as he'd been dating Lauren, she'd made it clear that she didn't like Keagan and his immoral lifestyle.

The sad part was Alistair didn't even know why he was still with her. He wasn't even sure if he'd ever truly been in love with her. She was just someone he had so he didn't have to spend the holidays alone, yet in reality he spent more time with his own family and Keagan's than he did with Lauren. Maybe it was time he sat down and really re-evaluated his life to see just where people fit into it. Well, if he was being totally honest, it was to see if Lauren still fit anywhere in his future.

"You're thinking too loud," Keagan mumbled beside him. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

Even though his friend was now awake, Alistair noticed he hadn't moved away. Keagan was still curled up against Alistair's side.

"Nah, I'm just thinking some thoughts. Nothing to write home about." Alistair chuckled when Keagan flashed him a half-lidded and sleep-filled grin.

"You know what?"

"What?" Alistair asked.

"I think I'm actually going to miss waking up next to you like this every day. After two months, I'm kinda used to sharing with you."

Another chuckle fell from Alistair's lips. "I bet you won't miss my snoring."

"Weirdly, I think I'll even miss that." Keagan's words seemed to be edged in sadness. "But I think you're going to be glad to get back to Lauren. I bet you missed her."

"You would think so, wouldn't you? She's actually who I was just thinking about. I realised a few things about our relationship and I have some thinking to do about everything when I get home."

"Huh?" Keagan pushed himself up on the bed.

Staring up into his friend's eyes, Alistair spoke, "I'm not one hundred percent sure Lauren and I belong together. We've been touring for two months and I haven't once rung her. The only times we've spoken to each other is when she's called me, and usually that was to yell at me for something I was supposed to have remembered to have done before we left. Hell, earlier today, no, make that yesterday, she tore into me because I put the towels on the wrong shelf in the bathroom."

Keagan stared at him and Alistair couldn't quite read his face. "Do you think you'll break up?"

Alistair sighed deeply. "To be honest, I don't know. We're supposed to love each other, and yet some days I get the feeling she can't even stand the sight of me. I'm not sure what I want to happen."

"No matter what does happen, remember that I'm always here for you." Keagan stifled a yawn.

"Come down here." Alistair tugged on Keagan's arm and yanked him down onto the bed. Pulling Keagan back into his side he added, "We still have a couple more hours before we have to be up. Try and get a little more sleep."

When Keagan wrapped an arm around his waist Alistair never complained. He just held on and welcomed the comfort in any form.

Chapter Two

Have you ever been so close to someone that a simple, innocent touch between two people can be seen as something more by family and friends?

Keagan looked at the words he'd written down. The question in itself had been running around his mind for a while now. He wondered if it was the beginning of a new song or maybe it meant something more. Glancing across the room he smiled at his best friend, Alistair "Krunk" Krunkstone who was currently sprawled out on the couch, dead to the world asleep, and snoring like there was no tomorrow. The weird thing was Keagan was used to the sounds of his friend in slumber. To be honest, he actually liked the sound; in a strange sort of way it was kind of like a security blanket. More than once while on tour, the band had shared rooms to save on costs. Alistair's snoring was legendary and had the rest of their band—DeRanged—running for cover in their early days when it came time to choose roomies. These days everyone just assumed Alistair and Keagan would be sharing. Apparently, according to Ross, their lead singer, it was in the best friends' code or some such bullshit that they should have to put up with the good and the bad of each other's idiosyncrasies. Five years on and he was just used to it. Sometimes when they weren't on tour he had trouble sleeping because it was so quiet in bed. Coop had even jokingly suggested that maybe they needed to record Alistair snoring to use as Keagan's own personal lullaby.

When they first started out touring as a band, they had all made a pact that for the sake of the band's sanity—slash—friendships, they would never live together. The thought was that being together twenty-four/seven would only lead to in-house fighting amongst the members, which could lead to the destruction of DeRanged before they had a chance to make it big. The funny thing was even though they lived on opposite sides of the city, Alistair could more often than not be found at Keagan's house. This, in itself, was both a good thing and a bad thing. Good; because they were best friends, and there was nothing better than hanging out with your bestie to relax and chill out in the down time, and bad; because sometimes feelings developed that you couldn't tell anyone else about because you didn't want to lose their friendship in any way, shape, or form. It was better to love from afar than to lose what was already solid. Yet on the last night of the tour Keagan had gotten the feeling that Alistair's and his friendship had changed. For some reason, the middle of

the night had been the perfect time for listening to his friend's woes. They'd been back exactly three days and Alistair had yet to tell him what decision he'd come to about his life.

Shaking his head, Keagan went back to scribbling down random thoughts. The truth was it was none of his damn business. Alistair was in a relationship, and he just needed to get over his stupid feelings and get on with his own life. You couldn't always have what you wanted. And there was no way he was fessing up that he wanted Alistair. The next time he looked up, Alistair was lying there, his face turned in his direction. Those beautiful huge hazel eyes watching him. He hadn't even realised the snoring had stopped until right at that moment.

"You're awake." He smiled across the room. "How are you feeling? You seem kind of out of it today."

Alistair nodded, stretched, and yawned as he sat up. "I'm good. How long was I asleep for?"

"Only a couple of hours. I was planning on waking you up as soon as the pizza arrived. I got it fully loaded. Is that okay with you?" Keagan placed the notebook he'd been working in inside his guitar case and clipped it up before leaning the whole thing into the corner of the room so it was safely out of the way.

"You working on something new?"

Keagan shrugged. "Just putting down some thoughts. I'm not sure if they'll lead anywhere, but you never know." He walked across the room and dropped onto the couch beside Alistair. "Are you staying here the night or heading back to your place?"

A strange look flittered over his friend's face for a moment or two before it was gone. For the life of him, Keagan didn't know what it meant, but in case it was bad he wanted to be there for his friend in whatever capacity he could. Maybe Alistair had made his decision after all.

"I was supposed to be going out to dinner with Lauren. She said we needed to talk, but then she dumped me."

"Dumped you how exactly? Is she going out with her friends instead?" In the five years Alistair and Lauren had been living together as a couple, Keagan had never truly liked her. The truth was he'd never given himself the chance to get to know her better, but honestly, that could have been simply because he

harboured his own feelings for the man. Feelings he could never disclose to anyone—ever.

A deep, bone-rattling sigh fell from his friend. “More like we broke up. She thinks you and I spend way too much time together. She made me choose between you and her—and she lost.”

“Wow! I knew you said you had some thinking to do but I never expected you to really break up.” Keagan was literally blown away with the knowledge that Alistair put their friendship before his relationship with his girlfriend. One part of him wanted to jump for joy, but another part knew his friend must be truly hurting. He couldn’t believe Lauren would make Alistair choose. He was just happy he was the one chosen.

Pain or something like it, was clearly etched on his friend’s face. “I tried to explain to her that you and I have been best buds for as long as I can remember. She shouldn’t have made me choose. We had our problems but...”

The sound of sadness in Alistair’s voice was evident and had Keagan asking, even though part of him was screaming, and telling him to shut the fuck up. “No, Alistair, she shouldn’t have. Do you think it’s for real, or do you think you’ll eventually patch things up?” *Please, God, let it be for real. I’ve never asked for anything in my life before, but I’m asking now.*

He was graced with another sad smile. “It’s for keeps. She said since both our names are on the lease she would take over the apartment, and I’d have to find somewhere else to live. The fucked-up thing is, I didn’t even really argue with her. Nor did it even cross my mind to try and get her to change her mind. You know I’d been thinking about things for a while now and this morning it all came to a head. If I hadn’t walked away when I did, I think the neighbours would have called the cops. You should have heard some of the shit coming out of her mouth. It was either walk away or hit her. Hell, I even agreed to let Cooper and Ross go and pack up all my stuff and bring it to me. Just because she didn’t want to see my face for another second. All I did was nod before I grabbed my guitar and walked out the door. What does that say about me?”

“Why am I only hearing about this now? I thought we were best friends. I thought we had no secrets. And it tells me you walked away like you did because you’re a nice guy. And nice guys hate causing friction, even if they are in the middle of breaking up with their girlfriend, but you still should have told me earlier. Remember our last night on tour I told you I’d be here for you.”

Another sigh filled the room. “I know you did, but I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to ruin the day for both of us. You make me believe everything

can still be normal. I want normal. I don't want my life to be so tragically fucked up that it becomes the inspiration for some whacked-out country song."

"A country song? Melodramatic much? So where are you going to stay?" A burst of laughter spilled from Keagan even as his mind was already running through half a dozen ways to suggest Alistair should move in with him.

In the end, he didn't have to come up with anything, because Alistair did it for him. "You know the *best* thing about having a *best* friend is they have to take you in when you are in need. I figure I'll just crash on your couch until I work out what my next step is. That's okay with you, right? You're moving out to the farmhouse next weekend, and there'll be loads of room for the two of us. Hell, the whole bloody band could move in. I'm not sure whether it's worth me trying to find a place of my own just yet, especially when we are away so much of the time. Even if I did have my own place I'd probably still be at your place most of the time."

A heated flutter raced across Keagan's skin like liquid fire as he found the words to answer. "Of course you are welcome to stay with me. Where else would you go? No one would put up with your quirky arse, except me. You're my family, man. You're also more than welcome to shift out to the farm with me. It'll save on living expenses and won't be so lonely. Everyone always said we practically lived together anyway. If the couch gets too much for you this week, you can always crash in my bed with me. We've done it often enough on tour."

He hoped he came off sounding casual, even if his gut was twisting and turning like someone was holding a set of beaters in there, stirring everything up into a heated goo. He also knew Alistair spoke the truth. The house he was moving into had once belonged to his nana, and was bloody huge. When she decided to move into a retirement village she signed the house over to Keagan, saying she was leaving him the farm because she'd bought Leah the condo she lived in with her family.

"My mum offered for me to come home, but as you know, Coop and Tay still live at home and they both can be annoying little shits at times. I suppose I could always ask your parents if I can crash in your old room," Alistair said with a mischievous smile. "I'm sure they'd love to have me stay for a while."

Keagan burst out laughing. "Go ahead and see how far that gets you. You do remember Dad turned my room into a home office a week after I moved out at the age of eighteen, but if you want to sleep on the floor under the desk

surrounded by boxes of paperwork instead of staying here, be my guest. I won't stop you."

The sound of the doorbell ringing interrupted the conversation they were having. Alistair was up on his feet heading for the door to retrieve and pay for the pizza. His friend lived for food. He didn't care whether it was homemade or take out. Keagan stood and walked to the kitchen to grab some napkins and a couple of beers. His breath caught in his throat when he realised this would be their first meal while living together. Hopefully it was the first of many to follow. The problem was going to be if they were going to be able to live in such close quarters without Alistair discovering Keagan's secret attraction to him. The thought of losing his best friend because of his feelings was something Keagan never wanted to have to contemplate. He knew he was going to have to suck it up and act... what? Straight? What a crock of shit that would be. The whole band already knew he was gay. He'd never rubbed it in their noses, but he wasn't about to hide away by stepping back into some damn metaphorical closet just because it might make his friends more comfortable. Even harder still to grasp was, what if Alistair started dating again? How was he going to live through Alistair moving on and being happy?

This is going to get so damn awkward if my body starts reacting to having Alistair around me day in and day out. Keagan scrubbed at his face and pasted on what he hoped was a friendly smile as Alistair came back in with two pizza boxes and set them on the coffee table in front of the couch. He was already munching away on his first slice.

"I bet you made the pizza guy hold the boxes while you got a slice."

"You know me well. The smell hit me before I even opened the door, and it was like 'Gimme now!'" Leaning back into the couch, Alistair lifted his bare feet up and rested them on the table beside the closed boxes of food.

Opening a beer, Keagan handed it over to his friend. "Seems ages since we've had time to just relax. I'd seriously had it by the end of that last leg of the tour. Nothing better than coming home and sleeping in my own bed. I'm glad we have a long stretch off this time."

"I know what you mean. I was well and truly ready to call it quits. We seriously need some family time. Get our heads on straight before we even think about going back out for more. Maybe we can even have a few jam sessions, and try and get some new material so we can put out a new CD or something. Seems like forever since we released the last one."

Keagan sighed. "Almost been two years." He couldn't believe it had been that long since they had last been in the studios laying down the tracks on *Red Flags*. The good thing about that particular CD, it had produced a song which had brought them moderate fame and a diehard—if somewhat crazy—fan base. To this day "Red Flag Burning" was still being played daily by most of the radio stations. "We probably should call a band meeting and see what everyone thinks of cutting another album, or where their general thoughts are heading. I bet you could personally use it, just to take your mind off things with Lauren."

"Sounds like a plan, but you know they'll do whatever you want, seeing as you are the brains behind us. DeRanged would still be a garage band if you'd never hunted down gigs and kicked our collective arses into gear. Weirdly, as far as the whole Lauren thing goes, my mind is pretty good. I honestly think Lauren and I weren't meant to last if I could walk away so easily. Doesn't that just scream that there must have been something wrong with the relationship—well, more than her hating the one person who means the world to me?"

At that last statement, Keagan almost choked on his mouthful of pizza. Taking a deep swig of his beer, Keagan decided to ignore the remarks about Alistair's relationship, and instead focussed on talking some more about the band.

"Someone had to do it." Reaching for another slice of pizza, he added, "Besides, back then I was the only one not obsessed with chasing pussy all over the place."

"Wanker," Alistair mumbled around a mouthful of food.

"Dork."

"Dick."

Keagan batted his eyes at his friend. "Don't I wish, but back then I was still too freaked out to tell anyone I liked guys better. I preferred to sit back and watch the rest of you guys making fools of yourselves."

The mood changed as Alistair sat up a little straighter. "You could have told me, you know. I would've understood. I would have still loved you regardless."

"I know that. In my heart, I knew that you wouldn't abandon me, but my head was telling me you would toss our friendship away like yesterday's trash. Our friendship was worth more to me than getting constantly laid. Does that make any sense at all? I guess it took me quite a few years to sort out everything inside my head, before I was comfortably able to come clean to everyone."

“Yeah it does. Though, by what you just said, it makes the rest of us seem like selfish arseholes. If I’m going to be totally honest, back then I don’t know what the other’s reactions would have been. All I do know for certain is you would’ve still had me no matter what. Best buds status is a hard thing to lose when we have been friends for as long as we have.”

The sincerity in Alistair’s whole demeanour eased the tension that had been steadily building like a tsunami in Keagan’s chest and gut. Maybe things would be all right for the next little bit. Alistair never had to know Keagan sometimes saw him as more than just a friend, but that was a train of thought that had no business in this whole conversation.

Needing to divert the conversation from its current path, Keagan said, “We have been friends for a long time, haven’t we?”

Alistair’s responding laugh was so deep, it had heat racing through Keagan’s body to settle in his groin. As casually as he could, he shifted positions on the couch so his growing erection wasn’t on full display for the world to see.

When Alistair wiped the tears from his eyes, Keagan went on, “I didn’t think my statement was that funny.”

“Just remembering the first day we met. Coop, Tay, and I were walking round the neighbourhood looking for Scooter only to come across some skinny-as-fuck kid stuck up in a tree, and screaming his lungs out for help.”

“All I remember is Coop and Tay going for help and you sitting on the sidewalk laughing your arse off at me. Boy did you piss me off that day. I wanted to hit you so bad.”

Alistair snorted out another burst of laughter. “I was thirteen and you were all of what, like ten? It was my God-given right of being the oldest person there to take the piss out of you. At least I eventually climbed up and helped you down, didn’t I?”

“Helped me! More like you gave me a good ol’ shove, and knocked me clean out of the tree. Mum had to take me to the hospital because the fall broke my arm, or have you forgotten that little fact? I swear to God, I’ll never forget looking back up and seeing the shocked look on your face. I thought you were going to shit pink kittens. It’s kinda weird how after you almost killed me we’ve still managed to remain best friends. You would think I wouldn’t want to have anything to do with you after that,” Keagan answered.

“The best friend part is because I felt so guilty about hurting you. I spent the rest of the holidays hanging out with you so you didn’t get bored out of your brains. Coop thought I was nuts, but I’m glad I did it. It also helped that you weren’t a complete loser, and being with you was kinda interesting. I’d never met anyone before who could just spit out random facts about anything and everything.”

“Not much has changed really. We still spend most of our time together. The only difference I can see is I’ve stopped blurting out random shit at everyone. Huh! I can almost see why Lauren was so pissed off, but to be honest dude, as much as you loved her, I couldn’t stand her. She always grated me the wrong way.” Watching the array of emotions wash over his friend’s face he added, “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that last bit.”

Silence reigned for a couple of minutes before Alistair began talking again. “I think some part of me always knew you disliked her as much as she disliked you. I kinda knew right back at the beginning she was the wrong person for me. I just didn’t want to have to deal with the fallout, so I basically ignored the fact that I didn’t love her as much as I should. If I’d have sat down and really thought about everything, and what the consequences would end up being, I doubt Lauren and I would’ve been together for as long as we were. I was mostly with her so I didn’t have to be alone. I had you on tour, but at home it was different, and I just liked having another person around. Fuck! Maybe...” Alistair’s words trailed off into silence.

Keagan leant forward and grabbed Alistair’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “No matter what happens in the future you still have me. I’ll always be here for you. I really think you spent more time with me than you did her even while you were still together.”

“I know. Why do you think I’m here? You’ve always been my comfort zone. You are the one person I can always count on to be there for me when I need someone.”

Keagan was flabbergasted. He didn’t even know what to say to that, so instead, he continued to hold Alistair’s hand as they both sat there silently, wrapped up in their own thoughts while the pizza lay cooling on the table where it had been forgotten.

Chapter Three

The smell of coffee woke Alistair the next day. His back was aching from sleeping on the lumpy couch. The thing was fine for taking a nap or lazing on with Keagan as they watched movies, but the piece of crap definitely wasn't made for trying to sleep through the night on. He knew he would definitely be taking his friend up on the offer to share his bed for the remainder of the week. He was also going to strongly suggest they dump the couch and get something more comfortable on the arse for the farm house. Standing up, he slowly stretched his arms above his head trying to work the kinks out of his neck and back. The sound of slightly off-key singing was coming from the kitchen.

After taking the time to empty his bladder in the bathroom, he made his way to the kitchen and leant against the doorframe. He couldn't have stopped the smile from forming on his lips at the sight before him. Keagan was bent over, checking something in the oven as his arse swayed in time to whatever song he was singing. Biting his lip to keep from laughing out loud he watched as Keagan stood up. Only then did he realise his friend was wearing his earpiece and the song he was singing was a nursery rhyme. He must be singing to little Luke. His thoughts were confirmed when Keagan spoke again.

"No worries, sis. Talk to you at lunch on Sunday. Tell Mum Alistair will probably be coming with me."

His friend hadn't as yet turned around so he didn't know Alistair was standing there listening to the whole conversation—even if it was one-sided. Guilt tore through him as he continued to listen, because it sounded like he was hearing secrets he shouldn't have the privilege of knowing.

"No, it's not awkward having him stay with me." Keagan made a sound filled with a little frustration. "He doesn't know that... No you can't tell him... Because it's none of your bloody business, that's why... Look, he's going through enough without that being laid on him as well. If you love me at all, you will keep quiet about what you know... Yeah, I love you too, Leah. Say hi to Mike, and give that baby boy hugs and kisses from his uncle."

Before Keagan could turn and catch him in the act of eavesdropping Alistair quietly stepped back and out of sight as Keagan ended the call with his sister. Not knowing what else to do he faked a big yawn as he stepped back into the kitchen doorway and smirked at the man standing before him.

“This is special. Not very often I get to wake up to one of the famous breakfasts from Keagan Thames, keyboardist extraordinaire, who also has mad skills in the kitchen. So what are we having?”

His friend snorted out a laugh. “Don’t get too used to it. Tomorrow you can have kitchen duty if you want.”

“Takeout it is... I doubt either of us want to have our stomachs pumped after what passes for my cooking. So tell me where’s the best takeout joint around here?” Alistair asked as he dragged out a chair and took his place at the table.

The way Keagan looked at him, with mock horror clearly in his eyes, was hilarious. “I forgot just how bad you were. Fine, I’ll cook but you have clean-up duty. I shouldn’t have to do it all.”

“What? Don’t you want to be my slave for the rest of eternity? Most people would kill to hang around me and do my bidding just on the off chance I might bestow a smile upon them.” He knew what he was saying was idiotic, but it did the trick and had Keagan in what seemed to be a happier frame of mind.

“What kind of slave am I supposed to be, exactly?”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Alistair answered without thinking, “Every kind there is... Do my chores slave... Give me all over body massages slave... Hell, right now you could even be my sex slave. It seems like forever since I’ve had any decent—” he bit his words off when he realised what he’d just implied.

The silence that followed his last statement was almost deafening. Keagan was staring at him open mouthed, and the blush rising over his skin was probably the exact same colour as the one Alistair knew he himself was more than likely sporting. *God, could my brain have kicked in a little sooner before my mouth jumped into action. How the hell do I get myself out of this? Fuck me drunk, I need to think of something soon before Keagan thumps me.*

Keagan’s shock seemed to dissipate as a gut rumbling laugh reverberated out of him. “Oh! My! God! You should see the look on your face. Wait till everyone hears that you just asked me to be your sex slave.” Keagan wiped his eyes. “You really shouldn’t make offers you have no intention of going through with. *Love slave...* as if that were even possible. Your offer makes me think two things. A: You and Lauren weren’t doing it enough, or B: the sex wasn’t that great. Especially if you’re looking to switch playing fields.”

Again Alistair shrugged, this time taking a moment to think before he answered. “I guess it was a little of both. We did the basics, but I don’t think we

ever properly clicked in that department. I think she was more with me because I was in a band than because she was in love with me. Look, I don't even know if *that's* true because most days she wanted me to quit the band and get a real job." He scratched the side of his head in thought. "Maybe that's why it was so easy for our relationship to end. The love we were supposed to have just wasn't there."

"I'm sure that's not it. From what I witnessed, you definitely had passion between the pair of you. Maybe this isn't as bad as you think and she'll ask you to come home again. Five years is a long time together just to walk away without regrets."

"I thought you didn't like her?" Alistair asked repeating what Keagan had confided to him the night before.

Keagan rolled his eyes. "Just because I may not like your girlfriend, doesn't mean I'd not want you to be with her if it truly makes you happy."

As Keagan dished up the scrambled eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, and toast he'd made for breakfast. Alistair fought an inner battle before he finally found the courage to say, "Sadly, after really thinking things through. I don't think I've been happy in the relationship with Lauren for a while now. I just didn't have the courage to leave. Her kicking me out made things a hell of a lot easier on my conscience. I think if the decision was left up to me we'd still be together and making each other miserable."

Once the words had left his mouth Alistair felt a hell of a lot freer for some reason. The heavy weight that had been playing on his mind for the last three years or so felt like it was all but non-existent. If the truth be known, he realised he could finally breathe again and not be worried that Lauren was going to lose her temper because he'd made plans to spend time with his best friend. Lauren truly had been jealous of Keagan from the very start. Her jealousy got even worse once Keagan came out and told everyone he was gay. She never understood how he could remain close friends with someone she perceived to be a perverted, immoral freak. This was one of the reasons he never ever told her how he'd more than once shared the same bedroom while on tour, and sometimes even the same bed as Keagan. They would have been over a lot sooner had he told her that fact. She never understood why Alistair never ever thought Keagan was perverted. To him, he was always just—Keagan.

They ate in silence for a while. Each caught up in their own thoughts. Alistair hoped Keagan wasn't planning on dodging him since the whole sex

slave outburst. As for himself, all of a sudden he couldn't get the picture of a naked Keagan out of his head. He'd seen his friend naked many times before, but had never really thought too much about it... Well, that wasn't quite true. There were a few nights when they'd been sharing a room when Keagan had done or said something, which had the good grace of making his body react to the closeness of his friend. One night he could even remember sitting up late into the night as he watched his friend sleeping in the other bed—*creepy much?* Creepier still, watching Keagan had become a serious habit after that night.

“So what's on the agenda for today?” Keagan asked, breaking into the silence.

“I guess we wait for Ross and Coop to bring my belongings here, though I should probably call Coop to make sure he collects the important stuff. For the most part I couldn't give a shit about it, but there are a few things I definitely want to keep, so they need to get them out of the apartment before Lauren tosses all my belongings out.”

The funny thing was, the things he wanted to keep were little things Keagan had given him over the years, plus all the photos where Keagan featured. All these things were kept safe in a shoebox out in the garage, as far from Lauren's prying eyes as they could get. Alistair knew without a doubt if she knew they existed she would have destroyed or gotten rid of them long ago.

That's how deep her hatred ran.

“Why don't you call your brother while I clean up the kitchen? The sooner we get this shit organised the better. Pity we weren't already in the new place. It would have made life so much easier. I think before they get here we should move some of my already packed boxes out and place them against the front lounge room wall so we aren't tripping over everything. See if you can get them to pack your gear so you won't have to unpack it until we move. Just leave your clothes and stuff out that you'll need right away.”

As he got to his feet, Alistair nodded. “Will do, and in case I forget, thanks for taking me in.”

“That's what best friends are for.”

It took three hours of moving shit around in the small apartment before everything was where Keagan wanted it to be. No sooner had they sat down when banging on the door let them know Coop and Ross had arrived with

Alistair's possessions. What Alistair hadn't expected when he got up to open the door was a very furious Lauren to be standing there glaring at him.

"Lauren!" Her name slipped from his lips in surprise.

"I can't believe they were telling me the truth when Cooper told me he was taking all your belongings to *his* house." The way she spat out the word *his*, it left no doubt in Alistair's mind she was referring to Keagan. He didn't say anything as she continued, "I thought he was pulling my leg, but here you are. I swear to God you disgust me sometimes."

"Here I am," Alistair echoed coldly. "Why do you even care where I'm staying now? You threw me out, remember? What did you expect me to do? Come crawling back to you on my hands and knees begging for forgiveness?"

"Yes! I *expected* you to come home and choose me. I didn't *expect* you to run straight to him. I *should* have expected it though. I've had my suspicions about you two for a while now. You being here just tells me that I'm correct."

What the hell was she talking about? And what the hell gave her the right to come to Keagan's home and cause a scene. She needed to turn around and go the fuck home and leave them in peace.

Trying his best to keep his temper in check, he took a deep calming breath before he finally could bring himself to speak to her without yelling. "I think you should leave. I don't know why you think you have the God-given right to come to Keagan's home and start making accusations and demands. You threw me out. That was a clear message to me about where I stood in your life. Why the hell would I come crawling back? You've disrespected me just as much as you've disrespected my best friend. You need to go home. You need to move on with your life, and you definitely need to stay the hell out of mine."

By the darkening, mottled-red of her face he knew he wasn't going to like what she was going to say next. He didn't have long to wait to know he was correct.

"You will regret this. Nobody walks away from me and doesn't pay," she snarled.

"What are you going to do? In case you didn't realise... you dumped my arse, not the other way around. You have no one to blame but yourself. Build a bridge and get over it."

As he went to turn away from her, she snatched her hand out and grabbed his arm keeping him firmly in place. "What do you think your precious fans

will think when they hear that he's a faggot? How long do you think they will stick around?"

"Go ahead and blab all you want. If you ever stopped by our websites even once you would already know that Keagan's being gay isn't a secret. No one seems to care. The only one who does is you with your narrow-minded bigotry. So do your worst, but just know this—I don't give a fuck about what you think of me, but if you say one word against Keagan again I'll sue your arse from here to hell and back. So you just go right ahead and do what you think best."

Alistair wanted to fist pump the air as she gave one God-almighty screech and stormed away. His whole body felt like it was churning. He wasn't sure why he finally had the balls to stand up to her, but he was glad that he did. Once she was gone, he could totally freak out over what just happened.

No sooner had she left than he suddenly found himself with his arms full of Keagan. The guy was laughing and hugging all over him. And to his surprise, Alistair found himself wrapping his arms tightly around his friend and holding on. He was glad that just like every other time in his life, when something major happened Keagan was there to celebrate or commiserate with him. The one true fact was Keagan was the one he could tell anything to and not feel like he was being judged.

Chapter Four

“You owe me a carton of beer. I said there’d be some man-on-man action happening once your brother broke up with that bitch.”

The smugness of their lead singer’s voice sounding nearby had Keagan pulling out of Alistair’s arms, and spinning to face Ross and Cooper carrying armloads of boxes.

Keagan couldn’t speak, and felt stupid for the fact he’d let his emotions get a hold of him. He was just so happy when he heard Alistair defending him to Lauren. He’d never truly believed how much she’d despised him until he heard all of her hatred spewing out of her mouth. The fact that she’d more or less asked Alistair to return home only to be denied told Keagan so much more than anyone knew. He didn’t even think Alistair himself had realised that he’d all but proclaimed Keagan meant more to him than the woman he’d spent the last five years with.

“You just missed Lauren.” Alistair snarled.

“So that’s where the wicked witch from the west went to. She demanded we not touch your stuff and took off,” Cooper said as he put the boxes next to Keagan’s steadily growing pile. “Fuck! They’re heavy.”

Ross grinned as he offloaded his boxes as well. “As soon as she left we raced around the apartment and grabbed everything we thought you’d want to keep. Left all the girly froufrou crap, but after what we just witnessed maybe we should have grabbed it as well.”

“Has anyone told you lately how much of an arse you are, Ross? I swear the shit that comes out of your mouth is just inviting a punch to the mouth.” Alistair threw back.

The tone of his voice kind of blurred the lines so that Keagan couldn’t tell whether Alistair was pissed off at their friend or not. “Alistair, he’s just being the dick he’s always been. Take no notice of him.”

“Why is it that when everyone calls him Krunk, you insist on calling him Alistair?” Ross teased.

“I’ve always called him Alistair. It was the name he used to introduce himself to me when we first met. So it’s the name I’m going to use.” Keagan wasn’t going to confess to anyone that his friend looked like an Alistair more

than he looked like a Krunk to him. He'd never even been tempted to call him Krunk. In his mind, Krunk was a stupid nickname to have, but Alistair never told anyone to stop so why should he? "Why should it matter what I call him?"

Ross shrugged. "It doesn't, but I've always wondered and only just gotten around to asking. Come on, you two can help us carry the rest of his gear into the house. Coop is right; this shit is heavy."

Keagan watched as Alistair bumped shoulders with Ross as they passed each other and wondered if it was Alistair's way of telling their friend to back off. Even without knowing it, Alistair was looking after him.

After they had brought in the last of Alistair's belongings, they were lounging around having a well-earned beer when Cooper nudged Alistair with his boot. "Mum still wants you to move home. I'm supposed to convince you to do it."

Something inside Keagan clenched tight as he waited to see how his friend would answer.

"Tell her I'm okay right where I am. Keagan is taking very good care of me," Alistair answered and Keagan felt himself relaxing.

"I told her you wouldn't want to come home, but if she asks you can tell her I tried. I think she's feeling a little put out."

"Why would your mum be feeling put out?" Keagan asked. Anna Krunkstone was one of the most easy-going people he'd ever met.

Cooper cringed. "That could be my fault. I kinda told her I was moving out. She realised if I did she would only have Tay at home to smother in motherly love."

"Moving out? Where the hell are you going?" Alistair demanded.

"I'm moving in with Ross. His flatmate is moving to Tassie and he needs someone to cover half the rent, so I thought I'd give it a go."

Keagan chuckled. "Remember when we swore we'd never live together and now here we are thinking about doing exactly that. Alistair even joked how the farm was big enough to house us all."

The gleam which suddenly appeared in both Ross and Cooper's eyes had him inwardly groaning at having opened his big mouth. He knew without a doubt the house he'd just begun to think of as his and Alistair's home was about to be invaded by the other two members of DeRanged.

“If I remember correctly the farm is big enough to even house a recording studio. We could have some place to jam without having to pay for studio time. I’d be willing to throw money in to create our own space,” Ross said in apparent excitement.

“Are we really doing this?” Cooper asked. Leaning across he tapped Ross on the knee. “When does your lease run out?”

“Two months.” The obvious frustration was clearly heard. “I wouldn’t be able to move until the middle of July.”

Alistair snorted. “Keagan hasn’t even asked you guys to move in and you’re already making plans.”

Keagan threw his friend a smile, but even he knew they’d all end up living together. It made sense. They could pool their money to pay the amenities, buy food, and anything else they need. His cash flow was running pretty low since he’d paid, not long ago, to have the wiring replaced in the farmhouse.

“Keags will let us move in; he loves us,” Cooper laughed.

“No, he’s letting me move in because he loves me.” Alistair shook his head in mock dismay at his brother. “He just tolerates you and Ross. Isn’t that right Keags?”

Rolling his eyes, Keagan thought a bit of payback was due. “Sure babe, especially since you have offered me the job of your sex slave.”

The sight of Ross and Cooper spitting their beer out was hilarious. They were coughing and spluttering so much that Keagan thought he was going to bust a gut from laughing so much. All the while, Alistair covered his face and groaned.

“You asked Keags to be your sex slave?” Cooper asked in between the deep breaths he was sucking in.

Alistair shrugged. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. Have you tasted the guy’s cooking?”

“So... you want him to not only be your sex slave, but to cook for you as well?” Ross queried.

“Okay, when you say it like that it sounds pretty bad, but I really wasn’t going to make him cook for me.” Alistair tried to defend.

“But just so we’re clear, you were going to have him sleep with you? Makes sense even,” Cooper said thoughtfully. “I mean who else are you going to get

who'll put up with your pain in the arse snoring. I vote if we do move in together that maybe you should soundproof your room so the rest of us don't hear the snoring or any other kinkiness that might be happening."

Keagan decided to throw Alistair a lifeline. "He really doesn't want me to sleep with him. Everyone knows Alistair is a die-hard heterosexual. I have absolutely nothing that would interest him in the bedroom."

The way Alistair blushed was kind of sexy. Keagan liked the fact that even with all this teasing he knew it wouldn't harm their friendship in the slightest. The hard thing was that even though Alistair had no intimate—beyond friendship—feelings for him, Keagan had been in love with his friend from the day they first met.

"So Keags, do you want a couple of more house mates? I'll need to let my rental agency know if I'm not renewing my lease," Ross asked.

"What do you think, Alistair? Should we let these two crash our home?" Keagan's chest felt constricted at the obvious relief written in his friend's eyes. He surmised his friend didn't really want to be alone with him after all this talk about the two of them having sex.

Before Alistair could answer him Ross spoke again. "If we are doing this, why doesn't Krunk move in with me for the two months and then Cooper can stay at home and in July we'll all crash the farm. I mean there's no sense in Cooper moving twice. Krunk can leave all his belongings here and just take the basics to my place."

"Is that what you want, Alistair?" Keagan asked calmly. If his friend wanted to stay here with him he would be more than happy, but if he'd be more comfortable with Ross, then he wouldn't interfere—he'd go along with whatever his friend chose to do.

"Are you really going to let them move out to the farm?" Alistair countered.

"Sure, I'll give it a go. Ross is correct. It will give us somewhere to practice without having to hire a place for it. We could probably turn the barn into a recording studio and practice area, especially seeing as it hasn't housed animals in years."

"Then I guess it makes sense for Coop to remain at home until you move in. I'll go and stay with Ross for the interim. Besides, your couch is really crappy to sleep on."

"If that's what you want." As much as he tried not to, even he could hear the disappointment in his voice. The sharp eyes of both Ross and Cooper

seemed to see straight through him. He knew they would be thinking about what exactly was going on.

“Well, on that note I think I’ll head home.” Ross stood up and stretched. “You ready to head out?” he asked Alistair.

“Yup, what about you, Coop?” Alistair asked.

“Nah, I still have half a beer. I think I’ll hang here for a bit. I want to talk some shit out with Keags about the farm.”

Once Ross and Alistair left, Keagan turned his attention to his friend. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“I want to know what’s going on between you and my brother.”

“I thought you wanted to talk about the farm?” Keagan stalled answering the question asked.

“We’ll talk about that later. What’s up with you and Krunk?”

Fuck! Keagan closed his eyes and leant his head against the back of the lounge. “There’s nothing going on. He came to my place to crash after he split with Lauren. Hell, he didn’t even tell me they had separated until late yesterday afternoon.”

“Do you have feelings for him? I mean I’ve always suspected that you do. Shit’s happened over the years which made me think you had strong feelings for him.”

“You’re right, I do have strong feelings for him. Alistair is my best friend. He’s seen me through some of the crappiest events in my life. I’m determined to be there for him as well. If you’re asking me if we’ve ever had sex? Then the answer is no. You know him probably better than I do even. Your brother is straight. I’ve never even had an inkling that he might bat on the same side of the fence as I do. What would even make you think so?”

Cooper stood and walked over to where they had stacked Alistair’s belongings and dug through them before coming back to the couch with a shoebox in his hands. He held onto it as he spoke.

“This is the one thing Krunk asked me to get when he called me this morning. He didn’t care about the rest of it.” He handed the box to Keagan.

“Why are you showing me?” Keagan’s hands trembled as he held the box on his lap.

"I think you need to see what my brother treasured over the rest of his belongings."

Slowly Keagan opened the shoebox. His breath caught in his throat as he saw what was held within. Tears filled his eyes as he rifled through his friend's belongings only to realise the box only held things Keagan had given to him over the years. There was also a bundle of photos in there that had been taken at the numerous gigs they had played. Each and every one featured him and Alistair. Some they were warming up, some they were on stage midconcert, while others were just the two of them goofing around. As he flicked through them one caught his attention. It was him and Alistair asleep on a train. For some reason Alistair was sprawled on his lap while Keagan used Alistair's thigh as a pillow. When the hell had the photo even been taken? He had green hair so he knew it had to be at least two years ago. What captivated him was the fact that even in sleep they both looked so relaxed and comfortable with each other. He carefully placed the photos back where he'd found them and closed the box.

"I'm not sure exactly what you want me to say. He's never acted any differently toward me. I don't know what you think it is that's going on, but as far as I'm concerned your brother is straight, and until he tells me anything different I'm going to always think of him as being straight."

"And if he decides that he isn't?"

"What do you want from me?"

Cooper sounded sincere when he finally answered. "I want you to promise me that if he comes to you seeking to be more than friends that you won't just use him and then send him on his way."

"I'd never hurt him. I—" he bit off what he was about to say. Cooper had no business butting into his life the way he was.

"You're in love with him. I've known that since the year you fell out of the tree and broke your arm. It's never made one iota of difference to me who you like to sleep with, but Krunk is my big brother. I have to look out for him."

"Rest assured, Coop, I don't intend to hurt him. I think you're wrong about him being gay. I've honestly never gotten that vibe off him."

"Then you've obviously never seen the way he looks at you."

Keagan wasn't sure what to make of what his friend was saying. He'd never seen Alistair look at him as anything other than as a friend. He wasn't happy

that Cooper was putting these thoughts in his head, but at the same time he knew he'd be watching his friend more closely to see if Cooper was telling the truth.

Shit was just about to get complicated.

Chapter Five

“What’s the matter with you?”

Alistair looked up from the page of the magazine he’d been staring at for the last twenty minutes without retaining a single damn word. In the time he was supposed to be reading, he’d been sitting here brooding about the fact he was staying here with Ross instead of with Keagan like he wanted to. He was feeling shitty because he knew that Keagan had wanted him to stay, but he’d freaked out when everyone had started joking about the whole sex slave thing. Even though he’d never before had a problem with Keagan’s sexuality, he wasn’t ready to come out of his closet just yet.

“Are you going to tell me, or what?” His brother was looking at him curiously. Why the hell was his brother even here?

Instead of answering him, he asked, “What are you doing here? I thought you’d be at home packing up your own crap in preparation for the move out to the farm.”

“I don’t have a lot of gear. I’m gonna pick up some boxes on my way home this arvo.”

Cooper was looking at him so intently that Alistair began to get a nervous feeling in his gut. He knew his brother wasn’t done grilling him, just like he also knew he didn’t want to have to play twenty questions all about his life. When he did that, all kinds of shit found its way spilling out of his mouth.

“There’s nothing going on with me. Just trying to get my head around everything that’s been happening lately.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. His brother just didn’t need to know how messed up his head really was. Shit like this was something he had to work through on his own.

His brother snorted out a laugh. “I call bullshit on that. There’s no way in hell you can tell me that you’re mourning the loss of your relationship with Lauren. I just don’t believe it.”

“Christ, Coop, she was my girlfriend for the last five years. Of course I’m upset things ended the way they did.”

“You forget that as your brother I know you inside and out. I think the only person who might know you better than me is Keagan. I’m telling you now you’re lying to yourself if you think you’re upset over losing Lauren, because if

you were you would have gone crawling back home to her when she asked. Now I want you to tell me what's really going on with you. The truth, and not some bogus bullshit because you don't want to talk about whatever is going on."

"I swear there's nothing going on," Alistair defended.

Why couldn't Coop believe him, or at least just drop the subject altogether? He didn't need this right now. All he wanted to do was work through this on his own. He didn't want anyone—especially his family—trying to help him. Christ if that happened he would end up more screwed-up than he already was. His family tended to get a little too enthusiastic when it came to offering help. Particularly if that help had to do with anything remotely concerning his private life. Cooper might be younger than him by four years, but he also took after their mother, who was the queen of all meddlers.

The staring match they were currently having was starting to piss Alistair off. If his brother had something to say, he just needed to spit it the hell out. To break the silence he asked, "What do you want to know, Coop?"

"I want to know what's up between you and Keagan. And remember, I want the truth."

"Huh? There's nothing up. Why would you even ask?" Alistair relaxed slightly as he realised his brother was probably only guessing that there was a problem. "Why would there be a problem? He's my best friend for fuck's sake."

"I'm not questioning your friendship," Cooper stated.

"Then what the hell are you getting at?" It was like his brother was talking in riddles. Or fragmented like a jigsaw puzzle. If he could get the thing into alignment, the whole conversation would make sense.

"Fuck, you can be dense sometimes." Cooper appeared to be frustrated as hell. "I mean that box you were so adamant I rescue from the garage. I got curious so I looked inside. I wanted to know what was so damn important to you."

Holy fuck! He knows my secret. What the hell am I supposed to do now? Alistair started to spin out. He couldn't have stopped it from happening even though he wanted to. His mind was on turbo overload—a full-on panic attack was heading his way. Taking a dozen or so deep breaths to get himself somewhat back under control he finally asked, "And?"

“And... I want to know why you have a secret stash all about Keagan. Is there something you want to tell me?”

The look on Cooper's face was blank and Alistair couldn't even begin to guess what his brother might be thinking. His choices were to panic, to deny everything, or to fess up and admit he had feelings for his best friend... taking a moment he looked his brother dead in the eye, and lied—well, kind of lied.

“I kept those things away from Lauren, as much as she hated Keagan, she would have destroyed it all.”

“You're lying.”

“Why the hell would I lie?” he demanded. Alistair wasn't liking where this conversation was going at all. He wanted it to stop right now.

They sat there in silence for a while, and the tension between them seemed to be growing by the second. He could see the calculating way his brother was watching him, and he wanted to yell at him, and tell him to stop.

“Maybe you don't even realise that you're lying. Maybe in your head—”

“You don't know what you're talking about. I don't want you going to Keagan with any of this rubbish you're thinking. I don't want you to screw up the one true friendship I have. I don't want you making things awkward between us. If that happens I'll never forgive you.”

“Is that why you're too scared to tell him the truth about how you feel about him? Are you scared he'll stop being your friend if he knows?”

Those two questions made him gasp like he'd been sucker-punched in the gut. He didn't want to have to talk about this anymore. He didn't want anything fucking up what was solid between him and Keagan. The reason he'd never said anything himself is because he never wanted to hear Keagan tell him that he didn't feel the same way. He'd worked out all those years ago when Keagan had turned fourteen just how much he was attracted to his friend, so he went out and got himself a girlfriend to be normal, and look just where that had gotten him—*dumped*, but he'd deserved what he got because, with Lauren, he'd been living a lie.

“Why would you think I'm in love with Keagan?”

“We've always known you're in love with Keagan.”

When he heard Ross speak from behind him, he groaned. He'd forgotten his current roomie was still in the apartment with them. How long had he been standing there listening to what he and Cooper were talking about?

“You forget we have eyes, brother. We see how you look at Keagan, especially when you think no one is looking. If he’s in the same room with you, you seem to know exactly where he is at all times. Hell, even when you’re apart you could probably tell us exactly where Keagan was, couldn’t you? I bet you know where he is right now.”

The shitty thing was he did know. He knew that today Keagan had a lunch date with the guy from Corelli Studios. They had met the last time DeRanged had hired rooms to lay down some ideas. He hadn’t at first realised the two had hit it off until Keagan told him a couple of weeks ago they’d been kind of meeting up for coffee or lunch.

“Do you know where he is?” Ross asked.

He nodded, “Yeah, he’s on a date with some guy from our last round of studio sessions. They’re having lunch at Oscarnelli’s.”

Confusion or something akin to it filled Cooper’s eyes. “Why would he be out on a date?”

“Because he obviously likes the guy.”

“He might like the guy, but he’s in love with you,” Ross interjected. “Maybe he’s tired of waiting for you to get caught up with the damn program. If I were you, I wouldn’t hold off too long or you’ll lose him to someone else completely. Keags is a pretty good looking guy. I mean he’s not my type, but he’s probably a lot of other guys’ type.”

Alistair and Cooper both wore matching open-mouthed expressions as they stared at Ross. Cooper recovered first. “How the hell did I not know you were gay?”

“You never asked, and by the way, I class myself as bi. I like both sides of the fence, so to speak,” Ross threw back casually.

“Am I the only straight one among us?” Cooper demanded jokingly.

Ross rolled his eyes. “No one in this band is completely straight. I don’t think any of us have forgotten about the time you and Joey won the kissing competition at Helen’s birthday party.”

“For fuck’s sake, that was years ago. I was all of thirteen for crying out loud. And you were the one who bet us twenty dollars we wouldn’t have the balls to go through with it. If you think one event six years ago makes me gay, or even bi, you’re dreaming.” The laughter in Cooper’s eyes was a clear indication he thought Ross was off his rocker.

“All I’m saying is you have participated in what would be considered by most a homosexual act.”

They all laughed and it suddenly hit Alistair that Ross in his own unique way was drawing Cooper’s attention away from the subject of Keagan, and his feelings for the man. When Ross glanced his way, Alistair gave him a quick smile as a thank-you. In return he was given a slight nod to indicate the message had well and truly been received.

The sound of knocking at the door was unexpected. Especially at the ferocity in which the person was pounding on the door. Alistair shrugged at his brother as Ross went to see who was there. The angry tones of a woman’s voice had him cringing inwardly. For whatever reason, Lauren apparently wasn’t yet done with him.

He didn’t even bother getting off the recliner as she stormed into the room and glared at them all. Even as pissed as she seemed to be he didn’t think the anger was aimed at him this time.

“What the hell gives you two the right to go through *my* belongings and remove things from *my* home? I told you not to touch a thing and when I got back yesterday you had done the exact opposite.” She stood with her hands on her hips as she shouted at Cooper and Ross.

Enough was enough!

“You told me that you would allow them to pack and collect my stuff. They never took anything of yours. Hell, they even left most of mine behind. What right have you got to be pissed off?” Alistair lowered the footrest on the recliner as he got to his feet and stood toe-to-toe with his ex.

She never even stopped to think about it as she hauled back and slapped him across the face. “You... You arse. You need to pack up your things and come the fuck home where you belong. It’s time you gave up this stupid band nonsense and got a real job. You know my father wants you to come and work at the bakery with him. He’s offered you a full-time job, and you’re throwing it away all on these idiots and the idea of becoming huge rock stars. It’s never going to happen. You need to come home and grow the hell up. You’re twenty-three, not some teenage boy still in high school. I want a family, and we can’t do that until you get a real job.”

What the fuck!

Pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, Alistair contemplated the vision of their future together and he didn’t quite see it in the

same fashion. Hell, to be honest, this was the first he was hearing about most of it. He did know about the job offer from her father, but he didn't want to be a baker. His dream had always been to become an author. He'd recently submitted to and gotten a contract for his first story from a publisher. The story was in some way based on his own life and the trials of becoming a band. The feedback he'd gotten back on it had been promising. They were even discussing turning the book idea into a series and him writing more stories to follow on.

After what felt like forever and was probably in fact less than a minute he focussed on Lauren. "Please listen to me when I tell you... This dream life of yours is never going to happen. If it does happen it won't be with me standing at your side. I don't want to wind up married to you with a handful of kids and working for your dad. I'm not asking for you to even give me half the stuff in the house. I'm willing to let you keep it. I just want you to go home and leave me the hell alone."

She went to slap him again but this time he caught her wrist before it made contact. "We're done, Lauren. You need to re-evaluate your life without me in it because I'm not coming home. If you are honest with yourself you would realise that you don't love me at all. You and me—we fell out of love a long time ago."

Fury flashed in her eyes. "Of course I don't love you. I know that, but at my age I want a family and there isn't time to find someone else and start all over again. I gave you five years of my life, and I damn well want to get what's owed to me."

"Owed to you? Just because you're turning thirty does not give you the right to act like I owe you a friggin' child. When I have a child it will be with someone I actually love, not with some bitch who doesn't mean a damn thing to me."

She threw her free arm in the air and huffed, "So how are you planning for you and your fuck buddy to conceive a baby? Do you think your precious Keagan is up for the job?"

"Leave Keagan out of this."

"Why? He is the bastard you left me for, isn't he?" she demanded.

"My relationship with Keagan is none of your fucking business. Get it through your head—we're over—done—never going to be together again. You need to move on to some other sucker."

The air was thick enough to cut with a knife as she glared at him. "Fine! I'll go, but be forewarned, I'm contacting the police and informing them that Ross and Cooper broke into my house and stole things from me. You should be expecting a visit from them sometime later today. And as for your fuck buddy, I'm going to make his life a living hell." She yanked her arm out of his hand and once again stormed from the room.

It only hit him then that Cooper and Ross had quietly snuck out of the room and left him to deal with the woman scorned. If he'd had any inkling that this would be how things were going to play out with Lauren, he would never have gotten with her in the first place. He hoped like hell she was only talking shit about ruining Keagan, but somehow he knew she meant every fucking word she'd said.

"So are you going to give Keagan a heads-up on what's heading his way? If she follows through on her threat he could lose his job." Cooper stood leaning against the doorframe.

Ross was leaning over Cooper's shoulder. "Considering he has a very public job, he might need time to warn and prepare his boss for what may happen."

Keagan worked night shift at one of the local respite housing complexes for the elderly. He'd trained long and hard to get to where he was in life, even as far as breaking the family tradition of joining the police force by forming a band, and becoming an aged-care worker.

"Yeah, and maybe we should get in contact with Leah and see if she has some suggestions about what to do about Lauren. I don't want the Thames's to be blindsided by this. I can't believe I've totally fucked up—or I'm about to fuck up—my friend's life to this extent. Not only him, but this could have repercussions on their whole family. When he gets back from his date I think we should tell him what's going on."

"Fuck waiting." Cooper extracted his keys from his pocket and headed for the front door. "We need to tell him now."

"But he's on a date." Sighing deeply, Alistair followed Ross and Cooper from the room knowing they were right.

"Some things are more important," Ross replied.

Chapter Six

Keagan laughed softly at some idiotic thing Matthew Phillips was saying. It wasn't that the joke was actually funny, Keagan just thought it would be more polite to laugh than to sit there like a bump on a log. Usually his meet-ups with Matthew were fun. Today just wasn't one of those days. Ever since Cooper had shown him what was inside that damn shoebox of Alistair's, Keagan couldn't get his best friend out of his mind.

"You're not even listening to me, are you? I can tell by the look in your eyes that you're thinking about some—*Krunk?*"

"What?" Keagan blanched.

How Matthew could possibly know who he was thinking about was beyond him. It was only as three people stopped at the side of the table that he realised his date meant Alistair was actually standing there. Not only Alistair but Ross and Cooper as well. *What the hell is going on? Why are my friends crashing my kind-of date? This can't be good.*

"We need to talk," Cooper blurted out before Keagan could even ask what they were doing there.

"Believe me, it's important, or we wouldn't be crashing your date like this," Ross added as he filched a chip from off of Keagan's plate. "The shit has hit the fan big time. I reckon we'll have to hire a dozen gurneys to get rid of the stink of what's going down."

Matthew immediately stood up. "This sounds important. I'll head out. We can catch up again at another time." He walked around the table and leant down to kiss the side of Keagan's cheek in a gesture of farewell. "If you need my help for anything just call me."

No sooner had Matthew left than Keagan's three uninvited guests sat down next to him. Part of him was a little pissed that they couldn't even give him one day to be by himself and do Keagan stuff. Didn't they know sometimes he just needed time alone to sort through the crap in his brain?

Ross again started eating off his plate and talking in between bites. "Hurry up and finish your lunch. We need to go talk to your sister before things get even more out of control."

“Can somebody please fill me in on what the fuck is going on? Why the hell did you feel you needed to chase away my lunch companion?” Even though he asked them all, he was looking only at Alistair for an answer.

“I think this is a conversation that needs to be had somewhere that isn’t so public. We don’t want everyone knowing our business,” Alistair said softly as he gestured with his head towards the door.

Keagan didn’t need to finish his lunch because his stomach was somersaulting with all the possibilities. If he tried to even fit in one more bite he would probably only hurl it straight back up again. “I’m done.”

As they stood up, Ross, who had already demolished the remainder of Keagan’s chips, grabbed the half-eaten burger from his plate, and followed behind them. When he stopped at the cashier’s to pay, Keagan was informed Matthew had already paid the bill—just showing how sweet and thoughtful the guy really was.

“You’re such a pig,” Cooper said to Ross. “You ate it all and didn’t even share.”

“I was hungry, and if Keags wasn’t going to finish it, I wasn’t going to waste a perfectly good steak burger and hot chips.”

Once they were in the cars and heading to his sister’s place, he turned slightly in his seat and asked Alistair, who was driving, just what the hell was going on. He didn’t like all this secretive bullshit. At first, he wasn’t sure Alistair was even going to answer him until a visible shudder ran through his friend’s entire body.

“Lauren came around to Ross’s and blew her stack at me again. I mean even worse than when she rocked up to yell at me at your place.”

“What did she want this time?” Keagan wished he could lash out at the woman for what she was doing, but he knew it wouldn’t do them any good.

Another shudder ran through Alistair, as he pulled the car over into the mall to park. “She basically informed me that if I don’t move home with her—if I don’t give up my whole life to work with her father at the bakery and have babies with her—she is going to make your life hell.”

Coldness seeped into Keagan at what he was hearing. “Why the hell does she want to destroy my life? What did I ever do to her?”

Alistair looked defeated. "In her eyes, you stole me away from her. She thinks I walked out on our relationship to be with you. She knows the way to hurt me is by hurting you."

"I thought she threw you out." This was all so confusing. Keagan didn't know what to make of it all. *And what is that whole—she knows the way to hurt me is by hurting you—about?*

"I thought so too, but apparently she doesn't seem to think so. She wants me to father her kids because Lauren reckons she's wasted five years of her life on training me up to fit the mould of who she thinks I should be. She really didn't like that I didn't go along with her plans. She basically isn't going to take no for an answer."

This whole situation was ludicrous. The woman was obviously barking mad. "I still don't get why she thinks this is my fault. I mean it's not like I can make you gay just by being friends with you. What does she actually think I've done?"

"Honestly, if I knew the answer I'd tell you. I just don't. Yes, I was with her for five years. We had sex. Okay, so it wasn't the greatest sex in the world, but I thought we were happy. The only thing we didn't agree on was you. She hated that you were my best friend. She didn't think you were good enough to socialise with her group of friends. She hated how I wouldn't back down on that one part of my life. Lauren never understood why I couldn't give you up."

"But that still doesn't make you gay, and even if you were it wouldn't be my fault." The whole—*Lauren never understood why I couldn't give you up*—was going to be a conversation for another day where Alistair would have to man up and give him answers.

As he sat there waiting for Alistair to answer, his fingers drummed out an irritated rhythm on his thigh. He knew that by now Ross and Cooper were probably already at Leah's and filling her in on what was happening. He was still trying to fathom how Lauren thought he was to blame for her and Alistair breaking up. He had an inkling of why, but until Alistair actually said the words he wasn't going to get his hopes up. And he definitely wasn't going to set his heart up to crash and burn.

"I'm sorry, okay? I don't know why she's carrying on like this. If I knew how to stop her I would. I honestly think you should warn your boss about what's going on. I don't want you losing your job if Lauren decides to go postal on our arses."

“Shit! Take me to work. You’re right, I better go warn Robert.”

Alistair started the car and carefully pulled back into the flow of traffic. They drove across town in silence before Alistair pulled into Drake House: Aged Care Facility. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Alistair spoke.

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

“I think you better, because this story is too insane to be believed. I think I’ll need you there to verify to some extent what I’m about to tell my boss. Hell, I’m not even sure if I believe it yet, and supposedly it’s happening to me. I seriously pray she was just saying shit to get under your skin and not something she was actually planning on doing.”

They both got out of the car and locked it before making their way into the building and headed straight for the manager’s office, only stopping long enough in front of the receptionist’s desk to ask if his boss was in. “Hi, Meg. Is Robert in? I need to chat to him for a minute.”

“Hold on, hon. I’ll just check if he’s available.”

Anger ate at him as they waited for the slightly—no more than a few years—older woman to ring through to his boss’s office. He wasn’t angry that he was here having to do this. He was pissed off that he had no choice but to try and explain something that may happen all because his best friend’s ex-girlfriend didn’t like being dumped. How fucked up was that?

“You can go right in. He has about two hours before his next meeting is scheduled to arrive,” Meg said as she hung up the extension. “I’ll bring coffee into you all in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, darlin’.”

She grinned at them both. “You know I’m not doing this out of the kindness of my heart. I expect free tickets to your next gig. Benny and I had a ball at the last one.”

“I would have given them to you anyway. Don’t I always give them to you for helping out?” Keagan threw her a grin as they left and walked the rest of the way to Robert’s office. He knew he needed to get this over, done with, out of the way, and hopefully he would still have a job at the end of the conversation which was about to take place. The truth was he wasn’t looking forward to this chat at all.

Knocking on the door, he entered the room and waited for Alistair to follow him inside. Keagan gestured to one of the two chairs in front of his boss's desk before taking the other for himself.

"What can I do for you, boys?" his boss asked.

Robert Danning was a very stoic man in his late forties. He was a great boss to work for, and a person who would listen to everything carefully before making his decision. Robert always claimed he wanted fact over fiction. So today this was what Keagan hoped to give him—fact.

"I'm not exactly sure how to start."

"Why not start at the beginning. It always works best for me."

Before he could start, Meg entered with coffee for everyone. He got an idea in his head and stopped her from leaving the office. "Meg, I think you should stay, as you may be the one who will have first contact with what I'm about to tell you."

"This sounds serious," Robert said, as Meg sat on the room's last remaining vacant chair.

"I don't know how bad it is yet, or even how bad it's going to get, but, truth be told I think you need to hear it for yourself and judge." Taking a deep breath he went on, "My friend, Alistair has been dating a woman for the last five years. Recently they broke up."

"Good, nasty piece of work that one. You're better off without her, honey," Meg interrupted.

Keagan rolled his eyes at his work colleague, and truthfully, Keagan supposed he could also class her as both a friend, and a fan. Meg and her husband had been fans of DeRanged since they first started out. Keagan gave himself a mental slap to get back to the job at hand. "Well, for some strange reason Lauren's gotten it in her head that Alistair left her for me, and let's just say she's not too happy about it at all."

"Did you?" Meg leant across and grinned at Alistair, "and if so, can I tell Benny?"

"Meg, settle down. Let Keagan finish what he has to say," Robert admonished softly.

Keagan nodded absently, not agreeing with Meg, but rather Robert. He needed to get his tale told. "Apparently Lauren and Alistair had a huge fight

today where she threatened not only him. She also told him if he didn't get back together with her she would ruin my life, seeing as she thinks their break-up is all my fault. I guess she thinks it fair that if I destroyed her life she has the right to destroy mine. Alistair thought it best I come and talk to you in case she makes good on her threat. I don't want to lose my job because some woman, whose biological clock is running out, is hell-bent on revenge for something I didn't even do. I can't help but wonder if she thinks I'm the cause of everything because she hated that I was gay. She once told me I was the scourge of society and would rot in hell for the rest of eternity."

There, he'd gotten it all out and he knew without looking that the other three occupants in the room were all staring at him. Two in horrified disbelief and the other with guilt and remorse at his part in all of this.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before Robert cleared his throat and finally spoke. "Before we make any decisions, there are a few things I would still like cleared up." He turned his attention to Alistair. "Did you in fact leave her for Keagan?"

"No. I honestly thought she'd kicked me out. I mean the fight started because Keagan and I spent so much time together when not at a gig. I tried to explain to her we were just good friends. I know she's never really liked Keagan from the very start. I had no idea she would try to ruin his life because we broke up. I have no clue how to stop her or how to fix whatever damage she may cause."

"Where did you go to on the day you left her?" Robert asked, as he made notes on the legal pad in front of him.

Keagan already knew this answer, so when Alistair hesitated he answered, "He came to my place, but that's nothing new. He was always at my place. You've got to remember, Alistair and I have been friends for just over a decade. We met the day my family moved here."

"Would there be any reason your ex-girlfriend would believe the two of you were in a relationship—whether it be sexual or not?"

"I don't know." Alistair shrugged. "Keags already told you we are best friends. We've often shared the same hotel room when gigging. Our families are really close and spend quite a few of the holidays together."

"That's true," Meg piped in. "I've been to a few parties at the Thames' residence and the Krunkstones are always there. When I first met the guys, I

thought their families must be related. It wasn't until I got to know them that I realised the truth. I guess the privilege of being a die-hard DeRanged fan has its benefits."

"Have you and Keagan ever been in a relationship?" Robert asked, and Keagan wasn't sure if the man was serious or just curious. Whatever his reason was, Keagan wanted to hear what Alistair had to say.

Again Alistair shook his head. "No, we haven't. I've always dated women. The only relationship Keagan and I have ever shared is that of being each other's best friend. Hell, I'll be lucky if I even have that after all this shit settles down."

"We'll always be best friends, Alistair," Keagan answered honestly. He reached over and squeezed his friend's thigh in comfort before letting go.

As the minutes rolled on by they talked about what they were going to do if Lauren indeed decided to try and cause trouble. Both he and Alistair promised his boss that they would keep him informed on whatever his family had to say. By the time they made their good-byes and left, almost two hours had passed.

The drive to his sister's house was relatively quiet; they didn't even have the usual background music of the CD player. Keagan was pretty sure Alistair was cut deeply by some of the things which had been revealed today. He wanted to ask about the shoebox, but didn't have the guts. Keagan supposed one day, when he was ready, Alistair would share the reasons behind it with him. For now he would just have to wait, wonder, and hope he wasn't wrong.

They pulled into his sister's drive behind Ross's car, and Keagan realised all of the Krunkstone family was here as well, word must have been passed throughout the whole family network. Could this day get any weirder?

"I'm sorry, Keags. I didn't mean for any of this to happen," Alistair said before he got out of the car.

Keagan hurried to join his friend and grabbed his arm to stop him from going inside. They obviously had things to talk about and get out of the way. He just needed something from Alistair right now, but even he wasn't sure what exactly it was that he needed.

"This isn't your fault." Keagan pulled Alistair into a hug. "It's not your fault you dated a psycho bitch from hell." He released Alistair and gently cupped his face. "You're my best friend and I will always love you no matter what."

Without thinking he closed the distance between them and brought their lips together in a soft kiss. There was no tongue involved, but oh how he wished there was. When he felt Alistair freeze in his hands he slowly pulled away.

Whatever happened next—the ball was well and truly in Alistair's court.

Chapter Seven

Holy-fucking-hell! Keagan had kissed him. Keagan had actually kissed him. Okay, so maybe it was just a peck on the corner of his mouth, but it was more than he'd ever had before. His mind was still working its way through everything when he realised his friend was heading into the house and had left him standing in the middle of the drive beside his brother's car. Keagan had kissed him and he just stood there like a stunned mullet.

Keagan looked back at him over his shoulder as he reached the door and the slightly freaked-out look on Keagan's face finally got his feet moving. He wasn't going to read too much into what happened. Hell, there wasn't even any tongue. The question was what did the kiss mean?

By the time he entered Leah and Mike's house, the distinct sound of angry voices could be heard coming from the kitchen. Even if he hadn't heard them, he would've known that's where he'd find everyone because every family meeting was held in the kitchen. The sight of so many blue uniforms facing him as he entered the room was formidable. Mike, Harold, and Catherine Thames were all still in uniform. The only one who wasn't was Leah, and that was only because she was currently on maternity leave after giving birth to little Luke. His own family held a variety of jobs. His mother, Anna, was a homebody, and his father, Ian, owned and operated Krunkstone Construction, where both he and Cooper had worked at different times during their lives. His youngest brother Taylor still worked there during school holidays and had all intentions of taking over if their father ever decided to retire. The truth was the fateful day he'd accidentally helped Keagan to break his arm had cemented a very strong friendship between their two families.

"Are you okay?" Leah threw her arms around him before he even registered she was there in front of him. His gaze sought out where Keagan was and saw him sitting between his father and Mike.

"I'm fine, sis." He and Keagan had always called her sis because when they were younger she'd thought she could boss him around since she was older than them both. It didn't matter to her that the age gap between the two of them was only by a few months. She was older and that was all there was to it.

"I can't believe what a complete bitch she's being. I mean I can believe it because she was always so snarky to everyone when you weren't around. A few

times I thought Meg was going to deck her. I'm glad you're no longer with her. She was definitely all wrong for you."

The way she spoke so fast was kind of comforting in a weird way. When they were younger all the boys had nicknamed her motormouth because she never seemed to breathe between sentences. Through the years things hadn't changed that much.

"Once all this bullshit is over, we can find you someone nicer to be with. Someone who sees what a wonderful and sensitive person you are. You can do way better than that overpriced good-for-nothing piece of white trash."

He couldn't help but smirk at Leah's description of Lauren. She wasn't far off. The only thing he would have to differ on was Lauren wasn't white trash. Her family were pretty decent. It was just Lauren who thought she was above the rest of them. Her father had once told him that sometimes it was better to give in rather than put up with the hissy fit that was sure to follow. Her mother pampered to Lauren's every whim even if it meant the rest of the family went without. Maybe this all happened for a reason—maybe he was supposed to show her that she couldn't get her way every time she felt hard done by.

When Leah pulled away from him, he realised she'd finally wound down, and by the end, he really hadn't heard a word she'd said. Walking around the table, he gave first his mother and then Keagan's mother a hug before he leant back against the bench. Harold was explaining what they could legally do. He wanted both Keagan and Alistair to take restraining orders out against Lauren. He also wanted them to record any conversations they had with her in the future, making sure they informed her she was being recorded, or otherwise it would be inadmissible as evidence. The other piece of advice was to get a book and record date and time and a rough description of what had taken place.

Keagan slowly filled everyone in on what had happened at his work. He also told all of them the plan Robert had come up with. Robert had assured Keagan his being gay in no way affected his ability to perform his job. His job was safe. If Lauren did try to make waves, they were just going to inform her the matter was already in the hands of the police. The police being Keagan's own family.

The stupid thing was, Lauren already knew that the Thames family were all in law enforcement, and considering how close the family was, she'd have to know they would all back Keagan if she did follow through on her threat. Alistair couldn't understand how she didn't understand she'd be in deep shit if she tried to cause trouble for Keagan.

“Should we let her parents know what she’s up to?” Alistair asked. He wasn’t sure if involving her family was the right way to go about things, but on the off chance they could calm her down, it would be a good thing. Kind of like shoving a fire extinguisher down the dragon’s throat before she could burn them all into crispy critters.

Harold nodded and tapped the list he’d made in front of him. “Already on the list. Mike and his partner are going to stop by the bakery on their shift tomorrow and fill him in on the situation at hand.”

“I don’t like the fact Keagan is at his house all alone,” Catherine stated firmly.

“It’s only for a week, Mum,” Keagan answered.

“What about after that?” Catherine countered.

Cooper answered before Keagan could. “After that, Ross, Krunk, and me are going to be moving out to the farm with Keagan. We decided it would be better to pool our money instead of doing it alone. We’re even thinking of building a studio out there to use instead of paying for space when we need it”—he paused for a moment—“actually I’ll be moving with him next week. Ross’s lease doesn’t run out for two months and Krunk’s staying there with him to help pay the last of rent.”

“Or,” Catherine began, “you could all move out together. If Ross is paying rent for another couple of months anyway it won’t matter whether he’s still there or not. I think it would be much better if you all moved together.”

Secretly, Alistair wholeheartedly agreed with her. If the shit was going to hit the fan, he wanted to be there to deflect enough of it away from Keagan before it did any real damage. He would give anything to be able to take the threat away from his friend. He didn’t really care what Lauren did to him because he probably deserved it for staying so long with her, even after he realised he wasn’t in love with her, but Keagan didn’t deserve this at all.

“That’s doable,” Ross said from where he sat on the kitchen bench. “I can’t believe we didn’t think of that option ourselves. Totally makes way more sense.”

“So it’s settled,” Ian stated. “The boys will all move out to the farm at the same time. I’m still a little worried about what she might do.”

Mike, who was usually the quiet one out of the group, spoke up. “To be honest, I don’t think she’ll do anything. I’m not saying she didn’t threaten Keagan or anything, but I truly believe that once she calms down and realises

just what she plans on doing and to whom she will reconsider everything. What idiot takes on a family filled with cops?"

"I hope you're right, but we can't take the chance. I think we serve the restraining orders and talk to her father and then see what happens. Just because she's pissed at Krunk for leaving, she shouldn't have the right to mess with Keagan. Even if Krunk did leave her for Keags," Leah said.

"Alistair didn't leave her for me. She threw him out, or are you forgetting that part in the whole drama?" Keagan sounded irritated, and Alistair had to wonder why.

"In her mind she thinks I left her for you," Alistair said quietly.

"But you didn't."

"I know that and you know that, but she believes that I have. She doesn't care that she was the one who asked me to leave." Alistair tried to explain it all again. "As far as Lauren is concerned, I left her because I wanted to be in a relationship with you."

No one spoke for a very long time. The sound of Luke making baby noises from where he lay in Alistair's mother's arms was the only sound in the room. He could feel the flush rising up and staining his skin as every set of eyes, except for the baby's, was focussed solely on him.

"Did you?" Taylor asked.

"Why does everyone's mind immediately think that? Keagan is my friend... My best friend... I have never been with him romantically," Alistair defended.

Taylor shrugged, "How would we know? Who knows what you get up to when you're away on tour? For all we know you could be living some freaky double life."

"What? So you immediately think I'm sleeping with Keagan?"

"It could happen," Taylor argued right back.

With a shake of his head Alistair said slowly, "I may have shared a bed with Keagan, but I have never slept with him in the sense that has all your minds in the gutter."

He wasn't really angry and by the smiles everyone was trying *not* to show he knew they were only yanking his chain. There wasn't any malice in the words thrown his way. Well, maybe Taylor wasn't joking as much as the rest of them because he seemed dead serious in his questions. This was confirmed by the very next words out of his brother's mouth.

“It’s not like it’s a big deal if you suddenly tell us you like dick now. Keagan does and we still all love him anyway.” Taylor grinned at Keagan. “Not that I’m coming on to you when I say I love you. I just mean...”

“I get it,” Keagan assured Taylor. “I love you too in a whole platonic sort of way.”

Taylor just didn’t know when to shut up. “Whew, but it’s okay if you love Alistair in the whole sexual way. We’re still gonna love you.”

“Thanks, I think,” Keagan answered.

When Keagan looked his way for help, all Alistair could do was shrug in the whole *you’re on your own* kind of way. He didn’t want to start any conversations that were going to have him spilling his guts unless he was totally sure about just what he was confessing. At the moment everything was just a muddled mess inside his head.

The afternoon dragged on into early evening before the family all went their separate ways. With everything going on, Alistair didn’t even think about getting in the car with Keagan. Even before the doors were closed he knew he would be staying at Keagan’s place. They drove in silence the short distance home. As Alistair turned off the ignition Keagan finally spoke.

“You staying?”

“I’m staying.”

Chapter Eight

To say Keagan was stunned by the turn in conversation at his sister's house last night would be spot on. The fact that Alistair hadn't jumped in and told Taylor he was way off base, or objecting to the rest of the family's general teasing of the two of them had Keagan's brain working overtime as he tried to figure his friend out. Stranger still was the fact that once they'd gotten home they had curled up on the couch together watching movies until Keagan had announced he was heading to bed and without a word Alistair had followed him into the room and climbed into bed beside him.

If the rest of the family could see them now it would have the gossip mill running full tilt. By the steady breathing, Keagan knew Alistair was still asleep. This gave him the perfect opportunity to gaze at his friend all he wanted without feeling guilty. The man was honestly beautiful... there was no other word for it. Keagan had been in love with Alistair a long time, so he was going to cherish this moment forever. His fingertip lightly traced the tattoo adorning Alistair's bicep. Keagan had lost count of how many times he had dreamed about licking every line and inch on the marked flesh. *Crap!* Even thinking about it now had his dick trying to grab the attention of everyone in the near vicinity, but somehow Keagan doubted Alistair would appreciate waking up to Keagan jacking off in bed beside him.

He was also still reeling over the fact he'd been brave enough to plant a kiss on Alistair yesterday afternoon. He wished it had been a real kiss instead of the slightly misplaced, lopsided one it had been, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He was just happy Alistair didn't push him away. Keagan still wasn't even sure why he'd done it in the first place, but he was glad that he did.

When Alistair moaned in his sleep Keagan smiled. The man had reached out and wrapped his arm around Keagan's waist and hauled him closer. He knew Alistair was on the verge of waking up and couldn't help but chuckle at what the reaction would be when he opened his eyes.

He didn't have long to wait.

"Good morning," Alistair murmured.

"Morning." Keagan returned and was totally fucking amazed when Alistair didn't readily let him go, but seemed intent to hold on for just a little bit longer. "How are you feeling today?"

A smile filled with the remnants of sleep rested on Alistair's face. "I'm good. I'll be better when all this bullshit is behind us."

"Me too," Keagan confided.

They lay that way for a while before Keagan broke the silence. "I'm thinking that I'm gonna move to the farm today instead of waiting. I know the workmen will still be finishing off, but I don't want to wait any longer."

"Sounds like a plan." Alistair rolled onto his back and yawned. "I'll grab my stuff from Ross's place and go with you."

Keagan mourned the loss of Alistair holding him, but didn't say anything. Instead they made plans to hire a van to take everything to the farm. Both Ross and Coop would be busy working, and Keagan still had three days off from his job so it seemed like a good time to get most of the moving done.

After getting out of bed, they made a quick breakfast before Alistair took off back to Ross's place to gather his stuff. Keagan was mostly already living out of boxes since he'd been packed since before they went on tour. Instead he pulled out his guitar, and settled on the couch to work on the lyrics that were still floating around the edges of his mind. He'd set up the recorder to try and capture the raw tune he was putting to the words. Once they smoothed everything out, he thought maybe they'd have another hit on their hands. No one had to know the song was all about his feelings for Alistair. He was absorbed in what he was doing and was startled when the doorbell rang.

Getting up, he was a little surprised when he found Lauren standing on the other side of the door. "What are you doing here?"

Lauren stared at him for a long moment before she pushed past him and made her way into the lounge room. "You working on a new song?" she asked, as she sat on the single recliner in the room.

"Yeah." Keagan went back and sat back on the couch and waited for her to continue. If she was going to be civil, he was determined to be as well. There was no need to rock the boat if they were both willing to float on the calm water between them.

"Are you and Alistair sleeping together?"

There it was, blunt as hell, but Keagan still detected the nuance of hurt underlying the words. He decided to answer as honestly as he could.

"If you're asking have we had sex, the answer is no. You were with Alistair long enough to know he would never cheat on you."

She stared at him as if trying to figure everything out. "Then why?"

"Why what?" He was making sure there were no mixed signals between them.

"Why did he leave me for you?"

Keagan swallowed hard. "You asked him to leave, remember. If you hadn't have asked him to leave he would have still been with you."

"Then why didn't he come home?"

Again Keagan decided to be as truthful as possible. "I don't know, but I guess when you threatened to destroy my life it was too much to forgive."

"I wouldn't have really done that. Don't get me wrong. I don't like you. I never have, but that's not a secret. I don't agree with your lifestyle, nor do I like the fact that Alistair seems not to care. For the last couple of years I've had the feeling that maybe Alistair had similar feelings for you. He's been changing. I needed to blame someone, and you were right there. Every time I made plans he'd already made plans with you, or you were going on tour. It wasn't fair." She seemed genuinely confused and Keagan pitied her because she couldn't understand how she was partly to blame in what unfolded.

"Did you ever think I'm not to blame for what went wrong in your relationship? I might be his best friend, but I never asked or even hinted that he should leave you, yet you blamed me anyway. You threatened to destroy my life and ruin my job if he didn't do as you wanted... think about that for a moment and see it as an outsider would."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm a selfish bitch?" She glared at him, but Keagan didn't feel any malice behind the action.

"I'm just saying that maybe that's how others would see it. I mean why would you even want to stay and have children with someone you don't fully believe is being faithful to you?"

She seemed to think about that for a long time before she answered. "I was jealous that he wanted you more than me."

"You do realise Alistair is straight, right? I have known the man since he was thirteen years old and I've never known him to even look at my side of the fence. He's only ever had eyes for the female population."

"I've seen you together. I've see the way you look at each other. I know that you're in love with him," she argued softly.

Again the truth was necessary. "Yes, I am. I have been since almost the first moment we met, but just because I have feelings for him it doesn't mean they have ever been returned. Sure there's love between us, but it's the deep and unbending closeness that comes with true friendship. It's never been anything more."

"But you want it to be more?"

"I'm not going to lie to you. I've always wanted to mean more to Alistair than I do. I'm just not stupid enough to do anything that may fuck up our already existing bond."

They stared at each other in silence for a long time. Keagan could see an array of emotions fighting for dominance on her face. In the end, he thought maybe it was resignation. She stood up and nervously glanced around the room before she spoke.

"I'm never going to like you. I'm probably always going to blame you for what's happened, but you can call your family off. They don't need to hound my family further. I won't cause trouble. I'll keep my distance. I just want to say I admire that you were so honest with me. Maybe you should do the same with Alistair, even if it means like me, you lose him in the end."

With that said, she walked away without saying another word.

Keagan stared after her in shock. If he ever wondered how this particular scene would play out in his head, it was never like this. He would never have dreamed in a million years that he and Lauren would sit down and have a civilised conversation about everything. He could only hope like hell she was being honest when she said this was the end of it.

When the sound of the tapedeck on the table clicked off, Keagan realised he'd recorded the whole bizarre conversation, he rewound it a little to make sure he really had. Switching out the tapes he put the one with Lauren on it inside his guitar case for safe keeping. He may never need it, but he needed time to digest what had just happened before he decided what to do with the recording.

After that fateful day, Keagan had rung his dad and let him listen to the tape of what had taken place. At the same time he'd made his father swear to keep what he'd heard a secret. He may have been honest with Lauren, but he wasn't ready yet to let everyone else know what was going on.

As it was they'd been living at the farm for nearly two months and Keagan was glad he'd kept quiet, because with every passing day it felt like Alistair

was pulling just that little bit further away from him. Since that last night at his old apartment he and Alistair had never shared a bed. Realistically, he knew they wouldn't, but it still hurt that there seemed to be a wall forming between them.

The funny thing was Alistair and Cooper seemed to be spending a shitload of time together, but lately, they were arguing more than not. Something was definitely going on between the two of them, and neither was willing to talk. Ross spent his time either working his day job, or mucking around in the small studio they'd installed in the barn. He was laying tracks down of the songs Keagan had come up with on their break. He and Ross had been discussing the possibility of doing a small tour where they were the headlining act, instead of being the starter band. They'd also decided before that happened they would put out their next CD. The recording company had been hounding them recently to hurry the hell up.

Tonight they were all supposed to be laying down the first real tracks on the demo, but Alistair had announced he had a date and asked if they could put it off for a night. The day Keagan was dreading had finally arrived—Alistair was ready to jump back into the dating pool, and didn't that just feel like a kick in the balls. He knew it was coming and there wasn't a damn thing he could say about it without coming off sounding petty. Ross and Cooper, on the other hand, both bitched him out big time.

Keagan didn't even stay to listen to the last of their conversation. He quickly made his way back to the house and hurried into his room, in effect shutting out the rest of the world as he fought to get his emotions under control. His heart was shattering into a million pieces and he felt there was no way he could put it back together again.

Part of him wanted to retaliate and go out himself. Sex would take his mind off his problems, but deep down he knew they would still be there tomorrow. In the last few months he'd finally had to let Matthew down easy when the man had wanted to take their friendship to the next level. Maybe now he realised there was no hope at all for him and Alistair he could finally move on.

Keagan curled up on his bed and let his tears freely fall as he forced all emotions out of his body. He needed to grow the fuck up and realise just because he wanted something didn't mean he was entitled to it. Let Alistair go out on his date tonight, and tomorrow Keagan would find the strength to move on.

Probably.

Chapter Nine

Just one more fucking word. Just one more ignorant, narrow-minded, snide remark about gays and Alistair was going to punch someone. He had a rule about never hitting a girl under any circumstances, but seriously, right now, he was reconsidering it. This bitch and her friends were getting on his last damn nerve.

Go out and get a date. It'll be fun. The words his brother said to him earlier in the week were still ringing in his ears. This was the reason why he now found himself sitting here with this bunch of the most obnoxious, self-centred, and close-minded bigots he'd ever met. In truth, he should have walked away hours ago when he first realised they couldn't see anything but their own points of view. Hell, they knew who he was, who his best friend was, and still they seemed oblivious to how wrong their conversation was. All he wanted to do right now was ditch them and go and find Keagan. Keagan would make this all right. At least then he knew he would have a chance of enjoying himself for the remainder of the night, instead of sitting here listening to the boring as hell biography of the miserable life of Joanne Wells, and how hard done by she was, all because her boss was gay.

Things had been perfect the way they'd been going. Why did Cooper need to fill his head with all that shit about putting a cock block on Keagan's personal life. Or how he just needed to get back into the dating scene and give Keagan some space. They had all been living together for over two months now and to him there hadn't been a problem. Then Coop pointed out that in that time Keagan hadn't been out on one single solitary date. Alistair had pointed out that neither had he when he realised his brother had a point. The weird thing was that when he'd told Keagan about his plans for tonight he could've sworn something akin to hurt had filled his best friend's eyes. And strangely that wasn't sitting well with Alistair.

The sound of laughter from the group brought him back to the night from hell he was currently supposed to be enjoying. In the three hours they'd been here, he realised Joanne hadn't said but a handful of words to him. As soon as her posse arrived to crash the date, he was all but forgotten. Nor did she care whether Alistair was keeping up with the conversation or not. He got the feeling he was just there so she could be seen with a guy from a band. Her fifteen minutes of fame, so to speak. The more he thought about it the more he

realised he had options. He didn't need to sit here and listen. He could walk away. Why the hell had he let Leah and Mike set him up in the first place?

Alistair stood and was just about to leave when Joanne grabbed him by the wrist. "Where are you going?"

"Look, I've had enough. I'm just going to go home." He really just needed to get out of there.

She looked at him expectantly. "You want me to come with?" When he hesitated she stood up.

He wanted to yell 'hell no', instead, he shook his head and said, "Nah, I'm just going to head home and crash early. You should stay here with your friends." There was no way he was going to take her bigoted arse anywhere near Keagan. With the way his night was going the bitch would say something to upset Keagan, and there was no way Alistair was letting that happen—not in this lifetime at least.

Before he even realised what was happening Joanne had thrown her arms around him and slapped an in-depth, and probably what she thought was a hot as hell kiss on him. Alistair wanted no part of it. He wanted to push her away, but she was clinging to him like a bloody octopus. Every time he moved one of her hands it landed somewhere else. The sad part was he knew it was all for show—this kiss was all sparkle with no real fizz. The worst part was her mouth tasted like the sugary-as-fuck cocktail she'd been drinking, sweet enough that he wanted to hurl.

When she finally pulled away she smiled at him and said, in what he assumed was an attempt at a sultry voice, "Call me."

"Not bloody likely." He knew he wasn't being pleasant, but he wanted to make sure these people understood his take on their whole prior conversation. "I won't be calling you ever again. You treated me like shit on the sole of your shoe all night long. Ignoring me was the best thing you did. I've had to sit by and listen to you and your friends talking bullshit about gay people. In case you've forgotten, my best friend is gay. And I can tell you now I'd rather spend eternity in his company than spend one more fucking second with you and your friends. You need to grow the fuck up—the world does not revolve around Joanne-fucking-Wells."

"When you said yes to come out on this date with me I thought those rumours about you two being involved were all bogus. My sources told me

you're straight, and not some homo-degenerate." The look on her face was all fury, and Alistair knew without a doubt that it was aimed at him. All he could do was laugh. And not just a small chuckle but a big, gut-rumbling laugh.

Did he deserve her anger? Probably. Did he care? Not one damn little bit.

By the time he finished laughing he wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes and smiled sweetly at her. Leaning in close he whispered for her hearing only, "Have you ever thought your sources should check their facts before handing over information they know nothing about?" Without another word he turned and walked away. He knew by the silence behind him he'd just stunned her with his revelation.

As he headed for the door of the night club, a vision of him buried balls-deep inside his best friend's arse came to fill his mind, and for the life of him he could not find the desire to stop it. His cock gave a jolt in agreement. Alistair realised tonight his whole world was going to change, because tonight—God willing—he was going to find out exactly how it felt to fuck his friend until they were both screaming in pleasure. Well that, or he was going to go to bed and jack off to visions of him fucking Keagan all night long. Sometimes it was worth having a good imagination.

Outside he went to hail a taxi, and groaned instead when he found Leah and Mike parked out front of the nightclub—obviously waiting for him. He knew then the drive home wouldn't be as short or as quiet as he would've liked it to have been. No sooner had his arse hit the back seat when the questions started, even if it felt more like an interrogation. The little amount of booze he'd consumed over the past three hours did little to dull what Leah and Mike wanted to know.

"So, have you made up your mind yet?" Mike asked as he gazed back at Alistair via the rear-view mirror.

"Made up my mind about what?"

Leah turned, leant between the two front seats and thumped him on the leg—hard.

"What the hell was that for?"

She glared at him menacingly. "You know what that was for... now answer the bloody question before I hit you again."

"Isn't this classed as police brutality?"

"I'm on maternity leave so I'm not a cop at the moment," she retorted.

Trying to divert the conversation Alistair asked, "Where is the rug-rat anyway? And why the hell were you sitting there waiting for me?"

"Luke is with Nan and Pop Thames for the night. And we're here to make sure you chose the right damn way," Mike snarled jokingly as they headed out of town.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Alistair had an inkling of where they were heading with this whole conversation even if he wasn't ready to admit it out loud. He couldn't even admit it to himself let alone anyone else.

"Idiot," Leah slapped his knee, "Keagan—we're here to make sure you pick Keagan."

"If you wanted me to choose Keagan, why the hell did you set me up on a date with Joanne?"

Leah rolled her eyes. "Duh, I knew if I set you up with someone who was not a bigoted psycho bitch you might not realise you're in love with my brother."

The little voice in the back of Alistair's head had also been telling him, since the disastrous date began, to man up and go the fuck home. It was enough to make him think about coming clean with everyone. Or to at least stop lying to himself. He'd been arguing with himself all night—hell, he'd been arguing with himself since he first met Keagan all those years ago. By the time they pulled up at the farm. Alistair found himself praying that Coop had been wrong and Keagan didn't have a guest over—mainly one by the name of Matthew-*bloody*-Phillips. As selfish as he knew he sounded, Alistair wasn't sure he'd be able to handle seeing Keagan with anyone else. Especially, someone who wasn't him.

The problem was, he now had to find out if Keagan could ever think of him as anything more than a friend. No matter that everyone else thought Keagan had been in love with him for years—until he heard the words from the man himself, he wasn't going to believe it. As the car pulled to a stop, Alistair took a moment to get himself under control. He wasn't going to race in there gung-ho if this was all gonna end up being for nothing.

"He's been in love with you for years." Mike put the car into park and turned to look at Alistair. "He may have hidden it well—from you that is, but for the rest of us it's been as clear as a cloudless sky. You only had to be in the same room as the two of you to know that you both have feelings for each

other. And by feelings, I mean of more than just friendship. No one cares if you love him. Hell, we've all been taking bets on how long it would take you both to get your heads out of your arses."

Leah cut in, "We're really okay with you two being together, you know? Nothing is going to change."

"Our friends mightn't agree with you. This could do damage to us and our sales." Alistair voiced one of his main concerns about everything.

Mike blurted out a laugh. "Sorry, but have you been on the band's site lately? Everyone has been guessing as to whether you and Keagan are an item or not since someone posted a picture of you asleep in Keagan's lap on the train. I think it was after we all went to Soundwave. I think Meg must have taken it. I'd never seen it before. Seriously, mate, the both of you need to sit down and talk it out."

"You look so cute all flaked out and Keags is kinda using one of your thighs as a pillow." Leah grinned at him.

All the while Alistair was wondering how or rather who had posted the picture. As far as he knew he had the only copy. Meg had taken the photo on Benny's phone, but not long after he'd forwarded the picture to Alistair, the man had dropped his phone and broken it beyond repair. Alistair had printed off one copy to add to his collection and had then moved the picture itself to his external hard drive for safe keeping. Who would have gone into his belongings and uploaded the picture? Damn he didn't even have to guess—Coop had already confessed that he'd looked in the shoebox.

"What if he doesn't want me?" Alistair asked the one question that he was having the most troubles believing—how could Keagan want someone like him. In all the years they'd known each other, besides that one kiss in the driveway of Leah and Mike's, he couldn't remember Keagan ever seeming interested in him as anything other than as a friend.

"Of course Keags wants you. He's always wanted you, but you were just too blind to see."

Alistair wanted to believe Leah. He wanted to believe there was a chance he and Keagan could have a happily-ever-after. The only way he was going to find out for certain is if he grew a set, went inside, and came right out asked the guy just what he wanted. Mike was right. This needed to come out in the open for them all to be able to move on with their lives. One way or the other he was going to come clean with Keagan and see where they both stood.

Inhaling deeply, Alistair said one last thing before he got out of the car. "Okay, I'm going in. Wish me luck."

As he closed the door he heard Leah reply, "You don't need luck."

The house was quiet when he entered. Cooper and Ross weren't anywhere to be seen when he walked into the lounge room, and he figured they were both in on the whole setup from the start. He wasn't surprised to find Keagan sitting on the couch watching TV all by himself. There was sadness in his friend's eyes when Keagan looked his way. This was both the most exciting and terrifying moment of his life. Right now he was going to find out if his world was going to become something more or if he would lose everything that was most important to him.

"How was your date? I didn't expect you home for hours, if at all." There was definitely a note of upset in Keagan's voice as well. This wasn't good. He hated knowing this was because of him.

Taking a seat on the couch beside Keagan, he turned to face him. He needed time to figure out just what to say, but not to the extent where it would become too awkward and he would shut down before he opened up. The nerves running through his body were tingling like all buggery, he felt like bugs were crawling all over his skin. Not because he was freaking out—more because the next words out of his mouth were going to change his life forever.

"Keags, we need to talk."

"If you're going to tell me you've been out screwing, well don't. I may be your best friend, but there are some things about you that I just don't need to know."

"Keags!" Alistair reached over and grabbed his friend's hand and held onto it like a lifeline. "I never had sex with her. Fuck! I should never have gone out with her in the first place."

"Then why did you?"

Alistair took in a shuddering breath and began to spill his guts. "Because I'm a fucking idiot. I listened to Coop and did something that my heart was telling me not to do, but my head was saying Coop was right."

"Right about what?" When Alistair shrugged and didn't answer, Keagan asked again, "Alistair, what was Coop right about?"

Gazing into his friend's eyes Alistair knew it was the time for the truth—all of the truth. "He said now that we were all sharing a house I was crimping your

love life. He said that in the two months we've been here you haven't been out on one date."

"Neither have you," Keagan interrupted.

"That's what I told him, but he said just because I had a fucked-up relationship and a break-up with Lauren that I have been hanging around with you so much that you stopped going out to stay with me all the time. I thought about what he said, and I realised he was right." Alistair squeezed Keagan's hand. "Have I really messed up your love life? I haven't seen you hanging out with Matthew lately. Did you ditch him to babysit me through my own life falling apart? Have I really been that selfish?"

"Alistair, I stayed home with you because I wanted to, not because I felt sorry for you. Sure, Lauren wasn't the best relationship for you, but I'm sure someone else will come along that makes you want to start over." Keagan smiled, but to Alistair it seemed a tad wobbly.

Alistair bit the bullet. "What if I told you I already found someone?"

If at all possible, Keagan seemed to pale further than he already was. "Then I guess I would have to say congratulations and I wish you the best in life. Is it the girl you went out with tonight?"

"Nope. The person I'm thinking about I've known for a very long time."

"How long?"

The silence between them lasted all of a minute but felt like a lifetime before Alistair finally confessed. "Ever since the day I found some scrawny kid stuck up a tree."

Worry or something liked it filled Keagan's eyes. "I don't think Mike will be willing to let you have Leah."

A laugh tumbled out of Alistair. He just couldn't help it. How could Keagan be so blind? "No, dumbarse. I'm not talking about Leah."

"Then who?" Dawning realisation must have hit Keagan. "You mean me?"

"I've spent all these years trying not to love you... Now I'm just plain tired of the fight. Are you okay with that?"

Chapter Ten

Oh! My! God! What the fuck just happened?

The truth hit Keagan like a sledge hammer. He wasn't sure whether to fist pump the air in happiness or to ask just how much Alistair had had to drink. Here he'd been slowly dying in his own misery at the thought of Alistair out on a date. And now, it seemed... what the hell *did* it seem like?

"What are you saying?" He needed to know.

"I'm saying," Alistair sighed deeply, "that I choose you. I need to know if you choose me too. Do you want me in your life as more than just a friend?"

Keagan didn't think, he just launched himself across the couch and into Alistair's arms. He didn't care that for the last three hours he'd been slowly dying inside. Not when Alistair was here now telling him differently. "Are you sure?"

"There's nothing I've ever been surer about. I've been slapped in the face by the cold, hard truth tonight. When your sister set me up with that woman, I thought I'd be able to get you out of my system. I sat there for three hours listening to all her bullshit and inside I was wishing I was here with you. In my head, I was telling myself if I just made it back to you everything would finally be all right." He chuckled nervously. "When I finally had had enough I walked outside to find Leah and Mike waiting for me. She'd set me up so that I would finally pull my head out of my arse and realise—admit—whatever, exactly where I belonged, and who my heart has always belonged to."

Keagan was giddy. Yep, he definitely felt like a giddy school girl as he rained kisses all over Alistair's face. Things quickly turned heated when Alistair began to return the kisses in full. Somewhere along the way his friend had managed to stand up and take them both to Keagan's bedroom. Keagan hadn't even realised they'd moved until he landed on the bed with Alistair coming down on top of him.

"Are you positive this is what you want?" Keagan managed to get out as Alistair began divesting Keagan of all his clothes. The man had paused, for but a moment, before he started on his own clothes. When they were both naked as the day they were born, Alistair smiled as he once again covered Keagan's body with his own.

The feel of his soon-to-be lover's rock hard cock pressing against his own had Keagan knowing the answer. Alistair didn't reply as he rocked them together at the same time as he devoured Keagan's mouth. Fuck it felt so good. He knew that there was no way Alistair would be ready to let Keagan fuck him through the mattress, but maybe he would be willing to be the fucker instead of the fuckee.

He needed more.

"Need you in me." He managed to get out when they broke for air.

He almost laughed as Alistair scrambled to get the lube and condoms from the bedside table. Even though this was their first time together, Alistair had always known where he'd kept his stash. The bedside table drawer only held lube, condoms, and a small assortment of his personal toys. The way Alistair had stilled let Keagan know he'd just discovered the blue dildo and three purple butt plugs... there should have been four, but at the moment the fourth was being used.

Alistair turned and stared at him, his mouth slowly dropping open as Keagan lifted his legs to his chest and showed where the fourth plug was currently resting. He knew he wouldn't need much preparation, which was a good thing, because by the look on Alistair's face he knew there wasn't going to be enough time to stretch him out. Keagan moaned at the sight of Alistair kneeling on the bed his fully erect and slightly crimson cock standing up to wave hello.

Keagan reached out and lightly squeezed the head and loved the way a full body shiver arced over Alistair. The contact was all it took to get Alistair moving again as he tore open a condom packet and covered his dick. The way he then slathered his cock in lube did wonderful things for Keagan and apparently for Alistair as well. With his free hand, Alistair played with the plug nestled between Keagan's arse cheeks.

"You look so fucking gorgeous all laid out and on display for me. For a long time I've wondered what it would feel like to touch you this way."

"Now you won't have to wonder." Keagan hissed in pleasure as Alistair jiggled the plug. "I need you, please."

A blush flowed over Alistair. "Can I... I mean, is it okay if I..."

"What?" Keagan's skin pulsed in pleasure. Just this small amount of contact was already too much. He wanted Alistair to be buried balls-deep inside of him before he came. "You can do anything."

With a seemingly shy smile Alistair slowly pulled the plug from Keagan's body. The feeling of loss had Keagan talking. "I need."

Alistair nodded before he circled Keagan's hole with his lubed fingers. The sensation had the base of Keagan's spine tingling in want. When Alistair's finger finally breached his body Keagan gave into the desire to move as he planted his feet firmly on the bed and began to impale himself on his lover's finger.

"More... Fuck, just more!"

Again Alistair nodded as he added a second and then a third finger into the mix as he explored Keagan further. The look of concentration on his face was almost Keagan's undoing.

"Alistair! Now! I need you to fuck me now. I need your dick inside me as you slam me through the fucking mattress with each thrust." He wasn't ashamed to demand what he wanted. And right now, tonight, he wanted Alistair in his arse before the guy decided this wasn't what he really wanted.

"Thank you."

Keagan was going to ask why he was saying thank you before they'd actually done anything, but his breath rushed out of him in a great whoosh as Alistair lined up and thrust home in one forceful movement. Keagan reached up, grabbed his lover's biceps, and dug his fingers in. He needed something to ground him to the moment. The passion in Alistair's eyes was too much.

"Please." Keagan shifted slightly beneath his lover and Alistair kissed him deeply. Keagan loved it. He loved the taste he'd only ever imagined before and realised how wrong he'd been. Alistair tasted so much better than anything Keagan had come up with.

There were little sounds coming from Alistair as he started off slowly, and it wasn't long before Keagan was moaning in earnest as Alistair fucked him with all he had. The act itself was rough and a little uncoordinated. Keagan knew with practice they would get better as their bodies became accustomed to one another. Right now this was need with a healthy dose of lust thrown in. They both needed this. First times were normally a tad on the awkward side until a rhythm was established that suited them both.

This, here, was exactly what Keagan had always dreamed of, yet in some ways it was even better because it was actually happening. No more dreaming, this was reality. The sounds of sex filled the room and they were like the finest

music to Keagan's ears. What he truly loved was how Alistair had seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Somewhere between that first cataclysmic thrust and the pounding he was now receiving, Alistair had gone mute. The only thing he seemed capable of producing was a guttural grunt.

The best part of this all was the way his lover's eyes never left his own. With their gazes locked this way, Keagan knew without a doubt his friend knew exactly who he was in bed with. There would be no denying later on that he wasn't a willing partner. The way the man's mouth parted slightly was a fucking turn-on, but what came next was even better.

"Love you," Alistair mouthed seconds before he took Keagan's mouth in a brutal kiss.

Keagan rocked his hips to meet Alistair's every thrust. He keened in pleasure when his lover's lips left his own and found their way to Keagan's throat. Keagan knew Alistair was sucking up a mark. Knew his friend wanted to leave behind some evidence of what was taking place, and as soon as he had the chance Keagan would be doing the same thing. He wanted everyone to know that Alistair Krunkstone was well and truly off the market.

"So close," Alistair mumbled against his ear.

The smell of sex and the sheen of sweat on his lover's skin had Keagan hornier than he'd ever been before. That coupled with the way the man's iron rod of a cock plunged in and out of his body leaving behind trails of fiery heat was enough to have him losing it like a virgin on prom night. He loved this, but more importantly he loved that it was Alistair he was sharing this moment with.

"Fuck me harder. I want to feel you every time I move tomorrow. I want to remember what it was like to have your dick shoved up my arse as you screwed me to completion."

When the hell had he become such a chatty Cathy? he'd never talked dirty like this with any of his past sexual partners. They'd been there to get him off, nothing more, and now he couldn't seem to stop voicing every little thought that ran through his head.

"You turn me on so much. Your arse is so fucking tight wrapped around my dick," Alistair ground out as he upped the pace, doing just what Keagan asked for.

Just when Keagan thought it couldn't get any better, Alistair stopped long enough to shift positions. Keagan ended up with his legs over Alistair's

shoulders as the brutal but fantastic fuck he was receiving started all over again. He concentrated on watching Alistair as he, in turn, seemed to be looking down and watching his cock slamming in and out of Keagan's arse. The new and slightly more erotic position had heat racing all over Keagan's flesh to curl lovingly around his balls.

Reaching down, Keagan wrapped his hand around his own cock and stroked. He couldn't keep up with the pace Alistair had set but it didn't worry him. Keagan knew it was only a matter of time before his orgasm ripped from his body. When Alistair's rhythm faltered just a fraction Keagan knew his lover was close. Just the thought of Alistair coming in his arse had Keagan screaming out to God and whoever else was listening as ropes of cum shot from the slit of his cock and landed on his chest, neck, and face. In all his life Keagan had never remembered coming so hard.

When he thought he could take no more, Alistair shoved his legs down as he dropped back over Keagan. He curled his hands around Keagan's shoulder at the same time Keagan found what little energy he had left to wrap his legs around Alistair's sweaty waist and held on for dear life as he rode out the rest of the pleasure ride.

Even though his balls were empty, they still tried to release some more as Alistair gave one final deep thrust that Keagan would swear to his dying day he felt touching his throat, and screamed Keagan's name. Hearing his name screamed in passion by Alistair had Keagan coming all over again. Heat flowed between them as Alistair's body draped over his own.

Wrapping his arms around Alistair, Keagan held on tight marvelling how the man's heart seemed to be beating in time with his own. A hiss that was a mixture of both pleasure and pain escaped him as Alistair carefully pulled from his body, making sure the condom was still secure. He watched silently as Alistair moved to the side of the bed and cleaned himself up.

This was the one time Keagan was glad that he had the master bedroom because it was the only room in the house that had its own bathroom. He watched as Alistair stood up and walked into the bathroom and returned with a face washer to clean Keagan's body of the cooling cum. Keagan wanted to speak when Alistair once again took his seat on the side of the bed, but words failed him when he realised Alistair's body was shaking. Reaching out he placed the palm of his hand on his friend's back and waited.

"I never knew it could be this good."

Keagan felt relief wash through him like a tidal wave when Alistair turned and smiled at him.

"I know this is probably not the right time to say this, but I don't know how else to explain."

"Say it," Keagan encouraged.

"Promise you won't get upset."

Well that didn't sound good. "I promise."

Alistair took a deep breath and said, "I once asked Lauren to let me fuck her anally. It took some persuading, but she finally agreed. At the time I thought it was the best thing ever. Taking her from behind like that turned me on more than doing it face to face ever did."

Okay this was definitely not something he wanted to hear, especially when he still felt the after burn of the hard fuck he'd just received, but he didn't say anything as Alistair got out whatever it was he needed to say.

"She hated it and would never let me do it again. She told me I was sick and twisted if something like that got me off, but tonight, with you, it just showed me that what I had with her was nothing. Being inside you felt like home."

With the last part of his statement, Keagan felt his cock starting to wake up and take notice, and so, apparently, had Alistair, as his eyes narrowed in on Keagan's returning erection. A smile graced his lover's beautiful mouth as he reached over and ran his thumb over the weeping slit of Keagan's cock. What shocked him even more was when his new lover leant over and swiped the head with his tongue before sucking as much of Keagan's length as he could get into his warm mouth.

Keagan gripped the sheets tightly as he was given one of the best—and worst—blow jobs of his life, but right then with Alistair's lips wrapped around his prick he didn't care. He moaned—a lot—as he thrust gently into the other man's mouth. Never before had he wanted the act of intimacy to go on forever, but here with Alistair he never wanted it to end.

What surprised him more was how his cock was willing for round three so soon. Before long, Keagan was pulling Alistair up and demanding he shove his cock back into his arse and make some more memories. He laughed out loud as Alistair immediately suited up and thrust home. When Alistair was balls deep and filling Keagan's chute, the feeling was so good that Keagan found himself falling just that bit further in love.

“I love you so much,” Keagan whispered.

“I love you too,” Alistair murmured as he began to move.

The last time had all been about sex and fucking. This time was different. This time Keagan knew Alistair was taking the time to make slow passionate love to him. Each small movement sent wave after wave of ecstasy flowing through him. The way Alistair moaned softly and repeatedly against his ear let Keagan know Alistair was feeling the exact same way.

Their bodies already seemed to have mapped each other perfectly. Keagan couldn't help but ghost his hands over his lover's flesh, relishing in the ripples of pleasure he felt beneath his fingertips. The way Alistair arched into his touch was one of the most sensual and erotic things Keagan had ever felt. The soft request for Keagan to wrap his legs tightly around his lover's waist was willingly accepted. He knew tonight was never going to be enough. His body burned with the need for the man above him and for the way he fucked him so religiously, as if Keagan's body was the temple that Alistair so willingly worshiped at. Lust and heat rolled through him as the orgasm he was desperately trying to stave off won the battle for release.

All his life he'd wanted to belong to someone, and now he did.

He wanted more—he wanted forever.

The End

Author Bio

NJ needs to write like she needs to breathe. It's an addiction that she never intends to find a cure for. When you don't find NJ writing about the wonderful men in her stories you find her reading work by others who she greatly admires. NJ lives in the SE of Qld, Australia with her family, who all encourage her writing career, even if she does occasionally call them by her characters' names. NJ thinks that anyone taking the time to read her stuff is totally awesome.

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