

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 16

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 16

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 1.

Words of Caution

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

Dedication

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

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

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

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

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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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UN/COMMON GROUND

By Arielle Pierce

Photo Description

A young Asian man is facing the camera, his arm over his head as he pulls his T-shirt off. His chest is bare, showing a fit body, and his expression is neutral. The photo itself is done with various vintage filters, giving the entire scene a dreamlike quality.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Jamal is a university student in the USA from my country: Kazakhstan, which (much to my regret) is an extremely homophobic country, where most gay people get married to someone of the opposite gender and never admit to being gay, not even to themselves. Out gay people practically do not exist there.

His dad, who is paying for his education, (and also every other male he knows) says that all gays should just be shot dead.

All of his numerous relatives, except his older sister, who is closest to him and supports him, are in his face about finding a girl to marry. (Extended families in Kazakhstan are very close and do not believe there is such a thing as 'personal boundaries').

How does he get his HEA in these circumstances, when it is impossible in his country and as for where he studies, his student visa does not allow him to work and getting a job as a non-citizen without a working visa as well as a working visa without a job is, to say the least, very difficult?

Where and how would he find his true love?

I'd love to read that there is hope for a gay man in these very hostile circumstances to beat the odds and find real happiness.

Sincerely,

Asselle

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: hurt/comfort, college, non-explicit, homophobia, artist, barista

Word Count: 22,581

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Acknowledgement

A huge thank you to Asselle! Without all your help and patience this novella never could have been written. Thanks for putting up with all my questions!

UN/COMMON GROUND

By Arielle Pierce

Chapter One

It was the little things that were important to Jamal. The way the sun, golden with the morning, warmed him as he sat on his dorm bed, cross-legged with his psychology book on his lap, phone to his ear. The soft snores coming from the elderly little cat he rescued in the depths of the New York winter, so much more pleasant than the frightened meows that had first led him to her in the dark by the university library only weeks ago. The way his roommate groaned whenever he had to turn a page for his hated business degree. The featherlight touch of a lover's fingertips along the palm of his hand, fingers that traced the scar there from a childhood accident, fingers that trailed from his hands, to his arms. Fingers that ran over his chest, and pinched his nipple before traveling down his torso, always moving, always seeking, until they curled around dark hair, tugged the curls there. Fingers that...

"And your mother needs to talk to you before you go," his father said, thousands of miles away via the phone. "There's a lovely girl—remember Aizhana? Well, she's not gone through with her engagement to that—what was his name again? Well, yeah, that boy, he turned out to be a bit wild for her father, so they called the engagement off. So..."

Jamal shut his eyes, and he shut his ears.

He shut his mind, he shut down the anticipated mental barrage that would emanate from his father's mouth. *Why aren't you married? This girl is lovely, that girl is lovely. You should get a nice girl and settle down. How about getting married? Your mama is desperate to have grandchildren...* Once Papa had the bit between his teeth, there was no stopping him. Jamal loved him, but at times like this, it was best to daydream, to think of things he wanted to do, not things his parents felt he should do.

Like get married.

"Oh, and before I put your mother back on, that Serik boy got himself beaten up real bad the other day."

Serik? Really? That woke Jamal out of his pleasant haze. "What happened?"

Like he needed to ask.

"You know how those people are. He taunted some of our boys, our good boys, and they put him in his place. Why they didn't just put a bullet through

his brain is beyond me, would've been cleaner that way. At least the boys would be nice and warm in their homes right now instead of having to worry about if the police'll do anything about it. But why they would... Serik was just an animal, just a dumb animal."

Jamal shut his eyes, shut his mind off again. It was the only way.

The only way to survive.

Images of Serik teased the edges of his mind. The way he always laughed in the deep snow, like Saratoga Springs was expecting right now. The way he could out-dance everyone in the gay club they had dared to go to a few times. Serik was so brave, so very brave.

His father's voice hit that strident tone he always got, the almost-monologue that said he was onto his favorite subject, the condemnation of "people like that." Jamal preferred to concentrate on the way his tears tasted of salt, the way they warmed their path down his face, from his face and onto his hand, upturned to take the touch of love. Tears, a lover's fingers, it was all the same.

His eyes drifted to the picture of his two sisters that sat beside his desk. It was so much better to think of them when his father was like this, with their sea-green eyes that they—and Jamal—had inherited from their mother. Beside the picture was a single lily, a silly gift a friend from the LGBT group on campus had given to him after his friend had been given an entire bouquet. His friend's words rang in Jamal's ears, words to the effect that it was the least Jamal deserved, unattached as he was since he had taken up studies in America three years ago.

The translucent light coming through the petals, that too was a small gift. The way they highlighted fragility with strength, the way they were like Jamal himself.

"You getting ill? You sound ill."

"Just a runny nose, Papa, nothing more." No, nothing more.

After his father, it was his mother coming on to talk to him for the second time today. Was he okay? Did he need anything? Did he hear about Aizhana? She then launched into a sales pitch about how pretty Aizhana was, what a good cook her mother was, what a nice wife she would make someone one day soon. Jamal shouldn't have felt weary putting the phone down, but all the same, he did.

Across the room the bedsprings squealed. He looked up to Denis, his roommate, who was sitting up on his bed. "What was that all about? Papa being a dick again?"

Jamal rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "He can't help it, it's just the way he was taught to believe." This was an old argument between the two. They had asked to room together after meeting the first year as freshmen at Skidmore, as both were gay and both Russian-speaking. But the similarities pretty much ended there.

As if on cue, Denis rolled his eyes and slammed his book shut. "So crying once you're off the line with your folks is common, and I should just shut my mouth?"

"No. No, it's not that, it's just..." Images of Serik in happier times tumbled through Jamal's head. What would he be like now? Would he be the same or would he have changed, have been forced to change, either through fear—or through brain damage?

"Dude, you need to stay in this country. I'm not going back, no fucking way." He patted Jamal on the knee. "So *why* are you crying?"

"It's just a friend of mine, Serik. He was beaten up last night, badly. My papa thinks he got off lightly. He's in the hospital now."

"Fuck. I'm sorry." When Jamal looked up into Denis' eyes, he truly did look sorry. "It's a fucked-up world we live in, eh? Come on, let's go get a beer at Michael's. He should have a lot left over from last night's party." He stood up and patted Jamal on the shoulder before heading to the door. "Come on, you could use one."

Jamal stood up, but his heart wasn't into having a drink at only eleven in the morning. "I dunno..."

"Come on, dude. There's nothing else to do. We're supposed to get a blizzard sometime today. They've had weather advisories all over the place, saying to stay home if you're not working or whatnot. Too bad it's a Sunday, otherwise we might've gotten the day off school, eh?"

"Like you go to school anyways." Jamal eyed Denis like he was mad.

Without thought, he grabbed his coat on the way out. Maybe he could take a little walk in the woods by the campus. Cold air in his lungs would clear his thoughts a bit—more than a beer would. As they walked down the stairs, he looked to the woods and to the town beyond. Alone, that's what he wanted to be.

“Hey Denis, I think I’m going to go for a walk. Can I meet you at Michael’s?”

“You sure? You’re not exactly dressed for the cold, y’know.”

“I’ve got my coat, it’ll be fine. Besides, this is nothing compared to what we’re used to, right?” Jamal threw his coat on, well aware of the cold biting his legs and his face. America or not, it was bitter out.

Denis didn’t look convinced. “Okay, just don’t go too far. All kidding aside, there really is some bad weather heading our way.”

“I won’t be long. I’m just walking through the woods—maybe go into town for a little while. It’s not like it’s miles away. A coffee sounds better than a beer right now anyways.”

“You just wanna look at the eye candy there. I know you.” Denis grinned like a fool. “Poor Matthew, always working at the coffee shop.”

“Well, you never know, maybe he’s not there at all.” Jamal blushed. He’d hoped his crush on the local barista, who came to a lot of the campus LGBT meetings, had gone unnoticed. “Besides, he’s got a boyfriend—that skinny guy who is always spouting off.”

“Dude, he got rid of that idiot months—hell, years—ago. Where have you been? Oh, yeah, thinking about making Mama and Papa happy and getting married, so you can have a life on the down low. Nice.”

“Fuck off.” There was no malice in Jamal’s voice. So Matt wasn’t dating? He tucked that tidbit into the back of his brain. “Okay, I’m going before this so-called blizzard hits.” It would probably be nothing more than a few more feet of snow—which would make the walk back either very pretty or very tiring.

Before Denis could argue and try to convince him to come with him, Jamal waved his friend off and turned his back to the tall dorm building that had been his home for the past three years.

Once alone, the cold of New York’s winter couldn’t stop Jamal’s fears. He tried to close his mind by taking in the view around him. The trees were heavy with soft snow, which buried him up to his knees. Too late he realized he hadn’t put on the proper boots for this type of weather. He had his normal hiking shoes, but they couldn’t keep the snow from gathering under his jeans, and sticking to his socks. Ah well, maybe if he stuck to the sidewalks he wouldn’t get so icy. Common sense said go back and hang out with Denis and Michael, but that just wouldn’t do. The last thing he wanted was to be around

those two. After the way Michael had drunk last night, the grad student would be hung over, and both would be gossiping and tut-tutting over his father. No, alone time was what he needed.

Angling through the woods, he struggled in the deep snow until it gave way to a recently plowed street. Thanks to the storm fears, the road was empty of cars, and Jamal was able to walk down it without worry. He should have been awed by the beauty of the scene, at the way the snow had turned a sleepy little village into some children's fairy tale. The quaint mansions with their gingerbread trimmings along the roofline were made for a scene such as this. But Jamal could not look out; his thoughts were all within. To Serik, to the beauty of Serik—perhaps lost. To his father, his hate so thick it could poison the purest dream.

Chapter Two

So there was a bit of snow on the ground. Matt snorted to himself as the latest customer complained about the two feet they had to trudge through to get to the coffee shop. He obviously was *not* a native Saratogian. Matt eyed the man from under his hair that was desperately in need of a cut, careful not to seem too much like he was amused by the man's behavior. The man was tall, with brown hair, brown eyes, brown clothes. And probably a brown life, if the way he sniffed at his surroundings was anything to go by. The girl next to him was little better, with her prim hairstyle and her fashionable big-city clothes.

Only five more hours to go. Matt did his best and tried not to look at the clock. *Uncommon Grounds* wasn't a bad place to work. His boss, Joe, was a good guy and, in typical Saratogian style, was laid back. But it wasn't the life surrounded by his sculptures that Matt had imagined for himself back at the New York Academy of Art all those years ago. Okay, so all of five years ago. And okay, so maybe it could still happen. It was just annoying that had he stayed back in NYC with his friends, he, too, would be well on his way to a career and have work in galleries instead of going back home to struggle and hang on—just—to a few hours a week in a rented studio. Being poor sucked. He sighed to himself as the steam from the lattes enveloped his head.

A blast of cold air indicated someone had entered the shop. Briefly Matt glanced up, more out of habit than curiosity. He looked back down at the lattes, until his brain registered who had just walked in. It was that Asian guy, the one with the exotic green eyes that Matt could lose himself in. The one who had been showing up with the funny Ukrainian guy at the LGBT get-togethers over on the campus. He walked along the long counter, past the glass display of cakes. The tiniest of silly grins played at the corner of Matt's mouth. This university student had been coming into his shop for well over three years now—not that he was counting—and he took Matt's breath away, every time.

Unfortunately, today his lean form was covered in his heavy parka. But at least there was his perfectly symmetrical face to gaze at, with his full lips, and long, elegant nose—and those eyes. Matt had never seen eyes like his. Clear green, with a black ring around the iris, and so exotic. Matt would have guessed him to be Japanese or Korean if he hadn't heard him speaking Russian at some of the meetings. He had never worked up the nerve to ask him where he was from.

He was so lost in his daydreams about the guy, that Matt didn't notice he looked as though he had been crying, until he was standing just behind the two New Yorkers. Shit. What now? Why had he been crying? It was all Matt could do not to drop the lattes on the two snobs and run around the counter to see what was wrong. Had someone tried to hurt him? Matt stared towards the door, but there was no sign of any menacing figures about. Hell, there was no one out. For once, everyone had listened to the weatherman.

Matt took the money from the New Yorkers and mentally wished them away from his counter, so he could see what was wrong with the student. When the young man stepped before him, the student tried to say something as he opened his mouth, but not a sound came out.

"You okay, man?" What else could Matt say? The student clamped his mouth shut and looked embarrassed.

There was an awkward silence between the two before the student opened his mouth again. "Just a... just a coffee please."

"Plain coffee?"

"Yeah."

"You never drink just plain coffee." No, more times than not he had *Uncommon Grounds*' justifiably famous hot chocolate. Or a mocha, and during last semester's finals, an espresso. But never plain coffee.

"How do you know?" Those beautiful green eyes widened.

Now it was his turn to be speechless. What should he say? "*I'm just your local cute, cuddly, stalker barista,*" might be just a touch frightening. "I uh... I just notice what everyone drinks, that's all. We're trained to know that... and I've seen you at the LGBT meetings over at Skidmore, so y'know... Everyone I see there I tend to make a mental note of what they drink when they come in." He smiled to try to look as friendly as possible—not scary, gay stalkerish, which is what he was afraid he looked more like at the moment.

Rather than answer, the student nodded and reached in his pocket to pay. He really looked the worse for wear. But, even rough around the edges, he was completely and utterly beautiful.

Clearing his throat—and trying to clear his mind from the pornographic place it really wanted to go right now—Matt said, "Hey man, tell you what, it's on the house."

The student looked up at him. "W-why?"

“‘Cause it’s a horrible day out, and you look as though you’ve gotten some bad news. So let’s just say you need it, eh?” Though he said a coffee, Matt was already beginning to prep the counter to make a hot chocolate. If he really did want that coffee he’d make it as well, just in case. “Tell you what. Just go have a seat, and I’ll bring it over to you, okay?”

Thankfully, the guy didn’t argue. He nodded and walked along the counter until he found the table tucked beside the newspaper rack, in the corner. It was dark there, no wonder he chose it. Matt watched him until it occurred to him that all he was doing was ogling, and making neither a coffee nor a hot chocolate. *Your friendly, stalker barista. Yep. That was him.* Bending to his task, he made two hot chocolates, and forgot all about the coffee. There was only the two of them, the big city couple, and feisty old Ms. Feinstein, sitting by the window and watching the snow settling softly over the old Victorian main street.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the student. The guy’s eyes were trained on the wooden table before him. Never once did he look up and see Matt watching him. *Poor kid. Wonder what happened to make him so upset? Hell, what happened to make him come all the way into town?* It wasn’t like Skidmore College was just up the street. Matt always took the car when he went there, but then again, he was a lazy bastard.

Drinks done, he took them in hand and walked around the long counter. When he put them down, the kid looked up and tried for a smile that just ended up looking like he had a toothache. Not waiting for him to say anything, Matt slid into one of the empty chairs.

“I don’t think I’ve introduced myself before, but I’m Matt.” He held out his hand. “And you’re...?”

“J-Jamal.”

The student, Jamal,—*what a nice name*—took his hand and shook it. His grip was firm, and Matt had to scold his mind for wandering off into that dark corner that wondered what that hand would feel like wrapped about his cock. *NoNoNo*, now was so not the time to be thinking this way. He would have kicked himself—if kicking himself didn’t look just a bit weird to someone who didn’t know him. He tried instead for a smile, which was marginally better than Jamal’s.

“You’re brave, coming out on a day like today.” Matt kept his tone light, in case Jamal would take offense.

"I just..." Jamal waved his hand in the air. "I needed some fresh air, to clear my head a bit." Matt nodded to keep him talking. Jamal eyed him for a moment and nibbled on his lower lip. He struggled with his words before he blurted out, "A friend is hurt, badly hurt. He's in the hospital."

The monologue that was about to start in Matt's head came to a screeching halt. "Wait... what? Your friend? He's hurt? In the hospital?" Who was Jamal's friend? Matt tried to recall the morning headlines in *The Saratogian*, but he didn't remember seeing anything about an accident serious enough to send anyone to the hospital. Maybe his friend had been in a car and...

"Back home, back in Kazakhstan. He was injured last night." Jamal held his hand over his face.

"Shit. I'm sorry." What did you say to something like that? Matt reached up to rub his chin, feeling the stubble there. He really needed a shave, but it had been so cold that any hair, even a little on his face, was welcomed. Even if it meant he was beginning to look like a cub.

"It's okay. You didn't do it." Jamal looked up at the photographs of racehorses that lined the walls. "No, it wouldn't happen here, what happened to my friend."

A heavy silence settled on them. Matt reached out for something—anything—to say. "Where did you say you're from again?"

"Kazakhstan."

"Where the fuck is that?" Matt clamped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that."

Jamal gave him a sad smile. "It's between China in the east and Russia in the north."

"Oh. Sorry, I'm really bad at geography." Matt really should've spent more time listening in on his history classes in high school, instead of swooning over the star quarterback who sat just in front of him. But how would he have known, ten years ago, that someone he was attracted to could possibly be from such an exotic place?

When he saw a tear trace down the well-worn path on Jamal's cheek, he couldn't stop himself. He reached out and wiped it away. Jamal blushed and pulled away. Matt held up his hands. "Sorry, man. Sorry, my bad. It's just a reaction. I hate to see anyone upset." He smiled, hoping that would take away any fear that he was some pervert type ready to jump the poor guy.

Jamal's smile was as watery as his tears. "That's okay."

Matt sat back and took a sip of his drink. He glanced at Jamal's, piled high with whipped cream like he always seemed to like it. Jamal glanced at it and then lifted it to his lips as well. Over the rim of his cup, he looked at Matt. His eyes were so green, so beautiful, that Matt found himself holding his breath. What he wouldn't do to be able to wake up next to Jamal, and have him looking at him with those green eyes, instead of here in this dark coffee shop, with the failing light and the bickering New Yorkers.

"So what happened?" His voice was soft.

Jamal shook his head. "I don't know, really. My father called. He told me right before he got off the phone. He thought it was funny. He was laughing."

Fuck. "Really? What the fuck? *How* could he find it funny?" Matt stared at him with his mouth hanging open.

Jamal nodded. "Yeah, as you say. What the fuck?"

"But why?" Not that he wanted to make things worse for Jamal, but Matt couldn't stop his curiosity.

"He's like us. My friend is." Jamal said in a quiet tone, almost a whisper. "H-he's like us at the meetings, except more brave."

"So *that's* why he was hurt? What the fuck?"

"In my country, it's considered wrong. You're 'against nature' to be this way. There's something wrong up here." He tapped the side of his head.

"*Really?* Shit." Okay. So Matt knew it wasn't sunshine and roses everywhere. Even so, it was always hard to face the reality of a lot of gay men's lives outside the liberal areas of the world. "So I take it you're living here full time now?"

Jamal shook his head. "My sister wants me to, but I have no choice. I must go back."

"But why?"

Sighing, Jamal waved a hand in the air. "Firstly, my visa. If I stay, I will be illegal, as I'm only on a student one. Second, family. The only reason I'm here at all is because my father is paying for college. If I don't go home and start earning it back, he'll be very angry."

"So?"

Jamal dropped his hand to the table and looked at Matt. "What do you mean 'so'?"

"So what if your dad's pissed off? He's the one who laughed at your friend being hurt." Matt thought that would have been obvious.

Jamal bit his lower lip and in a small voice said, "Yeah, but he's my papa. He's my family."

Matt blew out between his teeth. "I-I think I get it. My mom's a pain in the ass, but I still love her."

"Family's family." Jamal gave him an apologetic smile. "It's better there... in some ways."

Yeah, like having a homophobe of a dad laugh because your best friend has been hospitalized. Matt's family wasn't perfect, but right now he'd take them, hands down, over Jamal's.

A different, sharper voice cut into their conversation. "Matt!"

He looked away from Jamal to the source. Ms. Feinstein was looking back at him from her normal seat by the large windows at the front of the shop. She was glancing out, and then looking at him with a worried expression.

"What's up, Ms. Feinstein?" If she had that look on her face, then he knew to be worried himself, as nothing ever bothered her. It was then that he noticed the light had taken a funny turn outside. Even the New York couple had stopped bickering to look up the long, narrow room to her.

"Think there's a blizzard coming. An actual blizzard. Not one of those namby-pamby snows the folks on the Weather Channel are always yammering on about." She looked away from her audience once more to stare outside.

"Right." *Well, shit, what now?* He glanced at Jamal, but the boy was the only one not looking and had trained his gaze back to the table.

Matt hesitated for a moment, wondering what to do. The New York couple were looking confused; Jamal uninterested. No wonder. Matt supposed the beating of a good friend was more important than some piss-poor weather. He glanced up at the clock on the wall behind the counter. It read twelve thirty. *Too early to close up. But suppose he called his boss? Yeah, that would be the best thing to do.*

"Be right back," he told Jamal as he stood up. Catching the eye of the couple, he said, "You guys might want to head back to where you're staying. Is it in town?"

“A B&B just off the Main Street, towards the racetrack. I forgot the name of it,” the man said, looking worried.

“You need to get going. Just in case we get a whiteout.” Matt smiled, to take the edge off his voice.

The man sat, looking rather stunned by the change in weather. His wife nudged him and stood up. “You heard the man. Get your ass in gear or spend the night here by yourself.”

It occurred to Matt that Jamal had a much longer walk back than the rest of them. Ms. Feinstein lived close by the coffee shop, so it wouldn't be any big deal for her to get home, though it was slippery out via Caroline Street. Matt bit his lip, trying to figure out how to get her home safely and get the big city couple to move. They were still just standing there, not getting their coats on or anything else. Talking to each other like nothing was wrong.

And then there was Jamal. Matt couldn't leave him to try and struggle all the way back to Skidmore on his own. Maybe he could come back with Matt, and then Matt could try and drive him back? But what if he got stuck? The light outside the windows was already turning a very funny color, which meant the blizzard was almost on them. He blew his breath out of his nose, then made up his mind.

“Ms. Feinstein, don't head off alone. I'll make sure you get back okay.”

“I'm eighty-three years old, boy. If I've made it this long on my own, I'm sure a few more minutes won't be any big deal.” Though her voice was acid, he noted she didn't look like she was about to go out on her own.

He looked at the couple. “We're going down Caroline Street. If your B&B is close by, you can come part way with us, but if it isn't, honestly, I can't tell you how much you need to get your asses in gear, *right now*. It's gonna be a whiteout pretty damn soon.”

That spurred the woman into motion. “Come on, Mike, you'd make a pretty shitty snowman.” The man—Mike—never said a word, but meekly put his coat on and began to get his computer and newspaper together to leave.

Through all that, Jamal looked completely unconcerned about the events outside.

“Don't tell me, let me guess. This is spring-like weather back home?” Matt couldn't help but grin. This probably *was* nothing if you were from almost-Russia.

That at least brought out a teasing smile from Jamal. Matt's heart did a funny little flutter that had nothing to do with the bad weather. Jamal was *so* damn pretty. Matt had to tear his eyes away and turn towards the phone. Over his shoulder, he said, "I need to call my boss, then we'll see about getting you home."

Chapter Three

Jamal watched Matt walk away, muttering some words about a boss and closing up before the storm hit. Across the way, the sophisticated couple wrapped themselves up tight in their winter gear and walked towards the front of the building, their footsteps creaking on the slatted wooden floor. Ms. Feinstein stood by the glass pane that was the front of the building, looking out, her face showing concern. Jamal too, looked towards the window. The strange glow was beginning to darken. The snow would be upon them any moment. A glance at his phone told him that his brother would be calling any time now, and his eldest sister after him. It was like that every day, first his parents in the late morning, when he had a break between classes, and then his brother two hours later, followed by his eldest sister. His other sister would call in the evening to check in on him, followed by his two cousins still at home, and one more call from his mother, who would do one last check in to make sure he was alright.

He should've been putting his coat on and going back, but something kept him in his seat. Matt grinned at him from behind the counter, before turning away, no doubt talking to his boss. It was that grin, along with that face, that was keeping him sitting here. Denis would be rolling his eyes at him, if only he could see the scene right now.

Jamal had been aware—painfully aware—of Matt going on three years. But the older man had always seemed too popular at the LGBT meetings on campus. Always surrounded by other men, who looked nothing like Jamal. And there had been that time when he *had* had a boyfriend, even though Denis said they weren't together now. But Jamal wasn't anything like the type that always seemed to hang around Matt. He was just a bit too short, a shade too exotic, a bit too soft-looking, in a world that wanted high-testosterone, muscle-bound men.

Matt was everything that was popular with the crowd at school. Tall, muscular, rugged without seeming like he should be shooting small animals in the woods. His hair was almost as dark as Jamal's, and longer, shaggy around a chiseled face. His eyes were dark and warm, and always held a kind light in them. He could have anyone he wanted.

Jamal sighed. No doubt Matt was only being nice with the hot chocolate. He did note, with a shy little smile to himself, that the coffee he had asked for

hadn't been given to him, but the hot chocolate, with just the right amount of whipped cream, had come in its place. So maybe Matt *had* taken notice of him. But no, come to think of it, he probably did only make note of who liked what and when—like he had said.

Jamal shut his eyes, suddenly too tired to move after the emotions of the past two hours. Serik hurt, possibly brain damaged, and here he was, sitting in a warm cafe, enjoying the safety being in New York brought him. It wasn't fair. Of all people, it should have been Serik here. Laughing, enjoying the prospect of more snow on the ground. Jamal made a mental note to go over to the local racetrack once the snow had stopped. Serik would have loved that most of all, the Victorian buildings buried under the feathery snow. One year he'd get to come back early enough to actually see the races. See the town heaving with all the tourists and racing fans who came from everywhere to watch all the famous horses for six weeks every July and August. Every summer, his family always demanded that he return home. No doubt to be watched over, in case he did something as terrible as fall in love.

He sighed again and looked into the white mug before him, watching the way the last of the chocolate had stuck to the sides of the cup, along with a ridge of cream.

"Hey. You okay?"

He looked up to see Matt smiling at him, though the smile didn't reach his eyes. No, they looked worried. About the weather, or about him. Jamal wasn't sure. In case it *was* for him, Jamal smiled and nodded. "I need to get going, eh?" Even though he didn't want to, he stood up and began putting his coat on. Looking down, he saw that the bottoms of his trousers were wet from sitting in the warm coffeehouse. He *had* known this was going to happen. Nonetheless, he couldn't stop his sigh of frustration.

A light touch on his arm caught his attention. "Hey, wait a minute," Matt said. When Jamal looked again at the taller man, there was real concern in his eyes, and Jamal was sure it was all for him. "You can't walk all the way back to Skidmore in this. You could get lost in the storm, and—and I've got a better idea."

Jamal held his breath. "Yes?"

"Help me walk Ms. Feinstein home, and then just come to my place and spend the night. I mean..." Jamal felt a little thrill as a bright blush crept up Matt's cheeks as he spoke. *Could that mean...?* No, he couldn't let himself go there. Matt was just a nice guy and didn't want him to take the risk.

“That’s very kind of you, but I can’t take advantage of your kindness. I’ll be fine.” Jamal hated to say those words, but it was true. This *was* only a bit of snow, nothing worse than he would have seen back home. And the wet trousers. Well, that was his own fault. Three winters in New York, and he was growing soft.

“Oh no,” came Ms. Feinstein’s voice by her spot at the window.

Both men looked up as the coffeehouse was plunged into darkness. Outside, the wind rose into a howl. What had been buildings and bare trees a moment before, was just a swirl of white now. The only object that could still be seen was the stoplight, and that was because it was just outside the coffeehouse.

“Well, that settles it. You’re coming home with me. No arguments,” Matt said. He gave Jamal a little clap on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, you can have the sofa, and I don’t snore—though my cat does.”

He really shouldn’t have felt as excited by those words as he did. But Jamal couldn’t help the sneaky little smile playing at the corners of his lips. Ms. Feinstein was all but hopping from foot to foot in her anxiety, so he nodded to Matt and followed him to the front of the building.

When they were at Ms. Feinstein’s side, Matt said, “Okay you two, I need to shut everything off and set the alarm.” He looked guilty as he added, “For that you both have to stand outside for a minute. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, honey, I think your friend here and I can stand a little bit of snow.” Ms. Feinstein’s words belied the state of the weather outside.

Jamal smiled wryly at her idea of a bit of snow. Even the stoplight was lost from sight now. He jumped when Ms. Feinstein put her gloved hand in his.

“No use losing you in this, is there?” She smiled and squeezed his hand.

“It’s not that bad out.”

“Right, just a bit of snow.” She winked at him, as they walked out.

“Sorry guys, I’ll be as quick as I can.” Matt’s face was full of contrition.

It wasn’t his fault. Jamal grinned at him, but probably all Matt saw were his eyes peeking out from the collar of his coat. He seemed to like his eyes, Matt did. Or at least he was always seemed to be looking at them whenever Jamal looked up from his hot chocolate. That was one thing they should have done—brought refills to keep their hands warm. His hand in Ms. Feinstein’s was cold in just the few seconds they stood by the large pane of glass that encompassed the front of the store.

Jamal glanced in at the giant coffee grinder that took up the entire wall of the building on the side where the counter was. It was a lovely thing, but now was not the time to be thinking of it. As he looked out onto the street, he realized it was going to take both him and Matt, one on either side of Ms. Feinstein, to see her back to her house safely. The wind was forcing the flinty snow to fly in one direction, creating the conditions they were experiencing, but also making the pavement icier than it had been just an hour ago. He squeezed her hand, thinking it would be felt as reassurance.

"Don't worry, son, we'll get back okay." She squeezed his hand back.

"Okay!" Matt stepped out of the shop, wrapped from the top of his head to his knees in winter garb. They both moved closer to him, their faces all but huddled together against the wind and the snow.

"Here's what I think we should do," said Matt, taking Ms. Feinstein's free hand. "Let's go down Main towards Caroline, turn and go up the hill from there."

"What about just taking the alley that runs towards the library?" Ms. Feinstein's voice was all but carried off by the wind.

Jamal couldn't help but wonder why they hadn't formed a plan while they had been inside, where it was warm. Every second out here was taking away what little heat they had. And he had foolishly left his apartment without either a hat or a scarf. The hood of his coat wasn't helping much in this wind.

When he glanced up, Matt was shaking his head. "I don't want to take a chance of one of us falling. That alleyway's too steep in this."

"Can we just go?" Jamal was mortified when he realized that had been him making that sad little plea. But he couldn't help it. In addition to his ears starting to go numb, his lower legs were, decidedly, freezing from being wet. He couldn't begin to express to Matt how grateful he was that he could stay with him and didn't have to go all the way back to campus in this.

Matt looked at him for a second, and then he took off his ski hat and handed it to Jamal. "Dude, you should've told me you didn't have much gear on." Before Jamal could protest, Matt had let go of Ms. Feinstein for a moment and dug into his coat pocket, producing another, smaller ski cap. "Never leave home without three or four in this weather." His eyes crinkled up into a smile.

"Okay, let's go!" Ms. Feinstein retook his hand and all but dragged the boys behind her. "Freezing to death doesn't sound like a good way to die."

They walked down the street, initially in the direction of Jamal's campus. Only, his home was too far away now. All the Victorian buildings were snow lashed and huddled in the cold, the shops closed, or in the process of closing. The only people they saw were shop workers trying to get home before it got worse.

Jamal glanced to his right when they walked by the little alleyway Ms. Feinstein had been talking about. Between the two buildings and the blizzard, the road fell into darkness. He was glad Matt had vetoed that idea. Surely at least one of them would have broken something going down through there. On they trudged, the wind, more than once, whipping around their ankles and forcing one of them to almost go down. Jamal was a bit ashamed to admit it was him or Matt, more times than not, that was rescued from a hard landing by Ms. Feinstein. He was beginning to wonder who was escorting whom back to their place.

When they passed the large green building that housed a fancy restaurant, the wind caught them in the open area of the parking lot. The viciousness of the storm took his breath away, and he felt the pressure of Ms. Feinstein squeezing his hand. He squeezed back, slightly worried that he was beginning to lose the feeling in his fingers. The wind pulled at his legs, numbing them where they had been wet. The frozen denim cut into his knees, making every step painful. Why hadn't he, at the very least, put on his thermals before he had set out? Yes, Serik had been hurt, but even so, he never should have stumbled out so unprepared.

Not a moment too soon, Caroline Street came into view. The pavement down the hill was completely covered in snow. The road was a little better. Their line stopped, as they looked at the state of it. Jamal couldn't stop the miserable shiver that went down his spine. No way could they get Ms. Feinstein down that street in safety.

Matt must have reached the same conclusion. Shuffling until they were once again a little huddle, he shouted over the wind, "We need to get to Lake. That street should be clearer than this one, okay?"

Jamal had no choice but to nod. He tried to close his mind off to the way his legs were feeling like two clumsy blocks from the knee down and instead concentrated on what they needed to do. They needed to get Ms. Feinstein home safely. If she were to fall in this... No, Jamal's mind just couldn't go there. There had been enough sadness for one day already. At least the buildings on this stretch of the street had been built close together, and that kept them sheltered from the wind.

The group stopped when they got to Lake Avenue. Jamal squinted, but he couldn't make out the imposing red brick building that was only across the street. When he looked towards the even more impressive Post Office, likewise, there was nothing to be seen but white snow. The wind roaring up the avenue took the heart out of him. It was—once again—Ms. Feinstein tugging on his hand that woke him from the heavy feeling.

“Come on, we have no choice.” She was also tugging on Matt.

“We could go back,” he suggested.

She shook her head. “I want the warmth of my own bed, and this boy is freezing and needs a hot bath. I can feel his hand shivering through my mitten.”

Matt looked from her to Jamal, his eyes full of concern. “You okay, Jamal? It's not too long now.” Reaching out, he briefly rubbed Jamal's arm. Turning his attention away, he nodded, “Let's get in the middle of the road. No one's fool enough to be driving in this, and it's, at least, cleared off.”

Not one to disagree—particularly when he was freezing to death—Jamal shuffled out with the other two, breathing a sigh of relief when the icy footing gave way to firmer pavement. The salt trucks must have been by recently, by the look of the road. The slope of the hill wasn't severe and they all managed to keep their footing, but there was nothing to stop the full impact of the wind. Jamal could feel it literally sucking the air he needed to breath. Moisture from his eyes was turning to ice on his eyelashes. Lost as he was, he just hung onto Ms. Feinstein's hand and let them do the guiding. When they got to the intersection, Matt and Ms. Feinstein decided to backtrack slightly, as the smaller buildings along Maple would give them some protection from the wind. Jamal was feeling so sleepy, he barely registered the left onto Caroline Street.

When the shop buildings gave way to homes, Jamal wanted to weep. Maybe they would make it after all. He had been beginning to doubt it. The road became more treacherous, but sheer determination saw them up the rise of the hill. He never saw such a welcoming sight as the two grand old homes that stood sentinel on Circular Street. The wind had lightened up just that bit, so there was more to be seen.

“We're almost there,” Ms. Feinstein said in his ear. Over her shoulder, he saw the concerned eyes of Matt. As much as he wanted to tell him—tell them both—that he was okay, Jamal just couldn't muster the energy. And his brain couldn't seem to figure out the words he needed to say. All it wanted to do was chant “cold” over and over, like some horrid mantra.

“It’s just left of here.” Now it was Matt’s turn to shout in his ear.

Jamal nodded, but once stopped, he found he couldn’t make his feet move another step. His mind was fuzzy, and when he tried to command it to follow Matt’s orders, it was no use. He simply couldn’t walk another step.

There was a shake on his arm, but even that barely registered. Another shake and then Matt’s face appeared slightly below his chin. As he tried to puzzle that out, Matt spoke. “Hey, Ms. Feinstein’s is just down this street. I’m gonna run her down, you stay right here.” He pointed to the ground, like Jamal could actually move from the spot he was rooted to. “Right here, I’ll be right back, okay? Just stay right here, I’ll get you home and warm. We’re only a couple of blocks from my place.” One more pat on the arm, and he was gone.

Jamal blinked when his brain registered that he was alone. How’d that happen? He felt like a drunk man as he tried to piece together what Matt had said. Something about a house—his house? Or Ms. Feinstein’s house? Jamal couldn’t remember. He had said to stay here, hadn’t he? But why? The wind was tearing at him, mocking him. A normal Kazakh would have laughed in the face of this weather, but not him. Maybe his papa was right, maybe there was something wrong with people like him.

But Matt was the same, Matt was like him. And he had seemed to be just fine in this blizzard. So why was that? He stared stupidly at the lemon-yellow building before him and pondered that thought. It really was a pretty building, all of the ones in Saratoga were. It was just the sort of home his mama and papa would want. A huge home where all their children and grandchildren could cluster around them. Grandchildren, that’s really what his parents wanted, lots and lots of grandchildren to fuss over. And marriage, he’d have to marry someone to make that dream come true for them.

Just as he was mulling that over, there came a gentle pressure around his shoulders and behind his knees. Before he could get his sluggish mind to concentrate, he was being lifted off the ground and into the arms of someone much taller and stronger than him.

Matt.

He would have kissed him... if he had the strength. All he *could* do was say, “You remembered me,” and lay his head against Matt’s shoulder. Matt’s body felt so strong, so safe.

“Of *course* I remembered you, silly. Like I’d forget. Let’s just get you home and warm, hey?” Not waiting for an answer and stealing away the seconds that Jamal needed to get warm again, Matt headed down the street.

Jamal dully noted that they seemed to be in the middle of the street. There were cars lined up on either side of them, all covered with the same icy snow that hit his body like tiny bullets. But it was okay now, he was safe, now. Shutting his eyes, he concentrated on the way Matt walked, so sure of his footing. Never once did he stumble and jar Jamal's weary body. A part of his brain registered that he couldn't feel his legs, nor his hands. All he wanted to do was shut his eyes and fall into sleep. Then Matt seemed to be climbing, he put Jamal down onto his own two feet. Jamal couldn't feel a thing. His legs were like two blocks of wood that began where his knees ended.

But then they were inside. The wind tearing at him was gone, the bitterly cold flecks of snow gone. In the sudden silence, his ears rang. Ahead there were more stairs. Vaguely Jamal felt Matt's arms under his knees and shoulders once again, and a slight jarring as Matt fumbled for the lock to his apartment. Jamal had never been so glad to see a soft sofa, as Matt placed him on it.

"Just a sec... we'll get you all better in a sec."

Jamal struggled to open his eyes as Matt unzipped his coat and tried to get him out of it. Jamal's mind lay in a strange haze, rendering thought a particularly odd thing. *Layers* was a concept too hard for his brain at the moment. All he could think about was the warm air on his face and the feeling of his eyelashes thawing out. Once freed of the coat, he could also feel something soft rubbing against his arm. He opened his eyes as Matt made shooing noises, and saw a huge ball of fur with a tail and two yellow eyes jump down off the sofa.

He thought he said "cute cat" but the words seemed to come out all the wrong way. Matt shot a look up at his face and said, "My god Jamal, I'm sorry I didn't know *before* we set out how unprepared you were for the blizzard. I would've dressed you up better had I been paying more attention." He could feel Matt tugging at his shoes and socks. He was grateful he hadn't died in the blizzard. That would have taken a lot of explaining to his family, had he allowed some American snow to kill him.

"Okay, you lay there a minute, let me get some warm water to put your feet in." The floorboards creaked as Matt stood up.

"Like I can go anywhere." Like he'd want to. Jamal closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of just being.

Chapter Four

Poor Jamal! Matt kept stopping and just staring at the guy, even though he knew he needed to get his ass in gear. That coat was just too thin for the likes of the blizzard raging outside—*Jamal, what the fuck were you thinking?*—and the boy had no hat and no scarf. The only sensible thing he had worn were his gloves. But Matt was appalled when he saw that Jamal had not only gone without any long johns, but he'd also gone without boots, which meant his jeans had gotten wet, along with his socks. When he took Jamal's socks off, he was distressed to see that Jamal's feet were ice white.

Please god, no frostbite. Please no frostbite. That was the last thing they could deal with. Even though the hospital was just on the other side of town, Matt doubted they would come out this way in the next few hours to deal with frostbite. He was sure there must be bigger idiots out there in more trouble than him and Jamal.

Sighing, he set about making things better for Jamal. The boy had all but fallen asleep. The only way Matt knew he was still somewhat awake was the fact that his head didn't fall back onto the pillows behind his back.

At least Ms. Feinstein was okay. Matt had to snort at that thought. He had been so worried about her safety that it had never occurred to him that Jamal had been in distress. No, not until that horrible moment when Jamal had seemed simply unable to move another step. That horrible moment when Matt had realized he had to leave him standing in the blizzard, while he got Ms. Feinstein to her front door without slipping and falling. So much for thinking that everyone from any of the former Soviet states was hard as nails and able to take anything American weather had to throw at them.

He chided himself at his mean little thought. Maybe if Jamal hadn't fled his place after his asshole dad had just told him his friend had been all but murdered. Maybe then he would have dressed for the weather. More likely, he wouldn't have come out at all. *Shut the fuck up, man.*

It was better to think about the task at hand. Like how to keep Jamal from getting frostbite, and how to get him warm again. He got a basin of lukewarm water and placed Jamal's feet in it.

After a few silent minutes of staring at the slender feet and the way that even Jamal's toes were graceful looking, Matt looked up at him. "You getting any feeling back in them?"

“Yes,” Jamal muttered through gritted teeth. He looked more awake than he had a few minutes ago, a good sign if Matt ever saw one.

“Any pain?”

“Just a bit.” Jamal opened his eyes to look at Matt, his gaze becoming clear again, that sleepy look from the landing gone.

“Can you feel this?” Matt pinched one of Jamal’s toes.

“Oh!”

“Good, no frostbite then.” Thank god for that. “How’s your fingers?”

“I think I’m going to get to keep them.” Jamal held them up for inspection. As they looked much better than his feet, Matt put them out of mind.

He gave Jamal an apologetic smile. Jamal’s toes were beginning to show some color again. He just needed to get a warm bath running for him. And something hot to drink. And he had to get Jamal out of his soaked jeans. He still couldn’t believe he had walked out with only them. If he ever met Jamal’s dad, there were going to be words.

“I’m really sorry.”

“Uh, what?” Matt snapped out of his vengeful thoughts and looked up. “What’re you sorry for?”

Jamal’s voice was a lot more blurry than his. He seemed to struggle with just the simple words. “For being like this.” He nodded towards his white feet. “For going out so unprotected.”

“Hey, it could happen to any of us. Besides, you were in no state to think about dressing for the weather. And let’s face it, I’m sure this is nothing—weather-wise—for you, if you’re from around Russia.”

“You’d think.” Jamal had enough presence of mind to roll his eyes.

Matt gave his foot a little squeeze. “Hey, you’ve got a lot on your mind. You’re allowed to fuck up like this. At least it ended well.” Yeah, no one died. Maybe he should have insisted they all stay in the store when the storm hit.

Jamal must have been thinking along the same lines. “I hope that couple got back to their place okay.”

“Yeah, me too.” Matt gave him a miserable smile. But what could he have done? Maybe once he had Jamal all thawed out he’d call around to the B&Bs and make sure they had gotten back.

Giving Jamal a nervous look, Matt said, "I'm gonna go make us some strong coffee, but first I need to get you out of those wet jeans."

Instead of answering, Jamal nodded. Maybe Matt was daydreaming, but he swore he saw a little spark of excitement in Jamal's eyes at the prospect of Matt taking his pants off. Maybe. Nervously, Matt reached for the buttons of Jamal's fly. He gulped so loud he was sure Jamal had to have heard it. Trying hard not to brush against the bulge there, Matt got the fly undone. How many times had he fantasized about doing just this thing? It would be just his luck that it was only because Jamal was still too cold to do it himself. Life could be so cruel.

"Okay Jamal, I need you to lift your hips up, and I'll slide your jeans off. That sound okay?"

Oh, this *should* have been so erotic. Matt's cock certainly was thinking it already was. Biting the inside of his mouth, hard, Matt concentrated on just trying to make the guy feel warm and comfortable. *The very last thing Jamal needs is you getting pervy on him.* Thankfully Matt was hunched up, so the more obvious bulge in his own pants wasn't noticeable. Jamal gave a little shiver as his jeans slid off his hips, exposing a rather delicate part of his body, separated only by his boxers, and almost in Matt's face. It was all Matt could do not to bury his face there.

He was in a cold sweat by the time he had Jamal's pants off. They clung to his legs where they had gotten wet. Matt pulled the last of them with rather more vigor than he meant. Jamal gave a little *oof* as they landed on the floor with a wet sound.

"Damn, they were worse than I thought," Matt said, staring at them. It was easier to get himself in some sort of control that way. If he looked up now, from his position on the floor between Jamal's knees, he knew there'd be no way he could hide what he was feeling. "Let me go get you a blanket."

Scrambling up, Matt all but fled into the tiny alcove that served as his kitchen. Living on the top floor of one of Saratoga's various Victorian mansions certainly had its perks... but this wasn't one of them. Matt would have loved to have a dog—a nice furry husky—but that would have meant broken dishes and toppled furnishings every day in a place as tiny as this one. It was more a glorified studio than a proper apartment, just the living room, this pantry of a kitchen, a tiny bedroom, and another closet that had pretensions of being a bathroom. But it was home, and Matt loved it.

He rummaged through the laundry basket he had left sitting on top of the counter, until he found what he was looking for. A baggy pair of sweatpants,

probably far too big for Jamal, but they were dry, and they were soft and comfortable. And they had a drawstring, so if they were too large, Jamal could always use that to keep them up. As an afterthought, he also grabbed a throw blanket, an old afghan his grandmother had made for him once.

Taking a few deep breaths, he forced his body under control before walking back into the living room. Jamal was watching him, his eyes much clearer than even a few minutes ago. "You can put these on," he said, holding up the old blue sweatpants. "But in the meantime, I thought you could just throw this over your lap, to preserve your modesty and all that."

"Thank you, for everything." A perfect little blush colored Jamal's cheeks as he tucked the blanket around his hips.

Matt could feel the hot flush of embarrassment on his face. Perhaps Jamal hadn't noticed him staring as he had placed the blanket around himself. "I'll get the coffee," he said by way of escape. That would be better than fantasizing about poor Jamal, in his cute boxers, sitting half naked on his sofa. How many times had he played *that* scenario out in his mind in the past three years? *Listen dickhead, the guy has just found out a close friend had the shit beat out of him, and he's turned around, and almost got himself in a whole lot of trouble. So reel it in a bit, won't you, brain?*

The coffee beans were the same as at work. One of the perks of working at *Uncommon Grounds*, in Matt's opinion. That, and it was a rather fun job. Where else would he have become friends with Ms. Feinstein and all the other regulars that came in every day? The only time it was a pain was during the racing season, when the line to get a drink was out the door, literally. Even when the Starbucks had come to town and set up just a block down from them, there was no dip in their popularity. *Score one for the small business.*

"Coffee'll be ready in a second," he called out to Jamal, before he remembered that his guest didn't much like coffee. Peeking a guilty face around the corner he added, "Unless you want a tea or something else?"

"Coffee's fine, just please... a lot of sugar and even more milk." Jamal finally looked warm, huddled under the blanket. Matt noticed that he had pushed it up under his chin so all of him, bar two very white feet, was hidden from view.

Just as well. Anything to make him concentrate on the task at hand, which was to make sure Jamal was okay. He'd get something warm inside him, and then get him in a warm bath. *And to bed, never forget bed.* Matt grumbled at his

brain. Of course Jamal needed a place to sleep. He peeked around the corner as the coffee began dripping into the pot. The best thing would be to give Jamal his bed and take the sofa. That was the gentlemanly thing to do. Matt grinned a bit as he indulged in the image of himself as a country gentleman, Jane Austen style.

"I think I'm going to thaw out." Jamal rolled his beautiful green eyes as Matt walked in, two coffees in hand.

"Thank god for that." Matt offered him the bigger mug as he sat down beside him, aware for the first time of his own wet jeans and almost-numb toes. When he glanced down at his fingers, he saw that they were almost the same color as Jamal's feet. "I should call Ms. Feinstein in a bit, make sure she's okay."

"Thank you for getting me back." Jamal's voice was tinged with embarrassment. "I never should have gone out with so few layers on."

Matt couldn't resist a bit of teasing. "Yeah, now I may not know much about your country, but I'm assuming it's pretty damn cold there. Am I right?"

"You are." Again that cute blush tinged Jamal's cheeks.

When Jamal glanced up over the coffee mug to meet Matt's gaze, Matt found himself all but falling into those eyes. All of Jamal was beautiful—well, all that he could see—but it was his eyes that were like nothing he'd ever seen. Asian in shape, but green, so incredibly green. Matt could spend the rest of his life just gazing into them.

When Jamal raised an eyebrow, Matt realized he was staring. "Shit, man. I'm sorry, it's just..."

"Just what?" There was a tinge of excitement in Jamal's voice, or at least Matt allowed himself to think that for a moment. But there was no way a guy as exotically beautiful as Jamal would see anything in some small town bumpkin like him.

Matt cleared his voice, embarrassed by the words he was about to utter. "It's just... I've never seen eyes like yours before. They're stunning."

"Glad you think so." Now there *was* a definite undertone in that sentence.

"What's up?"

Jamal shrugged his shoulders. "It seems like everyone here only wants some super model. They don't want short, they don't want slender, they *really* don't want Asian." At that he looked completely dejected.

“Well, *they* are off their fucking heads, right? Don't you worry about that, if I say you have stunning eyes, you have stunning eyes.” With that, Matt mock-punched Jamal on where he assumed his shoulder to be. It was hard to tell under that thick blanket. Before he could say anything more and thoroughly embarrass himself, Matt stood up. “Let me get that bath on for you.”

“You don't have to. You've been so kind already.” Jamal went for an attempt at sitting up. If there had been a wrestling contest between man and blanket, the blanket would have won hands down.

“You stay there.” Matt pointed to the sofa until Jamal settled back down. “And I'll get a nice hot bath going. You need it, honestly.”

Jamal made no protest, so Matt moved into the bathroom. At least the hot water felt good. Matt leaned into the warm steam rising from the water and listened to the sounds of the blizzard outside. If anything, it sounded worse now. He nibbled on his lower lip as, for the hundredth time in the last half an hour, he wondered if he had done the right thing, setting the three of them off in the storm like that. Maybe they would have been better off staying the night in the store. His boss wouldn't have minded, and they would have all been safe. But Ms. Feinstein would have set out anyway; she was just that type. And, no doubt, so would Jamal. He might still be out there, stuck and cold. So maybe this was the right move anyway. And it got Jamal in his apartment. *Oh my god, I am such a perv.*

He really needed to stop thinking this way. It wasn't fair to Jamal, and it wasn't fair to the situation he was in. *Not fair, cut it out. End of story.*

“Hey, bath's ready,” he called out the door. When there was no response, he poked his head out the door.

Jamal was again struggling to get to his feet. But between the afghan, the coffee mug and Butch, Matt's overfed Maine coon cat—who had taken it upon herself to curl up into Jamal's lap while Matt had been running the bath—the boy was having problems, to say the least.

“Oops, hang on.” He walked up to the sofa and waved his hands at the cat. “Off you get, Butch. Go find another warm spot.”

“Butch?”

“Yeah, 'cause she's anything but. Furball was too obvious.” Matt grinned as the cat growled at him before hopping down and stalking off.

Jamal watched her and nodded. “True. Even with her gone I can't seem to get up.”

“Here, let me help.” Matt leaned down to take Jamal from under his arms and bodily lift him up. Jamal clutched at the blanket. “Promise on my life, I won’t get all creepy and stare at your underwear.” *Yeah, right.* Matt put his hand over his heart and chose to ignore the voice in his head. *Besides, he already knew what Jamal’s underwear looked like, so there.*

For his part, Jamal snorted and relaxed. “Well, it’s not like you haven’t seen it all, right?”

“Are you calling me a slut?” Matt placed his hand over his chest in mock indignation.

For the first time today, that brought a genuine smile from Jamal. And a laugh that tripped over his tongue and fell about them, a sound so cheerful it could break the gloom of the storm outside. “I would assume the last thing you are is a slut.”

“Oh, how little you know, my friend.”

“Oh?”

That only deserved a coy smile. “Come on, let’s thaw you out.”

Hours later, a belly happily full of spaghetti and beer, and one purring cat stretched out beside the sleeping form of Jamal, Matt sat by the window and looked out. It had taken seven phone calls, but he had finally found the B&B which had the New York couple, and they were happily bickering up in their room, according to the owner—who sounded like she was pissed off he had suggested they go back to her place. He snorted, well imagining her annoyance. But all was well. They had made a little gamble and it had worked out in the end.

The wind was slowing a bit, enough that he could see across the street, to the mansion which—like this one—had been broken up into several tiny apartments. It was the only way to keep most of the large homes in this town alive. He knew full well if they hadn’t had the famous racetrack in town, most likely this house would have been either abandoned or torn down by now.

A sigh from Jamal brought his attention back. The boy had all but fallen asleep over his dinner plate. Matt had to help him back into the bed. He even tucked him in. All he had to do now was lean back a bit in his chair and he could see Jamal’s face in the light of the lamp. He really was stunning, even with his green eyes closed in sleep. Black hair framing his face, high cheekbones, full lips... what wasn’t there to like?

Or want.

Matt *had* been a good boy when Jamal had gotten undressed for the bath. He could say on his mother's honor he had no idea what Jamal looked like from below the chin or above the knees. His mother would be so proud.

But now he couldn't help the lingering look over the slender boy. And who was off their fucking heads to not snatch him up for their boyfriend? It hadn't occurred to Matt, until Jamal had made the bitter comment about no one wanting the likes of him, that he had never seen Jamal with anyone at the meetings before. People were so odd. He just wished he had known that three years ago. They could have been a couple that length of time, then. Provided Jamal had any feelings for him, that is. He didn't seem to, other than being grateful for not being left to freeze to death in the blizzard.

He told himself he was only going to shut his eyes for a moment. One heavy blink was replaced by another. The last thing he felt was the heaviness of the cat settling in on his lap. At least he thought it was only a moment. But when he looked at the clock, it read six o'clock pm on the nose. They had been asleep for hours. There was a flicker of Jamal's eyelids, and he opened them, looking as confused as Matt felt.

"I think we fell asleep right after lunch," Matt said, hoping that helped him get his bearings. When Jamal looked alarmed at the feeling of heavy cat along his side, Matt added, "it's just Butch. She's a sucker for a warm body to sleep on."

That brought out a smile on Jamal's face. Matt marked this as the second real smile he had seen from the boy. If only he could begin to make this a habit. It would be nice to see Jamal happy, always, instead of pensive, which was the way Matt had usually seen him. But of course, Jamal had much to be serious about, poor guy.

Jamal sat up straight in the bed. "What time is it?"

"Just after six, the storm's letting up. Why?"

"Fuck!" Jamal looked around frantically.

"What's up? What d'you need?"

"A phone. My mother, she would have called earlier, and I wasn't home to answer. And my sister." Jamal knotted his hands up in his hair.

Alarmed, Matt reached out to gently pry his fingers out. "Hey now, what's the big deal? You can use my phone, international rates aren't too exorbitant."

"No, no you don't understand. It's too late to call. My mother's going to think something terrible happened to me. She's going to be so upset." Fear welled up in his eyes.

"What could happen to you in Saratoga? Besides being caught out in a blizzard by some idiot from the coffee shop."

Jamal took a deep breath, holding it for a moment before he let it out with a giggle. An actual, genuine giggle. He rolled his eyes. His body relaxed. "She'll think I've been kidnapped. She *always* thinks I've been kidnapped."

Matt snorted. "And I thought my mom was a bit nuts. What about anyone else in your family? Your sister?"

"Oh, she has more sense. She was over for New Year's last year, so she knows what it's like here. She's seen how it's like... all of it." Jamal's small moment of joy was over. "How *am* I going to be able to go back? It's horrible, being gay there."

"You want to talk about it?" Even though Matt had pulled Jamal's hands from his head, he didn't let go of them.

Jamal looked down at their hands enveloped in one another's. He squeezed Matt's before speaking. "It's just... You're not a human being, a *real* human being." Jamal stared straight ahead as he spoke, not making eye contact with Matt. "All the men in my family, they all think people like you and me, we're better off dead. My papa always says all 'people like that' should be shot. He was annoyed Serik was only beaten up. He said he should have been killed; it would have been better for everyone if he was dead."

"How can you stand it?" Matt slumped down onto the bed and pulled him by the shoulders close to him. If anyone needed a cuddle, it was Jamal.

Jamal laid his head on Matt's shoulder. "I can't. I mean, I have to, but it's hard, so hard... Every day my family calls, telling me about one girl or the other. I'm expected to get married and settle down and have babies as soon as I get back home."

"What do you want?" Matt could feel Jamal tremble a bit by his side, but he didn't pull away.

"Love." Jamal's whisper was so soft Matt barely heard it. But he felt it. "I just feel... like there's something so wrong about me. That no one will ever love me. Back home, I'll have to marry some poor girl who deserves better, who deserves to be loved. But I won't be able to love her. And my life will be

like all the gay men I know, constantly sneaking around, having sex, but no love.”

“So, stay here. There must be a way.”

Rather than answer, Jamal snuggled up against Matt’s side. “I always wondered what these houses looked like from the inside.”

Matt looked down to meet his eyes, shivering at seeing *those* eyes, that face so close. All he had to do was lean over a bit to kiss him. “I hope you like it.”

Jamal’s gaze flickered from Matt’s, to his lips and back up. In a low voice, he said, “I love it. I love your home.”

“So it’s not a bad place to be kidnapped then?” Matt’s voice was as husky as Jamal’s.

The corner of Jamal’s mouth twitched as he tried to keep his face serious. “This is true. Should I be worried?”

“Depends.”

“On what?” His face broke into a full smile. He laid back against the pillows and held his hands over his head, like a helpless damsel in distress.

As much as Matt wanted to continue with the teasing, that sight made his body swell in a way that Jamal might not welcome. He tried to straighten up.

“It’s okay.”

Jamal’s voice was so low Matt almost didn’t catch it. He looked up at him. “You can keep coming.” When Matt didn’t do anything, Jamal added in a whisper, “Don’t make me beg.”

“I’d never make you do that.”

Not quite believing his luck, Matt leaned down until Jamal was close enough to kiss. There was something about seeing those intense green eyes watching him, until he was so close he could feel Jamal’s breath on his lips, feel the way the bed was trembling under Jamal’s body. His own arms were shaking too, trying to hold him up, trying not to give in to what he wanted.

Jamal didn’t make him wait any longer. Wrapping his arms around Matt’s shoulders, he pulled Matt to him, pressing their lips together in a kiss Matt had fantasized about for years but never thought would happen. Even now he wasn’t sure this wasn’t just some sort of mirage. But the lips pressed to his, the hands clutching his back, pulling him tight, were real. As was the soft tongue playing against his lips, asking entry.

He let himself sink into Jamal. It was fighting against instinct not to crush the smaller man under him. Jamal pushed his hips against Matt's, widening his knees to allow Matt to push his cock against Jamal's, only separated by cloth. Matt couldn't stop the long slow thrust against Jamal. His cock filled with blood as needs and wants got in the way of "this is going too fast." To make matters more urgent, Jamal met him, his own hardened erection pressed against Matt's.

That last, mean but sane, part of Matt's brain said they were going too fast, that he wanted more than some one-night stand with Jamal. Though it was the hardest thing to do, Matt pulled away from Jamal, slightly.

"Jamal. Hey, slow down a minute."

It was even worse when Matt saw the stricken look in Jamal's eyes. "Have I...? I'm sorry... I thought..."

Matt reached out and cupped his face. "It's okay, Jamal. You've done nothing wrong. It's just... I want more between us. I like you. I want this to go slow. I'm a bit old-fashioned about that."

Jamal leaned his cheek into Matt's hand. "I am too."

"Oh good." He let out the breath he was holding, and settled down against Jamal again. When Jamal widened his eyes, Matt said, "Well, now that we have that settled, a little kiss and a cuddle, okay?"

Jamal didn't answer him.

At least, not in words.

Chapter Five

The smile on Jamal's face lasted forty-three minutes, to the second. This he knew from the clock on Matt's wall, to the blinking face on his own dorm room alarm. Forty-three minutes to feel that all was right with the world.

The outside of Matt's place was as beautiful as the inside. As Jamal had suspected, the house was one of the ones he often walked by and admired, with its combination of red brick walls and blue slate roof, and the curving bay windows to the side of it. It gave him an extra smile now, knowing which bay window was Matt's living room. Now he could walk by and know that Matt was sitting there, watching the world go by.

Most of the snow from yesterday morning was gone, taken away by the winds. It also took away the fairytale look to the town, but at least, the walk was easier. They used the sidewalk this time, as cars were back to driving on the roads. Matt was quiet, but the silence was comfortable. Jamal felt a funny little flutter in his stomach every time he glanced at the taller boy.

Today, they could walk up Caroline Street. The road was narrowed in the final block before it ended on Route 50, and the shops closing in on either side gave the place a secret feel. Matt must have thought so too, as Jamal felt a gloved hand slide into his on the steep walk up the hill. When he glanced over he saw Matt's eyes crinkled in the corners, his smiling mouth hidden under his scarf. Jamal was sure his grin was as silly as Matt's.

Breaking the silence, Matt said, "You have anything planned this week?"

Jamal shook his head, fighting down that funny flutter in his stomach. "Just classes and studying, nothing big."

"Want to go out?" Matt pulled his scarf away from his face. His grin was as silly as Jamal had known it would be. "I mean... if you don't mind... or you want to, that is..."

"I'd love to." Really, like Matt really thought he'd say no? That funny flutter melted away. "Where do you want to go?"

"Dinner Friday? I have to go visit my mom, so I won't be in most of the week, but when I get back I was thinking... If it's okay with you... that we could—y'know—go on a proper dinner date and..."

"I'd love that." Jamal squeezed Matt's hand. He bit his lower lip to keep from breaking out into the goofiest grin known to mankind.

“You okay with *The Wine Bar*? I mean, you being Muslim and all—”

Jamal waved off his concerns. “We’re very lax in Kazakhstan about all that, we’re not in the grips of Sharia Law or anything like that.”

“Oh, good.”

“*The Wine Bar* sounds good.” His stomach did another funny flop that had nothing to do with being in love. Wasn’t that place super expensive? What would his father say to him spending that amount of money? He nodded his head anyway, as this was an actual date, not just some covert groping in a darkened corner.

They parted at the corner of the street, Matt to go to work, Jamal to get to school. He had already missed his first class of the day, but it was only algebra. He would’ve slept through it anyway. And okay, so *The Wine Bar* was pricy, but it would be worth the memory he could take back home in a year’s time. Or... it *would* be in a year’s time... had he taken the courses he was supposed to take for his major—the one his father had picked for him in the first place. Jamal had enough to be able to claim a psychology major, but his father wouldn’t see the use in that. He walked faster, just thinking about his schooling. What would he say to his father, at the end of this year? His father wasn’t a fool, he would learn sooner or later that he had just paid for a psychology major, not the business one he had wanted.

Oh Papa, why didn’t you send Jamilya instead of me, in the first place? But he knew, there were several reasons. Firstly, he was a boy. Yes, the youngest but still a boy. Second... and this he knew was the real reason, his father wanted him away from all “those type of people.” He couldn’t admit to what was right before his nose. Jamal barely felt the cold as he walked up the curve of the road to Skidmore College. His thoughts wouldn’t let him.

He never saw the grand mansions that lined the road. Nor did he pay it any attention when the houses stopped and the woods started. He even ignored the quaint light posts, that usually made him smile every time he walked by them, as out of time and out of place in his world as the lawn jockeys that also lined the street, showing the racing silks of the owner of each house. This was a world he would never be part of; he was merely a passing outsider. Just like home.

Down the road was the campus, glaringly modern after the grace of the Victorian town. Even so, after three years, it was as close to a home as Jamal could ask for. From the Stadium to Case Green, it was as familiar as all his old haunts, back in Almaty. And here he could be himself. Out, proud, unafraid.

Unafraid mattered the most. If only he hadn't decided to go to his dorm first and change.

As soon as Jamal opened the door, he knew it had been a mistake. The message machine to his phone was blinking. Not once, not twice, not even six or seven. Jamal stood there, numb in the doorway, as he counted over 20 messages. In the corner of the room was his roommate, who gave him a level glare.

"Dude, you're so on your own with it." Denis stood up and took his backpack from the floor. He walked up to Jamal and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good luck with your folks. And... if you need it, there's a few beers in the fridge." Denis winked and left Jamal quite alone with the madly blinking machine.

Great. Rather than listen to what he was sure would be ever-increasingly panicked messages from his mother, Jamal went over to the fridge and pulled out—not a beer—but one of Denis' cans of soda. Not that Jamal was a big fan of them, but he did need the caffeine before facing the barrage of "where were you last night?" that he knew would be coming. A glance at his watch told him it would be six o'clock in Kazakhstan. If he was really unlucky, his mama would call in the next few seconds, before he could think up a convincing story.

Settling into the chair in front of his computer, he reached for his eldest sister's number on the Skype. It only took a few rings before the screen showed Tamilya, her black hair mussed, her new baby on her lap.

When she saw him, her face lit up into a smile before she waggled her free hand at him. "Have you called Mama yet?"

"No, I just got back in. How bad is it?" Already he could feel his stomach twisting around the cold soda he had just unwisely put there.

She just rolled her eyes at him. "Like you need to ask that. You need to call her."

"I'm afraid. She'll kill me."

"No. Papa will kill you. Mama'll just cry and be thankful you're alive."

"Well, what else would I be?" Really, his mother just needed to stop being so paranoid.

Tamilya snorted. "You *know* how she is. If you call her now, you'll just get her, you won't have to worry about Papa. I can take care of him and if Mama's

okay, you know he'll be fine too. So where were you last night? Why *didn't* you call?"

"Well... we had a blizzard here yesterday, and I, sort of, got caught out in it unprepared." Jamal could feel the heat of his blush creep up his neck.

"Unprepared, as in how?"

He screwed up his face. "I, sort of, forgot to put warm clothes on, and my scarf and hat."

"Good one." She snorted and covered her mouth, so he couldn't see her laughter. "You come from a cold country like this, and you get caught out in some tame American storm? Silly boy." Her words held a teasing note, as did her eyes.

"I love you." He stuck his tongue out at her. "Papa was on the line yesterday, telling me all about Aizhana. Apparently she's *not* going to marry Yeleu."

"Well, there's a shock." Tamilya snorted. "Yeleu's such a pig. Good for her, stopping the whole damn mess, she deserves better."

He nodded. Aizhana was a sweet girl, always shy and self-effacing, always with her nose in a book. "She deserves someone who will love her."

"She does." Tamilya had that knowing look in her eye, the one that said without words that she understood. "I wish I could give you a hug. You deserve love, too."

"Trust me, if I could change how I feel, I would have, years ago."

"I know. I don't want you to change, I just want you to be happy."

"One day. Maybe." He picked at the soda can top for a second before deciding to tell her. "Actually, I have a date, this Friday."

"You do? What's he like?" Her entire face lit up. Of his entire family, only his two sisters and one younger cousin knew about him. It was their shared secret.

"You know that guy I told you about a few times. The one that comes to the LGBT meetings but isn't a student there?"

"I thought he had a boyfriend."

"He did, but they broke up a while back. At least that's what Denis says. That they broke up when I was on summer break with you guys."

“Oh.” She looked confused for a moment before waving him on. “So tell me all about it. How did it come about?”

Jamal blushed. “It was the blizzard. He and I were helping this little old lady back to her house. Only I think by the end she was helping us more, certainly me.”

“Really?” She laughed.

Jamal had to snort as well. “Yeah, well, it was cold out. And Papa had just told me about Serik.”

Tamilya sobered at that. “Yeah, Zhaidar was the one who told me.” Zhaidar was their brother.

“I’m sure it was pretty much the same version as Papa’s.”

“Oh no, this being Zhaidar, I’m sure his version was much, much worse. Papa just wants gays all dead. Zhaidar wants to torture and humiliate them before killing.”

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“About you? If you stay in America, nothing. If you stay hidden, nothing. But you don’t need me to tell you what he’d do if he found out, and you live here.” She gave him a sad smile. “Tell you what, I’ll talk to Mama too. You just go grab happiness while you can.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Okay, on that note, I need to lay this chubby boy down. Talk tomorrow, same time?”

He nodded. “Talk later.”

The screen went blank. Sniffing a sigh, Jamal grabbed his books and fled the room before the phone could ring.

The week went faster than Jamal would have thought possible. As Friday drew closer, he found himself wondering more and more if he had exaggerated Matt’s feelings for him. Maybe he was only being kind. Maybe the reason he had stopped things from going further that night was because he didn’t like Jamal, not because he wanted to go slowly. The tirade he had to hear from Zhaidar, and then from his father again, over Serik, didn’t help. But there was one bright note. Serik was getting better, despite all the hate directed towards

him. According to Jamilya, Jamal's other sister, he would be okay. Beaten, but not dead. Beaten, but still himself.

Throughout the week, Matt did text, and he did call. Friday came quickly enough. Before he knew it, Matt was walking up to him, wonderfully handsome in his woolly sweater and jeans, his brown eyes smiling when they saw Jamal standing just outside, on the tall steps that led to the restaurant. Maybe things would turn out okay after all. Jamal tucked all his nerves into a small ball in his stomach and smiled a greeting to Matt.

"So what d'you think?" Matt asked, stopping before Jamal.

"It looks nice." And expensive. He had already been sweating over the menu that had been placed outside. His father would kill him if he knew how much money he was about to spend.

As if reading his mind, Matt said, "Don't worry, the dinner's on me."

"Wha—? No, that's okay, I can pay."

Matt took him by the hand. "When I said 'let's go on a date' I meant it. This is a date, and as your date, I insist on paying." He led Jamal up the stairs and into the restaurant.

Just this side of terrified, Jamal tried to take his hand back. After all, they were in a public space. What if people objected? But no, no one looked at them. No one said a word. The pretty girl that led them to their table by the window didn't scowl. In fact, she did the opposite; she grinned like the happiest fool on earth. It was only once Jamal was seated that Matt let go of his hand. Jamal could still feel the warmth there, the phantom of Matt's hand in his.

"But I thought you were just a poor artist."

Matt waved that off. "Yeah, well. Even starving artists have a bit of money to spend on a cute boy, eh?"

What could he say to that? Jamal could feel the heat coming off his face at the compliment. No one ever said he was cute. He never heard the word cute associated with his name. He blinked at the man in a mix of pride and disbelief.

Realizing he was starting to stare at Matt, Jamal looked down at the menu. Besides high prices, there were a lot of vegetables on offer, and pork. He cringed at the thought of either one. The pizza was cheap, but it came in either meat free or covered in pork products.

"Any preference on wine?" Matt was smiling when he all but jumped at the question.

“Sorry, it’s just so quiet in here.” He gave Matt a guilty look of apology before glancing about. Besides them, there was another couple at a table along the far wall, and a group of women settling at a table closer to the bar. They were the only ones sitting by the window. Outside was every bit as silent as inside the restaurant.

“It’s the weather,” Matt said, echoing Jamal’s thought. “No one wants to be out when it’s so cold. Life is much easier curled up in a Snuggie, in front of the TV.” He glanced at the menu before asking, “So, the wine? I’m thinking we just get a bottle and split it.”

Jamal looked at the long list that a place calling itself *The Wine Bar* would have. There were countless types of cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir. The whites he dismissed; it was too cold to even think about them. Feeling a rising surge of panic at the prices, he blurted out, “How about you choose? I’m not very good at knowing what I like.”

Matt reached out and stroked Jamal’s fingers where they laid against the menu. “Okay, do you know what you want to eat?”

“I... uh.” He glanced at the one thing that looked good. “Uh... no, not yet? You?” Maybe he could make a choice once he knew the price Matt was spending on his own dinner.

“I was thinking the cod.”

Oh good, that was almost the same amount of money as what he wanted. “Maybe the beef for me.”

Matt snorted and squeezed Jamal’s hand. “I’m not a wine/food snob, are you?”

“No, why?”

“Because we’d never get a wine to match both. So how about a pinot noir? To hell with matching it to fish, it’ll be nice on a cold night.”

“Okay.” Jamal had no idea of how a pinot matched food or not. He was happy to let Matt do all the talking to the waitress.

Why did first dates always have to be so awkward?

Chapter Six

The cold air felt good in Matt's lungs, as he breathed in deeply. After the stifling atmosphere of the restaurant, and Jamal's shyness, it was cleansing to be out in the night. Maybe going to such a fancy place had been a mistake. Jamal had clearly been uncomfortable. Though Matt wasn't sure if it was because they were obviously on a date in a public place, or if the prices at the restaurant made him uncomfortable. Matt felt bad. Nervously, he fingered the condom package tucked safely in the pocket of his coat. Just at the last minute he had remembered that he was out—a date really had been *that* long ago—and had run to the gas station to grab a pack. Figuring it would make Jamal uncomfortable if they had to go together to get some. After seeing the shy way Jamal had acted when confronted with a menu, he had probably guessed right.

Matt glanced at the boy, who was looking up the street. "Do you want to come back for a drink? Or would you rather go back to your dorm? I'll walk you back, if you do." Yes, the walk would feel good, tonight.

"I-I can come back for a drink... if that's okay." Jamal looked so unsure of himself. It was all Matt could do not to scoop him up right then and there. There was just enough of a size difference that he could do it without looking the fool.

Reaching out, he took Jamal by the hand. "That sounds perfect."

Jamal's hand was just that little bit smaller than his, just enough to make it a perfect fit. They set off down the empty street, the only sounds their boots on the snow. Through both their gloves, he could just feel a small tremble coming from Jamal. He was so nervous. Matt gave his hand a squeeze for reassurance.

"You don't have to come back if you're not ready."

"No, I-I want to."

"You sure?"

Jamal nodded. "Lead the way."

"Okay." They slipped down the dark alley that led to Matt's house. That was one advantage of living in town, everything was within walking distance.

In the darkest shadow in the alley, Matt stopped. Before Jamal could ask him why, he pulled the smaller boy to him, so close he could feel the heat of

Jamal's breath on his face. So close all it took was for Matt to tilt his head slightly, and Jamal's lips were pressed against his own.

When the kiss broke, he murmured, "I've been thinking about that all week."

"And?" Jamal smiled up at him, his eyes dancing.

"It's every bit as good as I remembered."

"You *could* have more." Jamal's smile was teasing.

"Now that's the best offer I've heard all week."

The next kiss was rougher, more urgent. Without saying a word, Jamal took him by the hand and led him back into the light of the library parking lot, and beyond that, up the street to his home. The light from his living room, spilling out of the bay window and onto the snow had never looked so inviting. Matt would have run—if running wouldn't have looked just a bit overeager. But he couldn't wait to get Jamal inside, to get him naked and into his bed.

Shutting the door, Matt turned his full attention to Jamal. Like he had any choice. Jamal was fully pressed against him as soon as he took his coat off. Jamal's lips were pressed against his own, Jamal's tongue was against his lips, gently, as though even that part of him was shy. But not his hands. They were pulling Matt's shirt up, daring to press firmly against his skin, as if Jamal was starved for the feel of naked flesh.

The bedroom was just beyond. It took all of Matt's will not to push Jamal into it. He yanked Jamal's hoodie, then his T-shirt off. Jamal's skin was like silk under his fingers and under his tongue, as he kissed and sucked on his chest, trailing down until he caught one small nipple with his tongue. Jamal's nipples were so small, so dark. Matt was careful—just—to kiss and suck them, not to bite too hard. He felt, more than heard, Jamal moan.

Jamal's chest was more muscular than he had thought it would be. It had been hard to tell, since the boy wore baggy clothes all the time. In the faint light of his living room lamp coming through the bedroom door, Matt could see what he had been waiting years for.

Jamal was beautiful.

Matt only took a moment to admire him before he fell upon Jamal's body, kissing and caressing, feeling the way his muscles knotted and tensed under that silken skin. It was nothing to pull at his jeans, to tug at them until they fell

away, giving Matt exactly what he wanted. He breathed in the scent of maleness and need. Then enveloped Jamal's cock in his mouth, tasting him, feeling him fill his mouth. Matt could feel his own cock straining against boxers and jeans, pleading to be freed.

Pushing Jamal onto the bed, he stood and complied. Jamal propped himself onto his elbows and watched him, a half smile playing on his lips. When Matt's jeans dropped, Jamal sat up and—never taking his eyes off of Matt's—took Matt's cock in hand, and then into his mouth. The warmth alone was almost enough to make Matt come. This moment was everything he had dreamed it would be. Jamal swirled his tongue around the head of Matt's cock before taking him deep, so deep he could feel the ridges of his throat.

"You keep doing that, I'm gonna come," he murmured, gripping Jamal's hair in his fists.

Instead of answering, Jamal leaned back, letting Matt's cock leave his mouth. He lay back until only his feet were still on the ground, Matt between his knees. It would be so easy to sink to the bed, to sink into Jamal. Matt wanted to fill him, to make Jamal his. He leaned down briefly to grab for a condom in his jean's pocket before he realized something.

"Shit, wait a minute, I forgot, the condoms are still in my coat." And probably still cold. Matt gulped at that thought.

Jamal reached to stop him. "Come on, it's okay." Enticingly, he urged Matt's hips to press against his own.

It would be easy, so easy. Just fall into that warm, sticky heat between them. To press his aching cock to Jamal's ass, to spread him open, to feel his cock sliding inside. Into that warmth. Jamal had to be so tight, Matt almost lost it just thinking about how good he was going to feel. It would be so easy, so very easy.

With a groan, he said, "No, man, I'm not gonna be disrespectful to you like that. Protection, always."

Jamal looked disappointed as he turned away from the bed and walked as fast as he could and still maintain his dignity. The coats were where he had left them, thrown over the sofa. Quickly he fumbled around with the pockets, until the small packet fell out of the—of course—very last pocket. They were as cold as he had feared. He ripped a few out and held them between his palms, trying to warm them before he had to slip one on in a few seconds.

“They’re still cold,” he said by way of explanation to that beautiful boy laying naked on his bed. Only instead of the overcome with lust look he had had only seconds ago, now Jamal looked worried. Stressed even. “It’ll only take a few moments, it’ll be okay.” When Jamal didn’t answer him, Matt asked, “Are you okay?”

Jamal sat up, nervously biting his lower lip. “I uh... do those things hurt? I heard they hurt really bad.”

“No, no, you’re fine. I’ll be gentle and...” Wait a minute. What was Jamal saying? He’d “heard” that they hurt? Feeling the mood slip away, Matt asked the one question he didn’t want to ask. “So... have you never used one of these?”

Instead of answering right away, Jamal looked horribly guilty. Guilty enough to pull the sheet over his waist, hiding his erection from sight. “I... well, we don’t really... I mean, in my country... you know how it is if you’re gay there...”

“What, they hate gays so much you can’t even find a condom? Not one?”

“No, if you ask for one—or for a test—then you’ll be found out. And then what happens?”

“Wait a minute... you’ve never been tested? You’ve been having loads of unprotected sex and you’ve never been tested?” Tossing the condoms down, Matt reached for his jeans. They weren’t having sex now, no way.

Still keeping the sheet over his lap, Jamal brought his legs over the side of the bed, looking like he just wanted to hide under that sheet. “I think I should go.”

“I think you should too.”

He couldn’t look at Jamal as the boy stood up and gathered his clothes as quickly as he could. What more was there to say? If he hadn’t forgotten the condoms would Jamal have even told him, or would he have just let it happen? Matt slumped to the spot on the bed that Jamal had vacated. He didn’t say a word as the boy slipped out of the bedroom. When the door shut, he punched the pillow beside him.

In the window Butch jumped, the noise too loud for her. “Sorry, cat,” he muttered, not sure if he was angry or sad. Sad certainly. He had just let something he thought was going to be so good—someone he had wanted for so long now—slip away. Or rather, he had found out something he had wanted for

so long wasn't what he had really wanted. The last thing he needed in his life was some foolish guy who thought AIDS was nothing.

What the fuck? What was wrong with Jamal? *Why* was he so stupid? Surely it couldn't be that hard to find condoms over there, could it? What did straight couples do?

Why did life have to be so messy?

"Butch, you're lucky you're spayed." The cat stared at him like she was unimpressed. And why would she be? He snorted at his own thoughts and looked down, to the chair that Jamal had thrown his clothes over. It should have been empty, but no, there was the hoodie on it. *Shit, did he just leave his clothes here and walk back in the cold?* Oh, and hadn't *he* told Jamal he would walk him back? Y'know, do the gentlemanly thing and see he was in safe, particularly after almost getting frostbite.

Fuck.

Matt scrambled to get dressed and get his boots on as quickly as he could.

Chapter Seven

The night was bitter but Jamal didn't feel a bit of it. He was lost, so far inside his own thoughts that he felt nothing, and saw even less. As fast as he could, he walked down the empty street, glad that no one was around to see the shame that must have been written all over his face. Things were so different here, too different. He was almost to the street lights of the main street when he heard the sound of someone running behind him.

Before he could turn, he heard Matt's voice. "Hang on, wait a sec."

Jamal stopped but didn't turn around. This was the last thing he could deal with. "What? Haven't you already hurt me enough for one night?" He didn't bother to hide the pain in his voice. What was the point? Matt had rejected him, why be coy about if it hurt or not?

Matt caught up to him. "Hey, look at who's hurting who. When were you going to tell me you've had unprotected sex and no AIDS test, eh?"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you, I..." I what? He *knew* this day might come, he just never knew it would come with the angry almost-lover being Matt.

Matt, who he had daydreamed about for three years. Matt, who was funny at the meetings. Matt, who knew exactly what kind of drink he liked and exactly how to make it. Matt, who had cared enough that he had saved him in the blizzard. Matt, who had talked to him about Serik. Matt, who was everything he wanted.

Matt.

Looking down, Jamal whispered, "I-I was going to tell you."

"In those next few seconds I hope."

"I was going to tell you, can you just leave me alone?" His voice broke at that, a sob caught in his throat.

In a voice that sounded as ragged as Jamal felt, Matt said, "You left this." He held up the hoodie. "I don't want you to get cold."

"I'm from a cold country, Matt. This is nothing." Jamal eyed the hoodie like the traitor it was.

Matt gave him a sardonic look. "So why did you get so cold the other day? A blizzard shouldn't have been anything for you, then."

“No, it shouldn’t have. I was stupid. I left the room without getting dressed. I was thinking about my friend.” God, what a long week this was turning out to be. Jamal half-kicked at the ground, wishing it would just open up and take him away. If crying could get him somewhere, Jamal would have tried it. He felt like trying it. Instead, he hunched up and half-turned from Matt. Why stay and be humiliated more? Matt didn’t want him.

Before he had a chance to walk away, Matt cleared his throat. “I said I’d walk you home and get you there safe, so if it’s all the same to you, that’s what I’m doing.”

Jamal stopped and looked over his shoulder to Matt. “I live in a country where most men think all gay men should be shot and killed. Do you really think a walk through some quaint little Americana town is going to either frighten me, or honestly be dangerous?”

“So is that why?”

“Why what?”

Matt winced at Jamal’s sharp tone but continued anyway. “Why you didn’t get an AIDS test.”

“I would have thought that was obvious. Don’t you get it, Matt?” Jamal stared at him like he had gone mad. “We can’t tell *anyone* in my country. We can’t meet one another, we can’t go out on dates, we can’t fall in love. Now you tell me how I’m supposed to go and ‘do the right thing’ when I’ve got a mother who hounds me all day and night—even here in America—to go find some pretty girl and get married. You know she calls me every day—*every day*—to talk about this girl or that girl or ‘Did you hear, Zhuldyz doesn’t have a boyfriend. Why don’t you be her boyfriend?’ Matt, I get this *all the time*. I get it from my mama and my papa, I get it from my brother and from my two male cousins *every day*. And on top of that, when I’m home, I have to worry about being found out *every day*. I have to watch what I say and what I do. I have to watch where I go and is anyone following me? It’s frightening, and in that atmosphere are you honestly asking me if I can just run down to my doctor’s office and say ‘Oh, can I get an AIDS test?’ Do you *really* think I can?”

Jamal could see Matt’s body deflate right then and there. In a small voice, he said, “Well, why didn’t you tell me all this?”

“What the fuck?” Jamal all but shouted, crossing his arms. “I *have* told you about how it is in my country. Have you forgotten already about what happened

to my friend? That was just for walking home. What do you honestly think would happen if I did something as dangerous as try to get a condom?"

Even in the moonlight it was easy to see just how embarrassed Matt was. "Okay, but why didn't you get tested here? You've been here three years now, no one back home would have known."

Jamal rolled his eyes at Matt's ignorance. "What was the point? Haven't you been listening to me? Who's been looking at me? Nobody wants me, no one wants the freaky Asian dude with the weird eyes who can't even speak English without an accent. And I'm Muslim on top of that... Who knows, I may want to blow something up, y'know, just snap and there I am, off on *Jihad*." Jamal waved his arm over his head. "Trust me, *no one* wants me."

"Well... *I* want you."

Jamal stared at Matt. After all this, did he actually say what he thought he just said? "You really *still* want me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

That word hung in the air like a knife, like a hurt. Jamal couldn't help that his voice was so soft, so alone in that one word. Why, indeed? Matt reached under Jamal's chin and lifted his face up until their eyes met. In the light of the moon, he could see tears forming into ice on Matt's eyelashes. Before he could say another word, Matt wrapped his arms around Jamal and kissed him. Jamal let his head fall back, let Matt enter the heat of his mouth.

When the kiss broke off, Matt looked into Jamal's eyes. In a voice rough with the effort not to cry, he said, "You're not getting it either. I don't give a fuck about what other people think. I want you. I want to be with you, now can we get that cleared up? I don't ask many guys out on dates, and I, certainly, don't have crushes that go on for three years."

"Okay." In that moment, Jamal decided. Love was more important than shame, than fear. If he wanted this life, he had to grab it. And he had to make amends, starting right here. "Okay... I'll do it. I'll get the test." His heart pounded just thinking about the test, and his family finding out about it. His voice left him with his courage as he asked, "But it won't be on my record or my visa information or anything like that, will it?"

"No Jamal. Wait... are you worried your folks'll find out?" Matt looked surprised, like it had never occurred to him. Jamal nodded miserably. Matt

squeezed his shoulders and looked him deep in the eye. "Ah, Jamal, no one has a right to know, no one. It'll be okay, they can't hurt you here."

Jamal stiffened at that and pulled away from Matt. He really didn't get his family, did he? Over his shoulder he said, "They wouldn't hurt me anyways."

"Maybe not physically, but you're already hurt inside. How could you not be?" Matt gently pulled Jamal around to face him.

Jamal knew he was right, but family *was* family. It didn't matter that Papa wanted all gay men dead, he was still family and even if he found out, he never would throw him away like he had seen so many other boys in the LGBT group talk about with their families. He might never speak to him again, but he never would cut him completely out of the family. "All I have is my family."

"Yeah, but they try and control everything you do. What kind of family is that?"

Jamal looked up the dark street before answering. "You don't understand, that's just how it is in Kazakhstan. They can't help it. Gays just don't exist there."

"Bullshit. You're there, you exist."

"No, stupid." Jamal rolled his eyes for both of them. "Gays don't exist to *them*, not literally. They're not a part of Kazakh culture."

"Yeah, family... I suppose I'm not one to talk about families." Matt sighed heavily. He looked every bit as tired and down as Jamal felt. "I'm sorry, Jamal. I-I hear what you're saying, but I guess I don't really understand what it means." Even his voice was low. "I mean... I *know* bad shit happens to gay men all around the world, but... I suppose I was happy in my own little bubble of openness, and it never really dawned on me what it felt like, or what you have to go through so you're not found out and hurt. I never really got it until now."

Jamal shrugged his shoulders, a sad smile on his lips. "Welcome to my world."

"Yeah, really." Matt looked away, his eyes wandering from the lamp posts, to the cars, to the space just before Jamal's feet. Even in the faint light, Jamal could see his lower lip tremble, as though he were about to cry. In a voice so soft Jamal had to lean forward to hear it, Matt asked, "Can I see you again?"

Jamal stepped forward until he was against Matt's chest. "Of course." It was no effort to kiss him, Matt all but melted into that contact. When it broke, Jamal

murmured into his chest, “Only... after the test. I want to be alone for it. Is that okay?”

“Anything you want, Jamal, just please...”

“Yes?”

“Please be okay. I just want you happy.” Matt leaned his head down, until their foreheads were touching. “Can I still walk you home?”

Jamal reached up and softly stroked the side of Matt’s cheek, feeling the stubble under his fingers. “As long as you hold my hand.”

“I can do that.” Matt kissed his fingers before taking Jamal’s hand in his.

Chapter Eight

“So honey, what are you meditating over that takes up all your concentration?”

Matt looked up from the spot he had been staring at for the past half an hour, it seemed. Ms. Feinstein had somehow managed to sneak in when he wasn't looking. *No stupid, you were too busy staring at that hole and being upset about Jamal.*

As if she could read his mind, Ms. Feinstein asked, “What's wrong, honey? You okay?”

He started to nod yes... but the nod came out as a shake. Behind his eyes he could feel the burn of tears wanting to come out. But no, he wasn't going to cry.

“Come on. Pour me a coffee, and come sit down with me.” She patted his hand and walked to her customary seat by the window.

On automatic, Matt poured two coffees and walked to Ms. Feinstein's seat. The only time this table wasn't considered hers was in the summer, when she took up residence at the table on the right side of the shop's outdoor seating.

Today couldn't be more different than the summer. Besides him and Ms. Feinstein, there was no one else in the shop. Hell, Matt hadn't even seen many people walking down Main Street all day, and they had done so little business he wasn't really sure why they bothered opening on days like this. Ms. Feinstein smiled at him as he walked towards her. She finished taking off her winter gear as he placed the coffee before her, black just the way she liked it.

“You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, my dear. What's wrong?”

“It's Jamal.” He felt guilty talking, but he needed to get it out to someone.

She looked up from her coffee. “Is that the boy from the other day?”

He nodded. “He's from Kazakhstan.”

“Ah, he is quite exotic looking.”

He felt terrible saying the next words but he couldn't stop them. “His family is strange.”

Ms. Feinstein snorted and eyed him as she put her drink back on the table. Patting his hand, she said, “Now, Matt, just because they're not like us, that

doesn't make them strange. That's just how diversity works. And your mother's no walk in the park, either."

Matt tried hard not to pull a face. "No. I mean, I know that. But no, this family is *strange*."

"Okay. How so?" She looked him straight in the eye.

Running his fingers through his hair, Matt decided to start with the biggest issue. "Well first off, they're like super homophobic."

Ms. Feinstein patted him on the hand again and sighed. "That's sadly the norm, Matt. We're just lucky we live in a liberal place like New York. A homophobic family wouldn't be out of place in, say, Alabama, or even parts of New Jersey. That's just how the world is."

"No, they're like super homophobic. His dad tells him all the time that gay people need to be killed." Matt felt like punching someone—like Jamal's dad—when he said that. "How the hell can someone be that evil?"

"I take it they don't know he's gay?"

He snorted. "How could they not? I mean, I like Jamal—I mean I *like* Jamal—but even so, he's pretty obvious, don't you think?"

"It doesn't matter what you think, or what I think." Now was her turn to snort and roll her eyes. "Remember, you *are* gay, and I'm an old liberal Jew, so of course we're going to see gayness where it occurs. But, if it's not something you're around much, how can you spot it?"

"True." He really hated when she was right.

"Just look at what's happening in Russia. You have city officials claiming they have no gay people, even when there's gay bars in their town. Look at that idiot who ran Iran, Ahmadinejad. He claimed there were no gay men in Iran. Look at the holocaust deniers. If they can pretend that eleven million people didn't disappear off the face of the planet, then what's a family who doesn't want to see that their son is gay?"

Matt glowered at her. "Are you always right?"

She had the audacity to look smug. "Yes, and the sooner you realize it, the easier your life will be. Now what does Jamal think of his family?"

"Well, that's the oddest thing. I'm pretty sure he loves them. He was so worried his parents would be upset that he spent the night at my place, and he's

resigned to going back to Kazakhstan and doing what they want when he gets his degree.”

“And what do they want?” She worded her phrase in a neutral voice.

“Oh, the usual. Go find some nice girl, get married, settle down, make them grandkids.”

“And what does Jamal want?”

Matt couldn't stop his fingers from reaching up and touching his hair once again. “I think he wants to stay here. But I'm not sure. I'm not sure he really knows. I'd say his heart wants his family, but his head wants to be himself.”

“And what do you want?”

“I just want him happy.”

“And?”

His heart was beating so hard he was surprised she couldn't hear it. “And I want him. I want to be his boyfriend.”

She smiled and patted his hand. “So why aren't you then? Does he feel the same back?”

“I-I think so.” How he could though, after the way Matt had treated him the other night, was beyond Matt.

She sat back and studied her coffee. “So just enjoy being with him. What's the problem?”

“I guess I just don't get his family. Why does he put up with it?” That was the biggie. Were it Matt, he would just tell the bunch of them where to go. He might even give them a map to get them there as well.

Ms. Feinstein's voice cut into the fantasy that was beginning to form in his head, of what he'd like to do with families like Jamal's. “Yes, but honey, it's not your place to understand his family. If you care for him, then your place is to support him.”

Didn't he know it. Matt sighed, knowing she was right on every count.

“The rest will come along, or it won't. But, please Matt...”

“Yes?” His voice sounded like a petulant child not getting what he wanted. He hated when he sounded that way.

“Please don't pressure him about either being gay or about his family. I'm sure he's got enough crap on his shoulders as it is. If you care for him, then just

support him as much as you can. The other stuff will work itself out, or it won't. But there's nothing you can do, and if you try, you'll just lose him. Got it?" She fixed him with a stern look.

"Got it. Anything else?"

"Yes, wear something not gray for a change. And shave, would you?"

He laughed and rubbed his stubble. "Don't like my beard then?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll shave."

"Today. Get yourself a shave, and go take that poor boy out to the movies or something."

"Okay, okay! I'll do it."

Ms. Feinstein snuggled back into her oversized coat, a sly smile on her face. "Good, now don't fuck it up."

Matt stood before the wide windows and teal-colored slatted-front of the local crêpe cafe, his heart pounding. This was it, the big reveal. Jamal had left a text on his phone only an hour after his talk with Ms. Feinstein, saying he had gotten the results. Matt should have stayed at work, but he was too terrified. No way could he stay there and stew until five, when he was supposed to be off. No, some things you couldn't wait for, and this was one of them. He had all but run to where Jamal had said to meet him.

Jamal was where he said he'd be. Even through the window Matt could make out his intense green eyes. The boy was sitting at the long table that faced out onto the street. Matt's heart threatened to pound its way out of his chest as he nodded to Jamal and walked to the door. Steel and glass was never so hard to open, as in that moment. *What would Jamal say? Would it be okay? Would Jamal still want him? Why had he reacted the way he had done, the other night? Yeah, the walk back had been sweet, after the fight. But they hadn't spoken since that night. What if Jamal had thought it over, and decided he didn't want Matt?*

What if the test was positive? Just the thought made Matt's chest tight.

The balmy warmth of the cafe enveloped him as he walked through the door. Jamal was to his right, but the boy wasn't looking at him, choosing instead to keep his gaze towards the window. Gritting his teeth, Matt walked to

the long wooden counter that nestled under the wrought iron window that stretched across the entire front of the building. No doubt in the past this had once been a warehouse. It had that sort of look.

Jamal looked tense, even from the side. There was a rigid way that he held himself, and the way his head stayed resolutely forward that told Matt he was as nervous as he himself felt. *Well, here goes nothing, just the rest of my life.*

“Hey.” Not the most innovative opening, but really, what did you say in a situation like this? Matt patted Jamal on the shoulder before sitting down at the empty bench next to him. It was the first tiny victory that Jamal didn’t flinch or pull away when he did that.

Jamal smiled at him, but it was a weak, nervous smile. “Hey,” was all he said back. Even that word sounded like it was hard to get out of his mouth.

Well, one of them needed to talk. Reaching out, Matt grasped Jamal’s hand. “Hey man, I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry.”

Jamal snorted and gripped Matt’s hand. “No, it should be me apologizing. I’m sorry I fucked it all up. I just never thought anyone would ever want to be with me, it’s just, y’know...” He was blinking rapidly.

Feeling even more like shit now, Matt brought his other hand up so he could cover Jamal’s in both of his. “Well for starters, as I said the other night, *I want you to be with me. I’ve wanted you for going on three years now.*”

Jamal looked him in the eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me before the other day? I just thought no one really liked me very much, that I was too ugly for anyone.” His words were so low Matt had to lean in to hear him.

Matt’s voice was just as soft. “Are you out of your mind? Jamal, have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re stunning, you’re a fucking ten out of ten. Oh my god, just look at you, really *look* at you. Look at your eyes, look at your lips, your face, your body. *Look* at you.”

Jamal pulled a face. “*I have* looked at me. I’m nothing special.”

“Well, maybe not back home—in which case your country must be the best looking country on earth—but to me, where I sit, you’re perfect. Like I said, I’ve been attracted to you ever since you first moved over here.” Jamal looked like he didn’t know what to say at that. Taking the initiative—hell, he had nothing to lose at this point—Matt held tightly onto Jamal’s hand. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was such an insensitive asshole the other night. I’m sorry if I’ve upset you. You can hate me. You can say you never want to see me ever again,

but Jamal, I want you. I want to be with you. I want to protect you when your dad is being harsh to you. I want to go to bed with you, and I want to wake up next to you. I want to make you breakfast. I want to go on long walks with you. I want to take you to the races this summer. I want you. I want to show you off to my friends and take you home to Mom and Dad. I want you to laugh. I want you to cuddle with me at night in front of the TV. Do you get this? I like you. I *really* like you. And yeah, I know it's only been a short while, but I want to be with you. I don't need any more time to get used to that idea. I already know it."

"Oh."

Jamal looked stunned by that barrage. Hell, Matt couldn't blame him. He'd have been stunned into silence too, had it been him hearing it. Maybe he'd said too much. Maybe it was only a couple weeks and one disaster of a date, but there it was. He couldn't lie. Jamal would just have to take it or leave it. The long pause before Jamal opened his mouth to speak seemed to be eons. People could have been born, grown up, had kids, and died in that space. Matt could feel his heart jackhammering. Hell, Matt could *hear* his heart jackhammering. He half expected to look down to see it spring out, Alien-esque, onto the table.

"Did you mean all that?" Jamal turned his hand over and placed his fingers between Matt's. And he smiled. It was like the sun had come out, his smile.

"I did."

"Oh." He bit his lower lip to keep from stopping his smile from getting even bigger. "I like you too... I mean I feel the same way, everything you said. Except the family bit, well, maybe my sister. If I took you to Kazakhstan, then we'd just get ignored. Or something."

"That's okay. I'd love to meet your sister."

"My sisters. There's two of them."

"Then I'd love to meet your sisters. All two of them."

"The doctor..."

"Yes?" His heart really was going to fall out of his chest, fall out and pump frantically all over the table.

"I'm okay."

"I... uh... what? You're clear? You're fine?"

"Yeah, all clear."

“Oh. Thank. Fuck.” Matt didn’t care who was watching at this point; he took Jamal by the shoulders and planted a kiss right on his mouth. Jamal stiffened momentarily under his fingers, then relaxed into the kiss. When it broke, Matt grinned and held up a finger. With his other hand, he dug around in his coat pocket until he found what he was looking for. Slapping it down onto the table, he said, “There.”

“You got tested too?” Jamal held a hand up to smother his laugh as he picked the paper up with his other hand. He looked at it, Matt watched his eyes scan the document until he got where he wanted to go. “Negative too?”

“Yep.”

“So what are we waiting for?”

Matt grinned. “Indeed, why’re we still here?” He stood up and offered his hand to Jamal. When the boy placed his in Matt’s, Matt said, “Lead the way, you know where you’re going.”

“I do now.”

“Good. So do I.”

The End

Author Bio

Arielle Pierce currently resides in both southern Spain and in Wales, ensuring that she doesn't miss the worst of the rains and gales of one country, nor the blazing heat and droughts of the other. When not merrily scribbling away about the adventures of two men in love (or lust, more likely) she can be found sewing sock kitty cats for her small son or gardening in her back yard, where she is locked into a losing battle with the weeds (and with the sock cats, for that matter).

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UNDER PRETENSES

By Jessa Ryan

Photo Description

The picture shows the torso and legs of a scantily clad man. Wearing only white, ruffled-lace undies and pink-striped stockings, his sexy, well-toned chest and stomach are bare and scrumptious. The tiny bows add to the contrast of strength and vulnerability.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My theater class recently watched the movie Stage Beauty, starring Billy Crudup. I've never been so turned on by seeing a man's performance of "feminine" qualities, movements, and mannerisms. Watching that movie, and already being a fan of the very masculine Mr Crudup, left me so painfully turned on—I was the first to get out of the room when the lights came up!

I just hope no one saw me racing out of the room with a hard on—but they probably wouldn't be able to guess why, anyway, right?

Wrong. Today I received a package in the mail with these beauties in it—no note, no idea of who sent them. Didn't let that stop me from putting them on though, and they feel AMAZING. How will I find out who guessed my secret?

Thanks for helping out,

Skookumjam

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, cross-dressing, humorous, secret admirer, underwear fetish

Word Count: 40,443

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Dedication

Thank you to Skookumjam for the awesome prompt and picture that gifted me with hot men whispering their deepest desires in my head.

A very huge thank you to my family, who had to put up with my crazy writing for the last six weeks, and still love me.

And to my amazing betas—you guys rock! I'd offer to have children for you, but since my husband has said "No way!" would you settle for chocolate?

UNDER PRETENSES

By Jessa Ryan

Chapter 1

“Okay, get this,” Sam began as he walked out of the bathroom, orange-scented steam billowing out behind him. He was already dressed in a T-shirt and sweats, and was furiously rubbing a towel over his mop of sandy-blond hair. “I had this crazy dream last night, man. I was in Electronics and Instrumentation and Professor Boyle was lecturing, but he was wearing a bright, red clown wig.”

“That’s odd, but not exactly crazy. The guy *is* on the nutty side,” Mark mused from where he sat on his bed, back propped up on pillows against the wall. He discarded the textbook he’d been reading onto the pile to his left, and picked the top one off the pile to his right. It was all of his assigned reading for the new term. None of it was overly exciting, but it had kept him occupied—which was better than bored, or going stir-crazy cooped up in his dorm.

“No, that’s not the crazy part. You see, he started stripping. Right there. I’m not just talking about taking clothes off, I mean wiggling his hips and the whole shebang. And he kept lecturing while he did it, like it was normal. Nobody in class even noticed. Or maybe they just didn’t care.” Sam flopped onto his narrow dorm bed across from Mark’s.

“If Professor ‘Boiling Point’ was doing a striptease for me, I’d sure as hell notice. He may be an arrogant prick, but he’s got a fine body for his age. Was I there?”

“Of course not. You’re not in that class.”

“Yeah, because your dreams are so realistic, of course they would follow curriculum.” Mark kept a straight face and nodded. “The crabbiest professor on campus in a clown wig, and my straight roommate dreaming of men stripping for him are proof of how well your dream world reflects real life.”

“Shut up.” Sam flung his towel at Mark. “Anyway, that’s still not the most bizarre of bizarre. Instead of his usual pale skin, it had this weird texture, and it was dark brown. I could tell it wasn’t really skin. And when he moved, I could see holes—”

“What song was he dancing to?” Mark cut him off.

Sam shot him an odd look. “What does that matter?” But then he hummed, either trying to remember the tune or just because he was thinking. “I don’t

know. I can't remember if there was even music, but he was definitely moving to a beat. That's not important, though. Stop interrupting." Sam turned onto his side, propped up on an arm, and continued in an excited rush. "When he took his shirt off, I finally saw why his skin looked weird. He was made of brownie! One huge brownie! And every time he took off another piece of clothing, you could smell that fresh-baked chocolaty goodness."

Mark burst out laughing, but Sam kept going, smiling through his explanation.

"Seriously, man. It smelled sooo good. Suddenly I was starving, and I remember thinking that I hadn't eaten in days—and for some reason that made perfect sense in the dream. Then my stomach started growling super loud and people were glaring at me because of the noise. I kept thinking that his arm looked tasty..."

"You are seriously deranged!" Mark announced through his laughter.

Sam's mouth curved up, and he looked pretty pleased with himself. "I know. But I got you to smile, didn't I? First time in days, and it's about damn time."

Mark calmed slightly and brushed his dark hair out of his eyes. "Give me a break, it hasn't been that long. And who could blame me, with Mother Nature going seriously schizophrenic. Snowing one day, raining the next. Weeks of gray skies might not bother you, but I feel like I've been stuck indoors for *months*."

"It's been three days. Besides, you're used to worse than this. Didn't they just get a storm up north with some insane amount of snow?"

"Yep. Three feet." Mark had talked to his mom the night before to make sure everyone was home and safe. Northern Minnesota could be a real bitch if you got caught out in a blizzard like they were having. "You're right, though. The last two years I've loved it here in Iowa because of the earlier springs. Maybe I am going insane, because right now it's bugging the shit out of me that it's only February and it's raining. I almost miss home where winter means bitter cold, and spring doesn't start until a few weeks before summer." Sam raised a brow at that. "Okay, maybe not, but having my winter gear soaked through when it's only a couple degrees above freezing sucks big, hairy monkey balls."

Sam snorted. "Hey, it could be worse. Just think about the three feet of snow that you don't have to shovel. You're better off down here with me. And my awesome, kickass dreams. So what do you think the dream meant?"

"Oh, God. I don't even want to take a guess. You need to find yourself a psychology major for that. Unless... did you eat anything funky right before bed? Like, maybe, I don't know... a pound of beef jerky?"

"It was one piece, dipshit."

Mark was about to remind him of how he'd topped the jerky off with a bag of cheesy popcorn, but was distracted when his phone chimed. He stretched to his desk to grab it, looked at it in confusion for a second, and then opened the email.

"Everything okay?" Sam asked, his smile gone.

"It's from the campus post. Hot damn, I have a box waiting." Mark looked up at Sam, grinned, and punched the air. "Yessss! My mom's package. And here I thought for sure it would be days of agony waiting for my—" Mark made a quick correction when Sam cleared his throat. "—*our* treats." He snapped his fingers. "I've got it! That explains your dream. I told you my mom sent something, so the only thing you could think about was her awesome brownies. Oh, and the professor wearing a wig and stripping were probably what your mind came up with as the most disgusting thing you could think of to distract you. But even that couldn't work, because her brownies are just *that* great."

"Oh-ho! You could be on to something. Maybe you should switch from education to psychology," Sam suggested, but then tilted his head to look down his nose at Mark. "Although, I do take offense that you assume I'd think a man stripping is disgusting. Just because I probably wouldn't pop wood from it, doesn't mean I think it's gross."

Mark was used to that superior, I-know-better-than-you tone from Sam. He reached a foot over to kick him. "Shut up, you idiot. I know." Mark glanced at his phone and checked the view out the window. *No change, still craptastic*. "I wonder what she sent."

"Go find out. You have plenty of time before class."

"It would make more sense to go after class when we meet for lunch. We're still meeting for lunch, right?"

“You bet. But what I meant was, get the hell out of here. A fidgety antsy Mark does not a happy roommate make.” Sam sat up and reached to grab his laptop off his desk.

“Gee, thanks. Didn’t know I was irritating you.” Mark laughed it off, but internally he cringed. He had no idea he was getting that bad.

“Irritating would be too strong a word. But your cabin fever is contagious. It should be better now that J-term is over.”

Mark had to concede that Sam was probably right. Their dorm building had been especially quiet all month with two-thirds of the students gone over the January term. It was an awesome idea he’d never heard of until he’d signed up for classes freshman year. First semester ended at Christmas break, and the second semester didn’t start until the first week in February. For the month of January, it was the student’s choice whether to stay home, take a class abroad, or a class on campus. Mark spent last January in Germany as a teacher’s assistant in an elementary class. This year he’d chosen to stay on campus and take part in the play. He was glad he did, but towards the end of the month, the empty campus had started to wear on him.

January term was nice in a way, having the same schedule every day. And a royal pain in the ass, having the same schedule every frickin’ day. But now, it was the first week of the new semester. Mark was looking forward to the variety and anxious to have all his friends around. Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one hunkering down indoors from the weather. Their friend, Carlos, had gotten back last week, and they’d met up here and there, but apparently a month away from his girlfriend was far too long. They hadn’t seen or heard from him in days. Not that Mark could blame him.

Students had been arriving back on campus throughout the weekend, and even just hearing all the commotion in the halls had been good. He and Sam had hung out with a few friends from their dorm on Saturday, but listening to stories of studying abroad or vacations in warmer climates hadn’t helped Mark’s mood. He needed fresh air. He needed the sun.

“Damn. It won’t start again,” Sam muttered down at his computer before pinning Mark with a narrowed look. “Go. You’re brooding again, I can tell. The walk across campus will do you some good.”

“Fine. Yeah,” Mark said without much enthusiasm and got up to rummage in his closet. He was already in jeans and a T-shirt, so he grabbed his red-and-

gray flannel and some warm socks. After he'd donned his boots, coat, and hat, he asked Sam, "Can I borrow your umbrella?"

"Can't. Sorry." Sam flicked Mark off when he shot a venomous glare at his mean roommate. "I'm not being a dick. I loaned it to Carlos on Friday, and I haven't gotten it back yet." He must have seen the way Mark looked wistfully at his bed, contemplating crawling back in, because he jumped in with, "Here, five bucks. After you get whatever your mom sent, go grab a cappuccino at Brew. Talk with people. Have fun."

Mark cocked his head to the side and considered his roommate. "You're awfully eager to get rid of me. Do you have a hot date or something?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Or maybe I want you gone so I can watch porn and jerk off. Either way, go."

Mark chuckled. "Yeah, good luck with that since your laptop's history. If you need to use mine again, don't leave any spunk on it." Mark grabbed his bag and flung it over a shoulder. "Have fun, you horndog," he sang out as he closed the door behind him.

Getting spit on by equal measures of rain and snow was definitely not Mark Giorgetti's idea of a good time. He ducked under a branch, readjusted the bag on his shoulder and pulled his coat collar tighter, grumbling.

Mark hadn't admitted it to Sam, but the three days of gray, drab, and damp weren't the only reason he'd been moody. For the first time in his college life he was homesick, and the phone call from his mom last night hadn't helped. He loved his mom, of course. She was sweet, supportive, and wonderful, and that was part of the problem. She'd spent almost an hour telling him about what all five of his younger siblings were up to. While listening to her ramble about all the little-big things he wasn't there to see, it hit him square in the chest how much he missed them. Sure, he'd been home over Christmas break, but the eight short days were a blur.

There was a bonus to his mom's preoccupation with his siblings, though—she hadn't once asked if he'd had any dates, or why he didn't have a boyfriend yet. Hopefully, that meant she was finally taking his Junior Year Hiatus from Dating—as he'd dubbed it—seriously. How many times did he have to tell her that he was taking a break by choice and she shouldn't worry? He had friends, and a full schedule of killer classes, so it wasn't like he was sitting home pining

for some man to come and sweep him off his feet. Hell, when it was time and if he met the right guy, he'd do the sweeping himself.

Mark passed a couple huddled together heading in the other direction, turned the corner to reach the sidewalk that led to the campus center, and ran smack into what felt like a wall. A split second later he was flat on his back.

"*Oofffuck!*" he yelled as his bag went flying.

"Damn, are you okay?" asked a rough voice.

Mark opened his eyes to see the wall was actually another guy. His first impression was slender and tall, but Mark couldn't even be sure of that with the way the guy was bundled head-to-toe, including a scarf covering everything but his eyes. Nice eyes, though. Bright green.

Mark shook the odd thought away and sat up, assessing the damage. "Um, yeah. I think so." Could his day get any worse? The stranger didn't offer a hand as Mark managed to stand, but he did go and retrieve Mark's bag. "Thanks." As soon as he handed the bag over, he skirted around Mark to walk away. "Hey," Mark called out. "I'm sorry about that, I—"

"No problem." The guy kept walking and didn't look back.

How rude. Mark wasn't even sure why he'd tried to apologize—he was pretty sure it wasn't his fault—but he felt like somebody should have. *Oh well.*

He turned back around to get to the sidewalk and stopped in his tracks. Just his luck. As the rain touched down it was freezing... and turning the sidewalks into mini ice rinks. And since the rest of this flat part of campus was covered in a foot of snow—freeze his ass off or risk falling on it? Again.

Way to look on the bright side there, buddy. No, he thought, the bright side was the reason he was booking it all the way across campus in this bitter minefield, his mom's cryptic teasing that she'd sent him something special. Screw the slush and yuck. Who cared if his balls shriveled into raisins to hide? Oh, man, did he love-love-love his mom's care packages.

This walk was a pain at the best of times. The McAlister building, where he and Sam lived this year, was a long walk from the campus center where the all-important cafeteria was located, along with less important things like their mailboxes and the campus store. They really should have thought of that before requesting the building, but McAlister was the newest and nicest, with larger rooms. And even more important to Mark, it was close to the theatre building where he spent a good chunk of his time.

A group of students were coming out of the campus center when he got there. Two had umbrellas—obviously they were smarter than Mark—and the last one held the door for him. Stomping his feet to get as much water off as possible, and swiping off his wet hat so it wouldn't drip in his eyes, Mark made his way upstairs.

There was barely anyone in the common room as he walked over to the window next to the wall of mailboxes. Anything larger than a letter couldn't fit into their individual boxes, so packages had to be picked up. When the student worker behind the window handed over a medium-sized box, all thoughts of dreary days and homesickness fled. He knew what a box this size meant—goodies.

He dumped his bag on the floor by the closest chair and sat to rip open the package. And, *ooohhh*—the best kind of goodies. *Homemade cookies*. Inside the box was a large plastic bag decorated with white snowflakes and filled to the brim with what looked like chocolate chip and M&M cookies. With a groan of pleasure, Mark bit into one, ate it with glee, and grabbed another.

Oh, man, his mom was the best.

Mark would have happily stayed there and eaten more, but if he wanted to grab a coffee and still have time to catch his professor before other students got to class, he'd have to hurry. Even knowing that the walk would be miserable, and any part of him that was still dry soon wouldn't be, Mark was actually looking forward to his first class, Theatre and Society. The only thing better than starting and ending each week with a class he knew he'd like was that it was taught by Professor Daniel Walker, who also happened to be Mark's boss in the scene shop and a great teacher.

Acting was Mark's first love, and his job building sets had given him a whole new appreciation for the stage. Freshman year he'd entertained the fun idea of switching his major to theatre, but he was nothing if not practical. So, for a career and stability—an education major. And for his passion—a theatre minor. Made perfect sense to him.

The freezing rain was even worse on the walk back, but his mood didn't get any darker. *Must have been the cookies*. He shucked his wet coat and hat the second he entered the building, and was surprised when he got to the classroom to find other people already there. He thought he'd be early enough to catch the professor alone. But Professor Walker, Dan as he preferred the students call him, wasn't even there yet, which was odd. He'd been Mark's boss since

freshman year, and they knew each other pretty well by now. One thing Mark always counted on was that Dan was habitually early. Glancing at the clock above the desk, he saw there were only ten minutes before class started, so he decided to settle in and talk to Dan later.

The group of three heads huddled in the corner whispering didn't look inviting. Especially when the squeak of Mark's wet boots caught their attention and they all looked up. He didn't recognize either of the girls, and the guy he wished he didn't. They'd had classes together over the years, and Taylor was that know-it-all asshole type Mark tried to avoid. And now Mark would have to see him twice a week in class. Wonderful.

There was one other person sitting in the back, but he didn't look any friendlier than the other three. He was wearing a dark knit cap and was bent over a notepad, studiously ignoring everyone's existence. Great. Scanning the room, Mark picked the chair farthest from the others and settled in.

At least he had time to chow down on another cookie or two.

He pulled them out of his bag along with his books for class, and munched while he played a game on his phone. Only a second or two passed before he felt a distinctive prickle on the back of his neck. He looked up and saw the three in the corner staring at him as if he were an offensive bug. What was their problem? He shrugged, and one of the girls rolled her eyes before asking in an overly sugar-toned way, "Would you mind eating a little quieter?" and then went back to their whispering.

Mark didn't give a shit. Obviously the girls were in the same league as the asshole, nitpicking in that snooty way. The dirty looks for making noise reminded him of Sam's dream and Mark laughed to himself. It wasn't until he took another bite that he understood what the girl meant, stupid as it was. The cookie *was* crunchy, and the sound echoed with the odd acoustics of the room. Mark looked over his shoulder to see if he was irritating the student in the back as well, but the guy never looked up.

He was familiar, but, with his head down like that, Mark couldn't place him. A second ticked by and Mark watched, hoping he'd look up, but whatever the guy was writing in his notebook consumed all of his attention. Then Mark saw why he hadn't heard the loud crunching—he was wearing earbuds. Between the knit cap pulled down and the over-large black sweater, they weren't easy to see and from the little Mark could glimpse, he was decent-looking in that I'm-hip-and-brooding kind of way.

Turning back to the class so he wouldn't get caught staring as other students filtered in, he wondered about the guy. It might be a small campus, but that still didn't mean you knew everyone. Was the guy a freshman or a late transfer? He couldn't be involved in the theatre in any way or he'd be more than just familiar to Mark.

Dan rushed in at the last second, pulling his long, gray—and very wet—hair back into a ponytail.

"You don't own an umbrella either, huh, Prof?" Taylor said from the corner.

"Forgot it at home I'm afraid." Dan smiled. He did look a bit like a wet rag, although a friendly one. That was what Mark liked best about him, the constant smile on his expressive face. For a man in his fifties, he had a never-ending flow of energy that Mark envied. But how could the man not be happy when he had, according to him, the best job in the world and a loving partner of twenty-six years? And that partner was, again according to Dan, the reason the sun rose each day. Another thing to envy. "You look like you made it here okay, though."

"Oh, not me. Mark came in drenched to the bone." Taylor smiled at Mark, and it was beyond strange because it actually looked like a real smile. "I was just thinking I should take pity on him and lend him mine."

"Oh, uh—" Mark didn't know what to say to that. Was Taylor really trying to be nice or just be a smartass? "I'm fine. But thanks."

After the last student arrived, Dan started class as usual, with a theatre joke and introductions, reminding everyone to please call him Dan. The first half of class was spent with a getting-to-know-you session that was pretty typical for this small school. They were all supposed to introduce themselves, tell their year, why they were in the class, and a fun factoid about themselves. Mark was so used to it he had his answer down pat, and most of the others did, too.

Mark had almost forgotten about the knit cap guy—he'd stayed so quiet—until it was his turn. His name was Landon Hayes, he was a sophomore and a psychology major. He was taking the class as an elective, and he liked dogs. Even though he didn't offer any more information than what was asked, Mark learned a lot more than that about him. He learned that the guy had a quiet but very masculine and sexy voice, and that he wasn't a natural people-person. Mark could tell by the way he didn't really smile and looked down quickly when he was done talking. It was sort of cute. Or would be, if Mark didn't also get a strong stay-the-hell-away vibe from the guy.

Not looking for a date, Mark reminded himself and tuned in again as Natalie, a friend he'd made through the theatre, took her turn answering.

It wasn't until the end of class, when they were all packing up, that Mark realized that Landon hadn't said a word throughout class other than his introduction time. What was really odd about that was that Dan allowed it. Normally the professors were absolutely determined to promote dialogue in class. Not talking and participating was *not* acceptable.

Mark shouldered his bag and stood by Dan's desk to wait. He couldn't help but look Landon's way again because, well, he was curious. Landon was looking right at him, and all it took was one look at those eyes. Mark finally placed him. It was the same guy he'd run into earlier. Or who had run into him. Either way it amounted to the same thing—Mark in the snow and Landon not bothering to apologize.

Landon turned away without a smile or acknowledgement, but Mark kept looking. Now that he had a full view of Landon, he recalled seeing him around campus before. Wearing the cap inside should have tripped Mark's memory, because every time Mark had seen him he'd been wearing it, or one like it. Even when it was warm. He couldn't even think of what color hair the guy had. And for no reason that made sense to Mark, that was suddenly bugging the shit out of him.

Landon walked by, only a few feet from Mark, and nodded, quick and jerky. Mark smiled and nodded back and even opened his mouth to say something, but Landon just kept going.

"See you Friday, Mr. Hayes," Dan called out, teasing and friendly. Which made Mark wonder even more. If this Landon guy was a jackass, Dan would be polite, sure, but he wouldn't sound like they were friends. Maybe he'd ask.

But then Dan asked if he had the paperwork done for his summer internship, and Mark was reminded of why he needed to talk to Dan in the first place. They went over his options, and Mark was generous enough to share his cookies.

On the way back to his dorm to meet Sam before they headed to the cafeteria, Mark called his mom. The second she answered he professed, "You're the best mom in the world! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Pick a song, any song."

Her laugh was melodic even over the phone. "You got the tickets already? That was fast. I'm so glad you like them, sweetie."

“What tickets? I didn’t see anything in the box but the cookies. To be fair, they are the best cookies you’ve ever made. After one bite, I forgot everything else in the world existed.”

“Um, well, that’s nice, hon, and it explains why you were going to pay me with a song, but I didn’t send you any cookies. Unless you’re just now thanking me for the Christmas tree ones I sent you back in December, but I’m pretty sure you sang me a lovely and loud Christmas song as a thank you.” He could hear the smile in her voice at the end, and remembered his over-the-top rendition of “O, Christmas Tree”, but at the moment he was too confused to find humor in that.

“They’re not from you?” Mark looked at his bag, but between holding that and his phone, he didn’t want to pull out the box of cookies in the rain and risk getting his other things wet.

“Well, no. But your auntie might have. She was baking up a storm last week. Or your grandma. We all love the payment we get for sending treats.” She chuckled. “Doesn’t it say who they’re from?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look, I just assumed they were from you. I’ll look when I get back to my room. What were you saying about tickets?” He stopped under the eaves outside his building to fish out his keys.

“Oh, no, no, no. If you didn’t get my gift yet, I’m not giving any more hints than I have. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“You are an evil woman, torturing your son like that.”

“Well, that’s a far cry from a moment ago when I was the best mom in the world. I guess I see how I rate compared to cookies, huh? And what was that you said about them being the best I’ve ever made? Is there something wrong with my baking, young man?”

Mark smiled as he let himself into the building and made his way upstairs. “No, ma’am. You know I love everything you make dearly. And Sam told me just this morning that he had a dream featuring your killer brownies.” Mark smiled. He wasn’t about to tell her *how* her brownies featured. “Which reminds me, I gotta go. I’m supposed to meet Sam for lunch and I’m running late.”

After their good-byes, Mark took the stairs two at a time. He left his room door open behind him and pulled out the box of cookies. There was no return address. Just like the two packages he’d gotten in December. Weird.

The first one had been a CD of current country artists singing Christmas songs. The note said, *Hope this helps you get into the Christmas mood, even without a tree and ten feet of snow.* It was exactly the kind of thing his sister, Sara, would send. When he'd called to say thank you, she didn't know what he was talking about. The postmark was smudged so he couldn't make it out, but he'd assumed it was from family or a friend back home who just forgot to sign it. That wasn't the case with the next one. It arrived right before Christmas break and as soon as he opened the sketch—framed and all—of him on stage from the fall production of *Assassins*, he knew it wasn't from someone back home. It was strange and flattering at the same time. There was a note, unsigned again, written in neat block letters. It simply said, *Merry Christmas.* Even though he didn't know if the two gifts were related, Mark wished he'd kept the note from the CD to compare handwriting.

"There you are," Sam said from behind him, before plopping on his bed. "I'm starving, man. Oh, yessss." Sam's eyes lit up as he reached for the cookies.

"Don't touch those!" Mark snatched the box out of reach, suddenly panicked. He'd already eaten some and—*oh, shit*—so had Dan. Surely if there was anything wrong with them, he'd feel it by now. Apparently, all those years of hearing adults warn about never taking candy from strangers hadn't sunk in.

"What the hell, man? If you don't want to share, fine. Don't need to be an ass."

"It's not that." Mark slumped back on his bed, a bit embarrassed but still worried. "They could be poisoned," he admitted and was fully prepared for the strange look Sam sent his way, so went on to explain about the mysterious gifts.

While he was talking, Sam pulled out the bag of cookies and found a note at the bottom. "*Thought you would enjoy something homemade. I hope you like them,*" Sam read out loud. "Well, it's simple. You have a secret admirer."

Mark grabbed the note, read it, and considered what Sam said. "Don't people who do that usually sign it, 'From your secret admirer,' or write flattering things in the letters? Or poems, or something? This doesn't seem like that at all. This could still be from my aunt, except"—he flipped the note over and back, just to make sure he wasn't missing something—"except this is the same handwriting as the last one. I'm almost positive."

"One easy way to rule out the people from back home. Where were the postmarks from?"

"I don't know about the first one, but the last one was Des Moines. I haven't checked this one yet. I thought it was from my mom so I didn't even look before I ripped it open." Mark turned over the now-empty box. "Shit." He felt Sam hover over him. "It's sent from right in town."

"Well, now at least you know it's from someone around here. Where's the sketch? And why haven't I seen it?"

"I brought it home over Christmas break. My mom saw it and loved it so much she hung it up. I wasn't about to tell her I didn't know where it came from, so I lied and said a friend drew it. I mean, who would do this? It's a bit on the creepy side, right?"

"It's not that weird, man. Actors get fan mail all the time, don't they? So it's probably a fan. Or some guy that thinks you're gorgeous. Oh!" Sam jumped a little, landing closer to the edge of his bed. "I know, I know!"

"What?" Mark was having a really hard time not laughing at Sam's wide-eyed excitement.

"Well, how many gay guys are out on campus? There are probably dozens who are in the closet. Didn't you say that once? So, it's some guy who's in the closet, and that's why he didn't sign his name. Yeah, yeah, it's perfect. This is exactly what a guy would do to get your attention. He gave you music, which is kind of like poetry, yeah? Then he stroked your ego with the sketch, and now he gave you food. Cookies, man. What man doesn't want baked goods?" Sam snatched one of said baked goods before leaning back on his bed, looking pretty damn proud of himself. "*Mmm*, good," he moaned through a mouthful of cookie.

"Yeah, they are. But remember, we don't know where they came from. For all you know, you could be eating lethal poison right now. They could have arsenic or something."

"Or a love potion," Sam said with a wink. "And that's a lot more believable than poison. Who the hell would try to kill you? Honestly. You theatre types..."

Mark didn't smile. At least he tried not to. "Oh, shut up. But you're obviously way off-base on the love potion. I ate a few earlier and I'm still not hot for your bod, so..." Sam threw a cookie at him, and Mark caught it before it fell and took a bite. While he chewed, a thought hit him. "You don't think it could be a girl, do you? 'Cause that would be awkward."

“Absolutely not. You’re gay. I mean, not like it’s obvious—you know, with your country boy flannels and shit—and yeah, I know it bugged you our freshman year ’cause nobody believed you, but still... you don’t hide it.” Sam waved a hand. “Nah, everyone who knows you knows you’re gay.”

“Maybe, but there are thousands of students on campus. Not all of them know me.”

“This guy knows you. He knows you like country music. You said the CD was country, right?” Sam asked, and Mark nodded. “And he knows cookies are your kryptonite.”

“Or those are educated guesses,” Mark hedged. “I listen to music when I work out at the gym, and like you said, what man doesn’t want baked goods?”

“Well, it has to be someone that went to the play.”

“Not helpful. There’s no way to narrow this down from that.”

“Not yet. We just have to wait for you to get another gift.” Sam moved to stand. “Now can we please, please, please finally go to lunch? If I don’t get something to eat soon, I’m eating every one of those, poisoned or not, and leaving you with none.”

Chapter 2

Mark took a short break from painting the archway and looked around the scene room to figure out where he'd left his bottled water. There were twelve other students scattered around, all part of the set crew, working on various projects. Mark was content here, at home with the smell of paint, the sounds of people working or talking, interrupted for bursts at a time from the table saw in the back corner. It was colorful, active, and quiet all at the same time, and he loved it.

The rain had stopped and they'd had four wonderful days of sun, but clouds were rolling in and the forecast called for a rainstorm. Mark just hoped it would hold off until he got back to his room.

There hadn't been any more anonymous gifts. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He appreciated a good mystery the same as anyone else, but the more he thought about it, the more his curiosity killed him. A clue would be nice. Sam still teased that it was a secret admirer who was lusting after Mark's body. Mark wasn't too sure how he felt about that, either. It was weird, but it made him feel good in a strange way. The idea that there was someone out there who thought enough of him to admire him, to take the time to send him something special? He smiled every time he thought of it. He couldn't help it, strangeness be damned.

Even though there hadn't been any more mysterious mail, he did get the tickets from his mom and that gave him a whole new dilemma. They were for a dinner theatre, there were two of them, and they were for Valentine's Day. Not exactly a subtle hint, but he supposed he could forgive her. At first he'd laughed, because if her idea was to force him into a date, that was just ridiculous. He had tons of single friends who would join him just for something to do on Valentine's. But after thinking about who he'd ask, he reconsidered. Sure, Sam was single and his best friend, but he wasn't into theatre. And a dinner theatre? So not Sam's thing. Two of his other good friends, Grady and Carlos, would both really get into it, but Grady had a boyfriend and Carlos a girlfriend, and if they were smart, they already had plans.

He made a mental list of his other friends—his friends from classes, his theatre friends, and the ones who lived in his dorm. He wasn't really all that close to any of them, and about half were in a relationship. With some frustration, he realized his mom might be smarter than he gave her credit for.

“What’s with the sour look?” Dan’s quiet voice asked from Mark’s side, making him jump. He hadn’t seen his professor walk up.

“Nothing. Just thinking of my mother’s manipulative ways.”

“Uh-oh. Is she on your case about something?” Dan asked as he leaned forward, resting his arms against a painting bench.

Mark shook his head but grabbed his paintbrush to start back to work before answering. “No, not really. She’s great. It’s just that she bought me tickets to see a play on Valentine’s, then waited till the last minute to send them to me so I can’t even refund them for her if I don’t use them. I thought I could ask a friend. You know? Platonic. And if it was any other day, I could. But on Valentine’s Day? *Shit.*”

“Is there anyone you’re interested in? Anyone that you’d consider asking out as more than platonic?”

For some reason, Mark’s mind went to the quiet guy in the knit cap, Landon, but he shoved the thought away. “No. And I told you before, I’m not interested in dating right now. I swear, my mom doesn’t think anyone can be happy unless they have someone else.” *Either that or she’s just worried I’m out there hooking up with every gay man within thirty miles*, Mark thought, but didn’t really want to admit that to the professor. “But after the previous three failed attempts, the last thing I want is a boyfriend.”

“Sometimes, you need to break a few eggs to—”

Mark spun on him. “Don’t you dare finish that—” Too late, Mark saw he still had the brush, freshly dipped with paint, in his hand. It hadn’t only spun with him, but splattered across Dan’s face and chest. Stuck between mortified and amused, he spluttered. “Sh—I’m sorry... I... oh shit.” He clamped his mouth shut tight to keep from laughing and set the brush in the tray. “Sorry,” he murmured.

But between the utter shock on Dan’s face and the dark green paint dripping from his nose—Mark lost it. Damn, but he couldn’t help it. Luckily for him, it only took a second for the shock to wear off before Dan cracked and joined him.

“Holy shit, kid. You wield a wild brush.” Dan, still laughing, used his now-destroyed shirt to wipe at his face. “Point taken, though. No boyfriends—got it.”

“No boyfriends, no blind dates, and no subtle nudges. I’m sick of it.”

“I get that, Mark, really I do. Matter of fact, I respect you taking a break. If it’s what feels right, then good for you for sticking to your guns. Even if sometimes you seem a little too mature for your own good.” Dan paused and looked sincere, but Mark could hear a big “but” coming. “All I was going to say is, don’t let a few sour experiences make you miss other opportunities. There’s a lot of fun out there to be had. And a break is fine, but if a break means you put blinders on, you might not see Mr. Right when he walks past. That’s all. Just don’t close yourself off completely.”

“I’m not. And I don’t have blinders on. I’m just not actively looking. And besides”—he gestured to the room—“I’m busy.”

“Really? So is that why you haven’t been to a single GSA event this year? From what I remember, you were pretty active the last two years.”

“Yeah, well, exes one, two, and three are all active as well, and it makes things a little awkward. Especially after Mitchell started dating Tony and Jeff took over as vice president.” Mark was actually happy for Mitchell and Tony—they were well-suited, even if they weren’t suited for him—but Jeff was another matter.

The little twit considered himself an activist, but in reality just loved attention. He spent more time whispering about drama than doing anything good. Jeff had actually had the nerve to tell Mark, right to his face, that he was a betrayer of gay men everywhere just because he had straight friends. Like you had to belong to a side or something. And that from the VP of the Gay-Straight Alliance. What a joke. What it really amounted to was Jeff’s jealousy over Mark’s friendship with Sam. Mark thought it was petty, and during their last argument, he’d been so fed up he’d accused Jeff of being a bigot against straights, which had ended the short relationship rather quickly. Mark felt his gut twisting over his bitter thoughts until Dan’s quiet words brought him back.

“Yeah, I can see that. It’s too bad though, that you’re letting them keep you away. A little fun once in a while wouldn’t kill you. And if you had attended any meetings lately, you’d probably have remembered why it’s going to be nearly impossible to find someone to go to the theatre with you.” Dan gave another one of his teachery pauses, where he thought the student should fill in the blanks. But that’s all Mark was coming up with—a blank. His look must have shown that because Dan just sighed. “The Valentine’s Day dance. The

same one that happens every year, that the GSA hosts, and that almost everyone on campus goes to.”

“Oh, damn, I forgot.” Mark knocked his forehead against the archway before he thought better. The stickiness was his first clue that he really was an idiot. “Oh shit.” He pulled back and rubbed at where he knew green paint would be.

Dan chuckled. “Hey, now we match. Seems only fair.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Mark was stopped from saying something inappropriate, like *screw you*—no matter how informal a small college was, you showed respect to your profs—by a freshman girl walking up.

“Professor Dan? Can you help me with something?” She was a little on the skittish side, like a lot of the freshman were until they got used to the atmosphere in the Theatre Department.

“Sure, Carrie, what’s up?” Dan asked. She explained that she’d been sent for boards for the stairs, and Dan directed her on where to find them.

But then, surprising Mark, she turned to him with a big smile. “I heard about your admirer. I think it’s cute. If I hear anything, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Wait, *what?!?*” Mark almost shouted. Heads shot up to look at them so he lowered his voice and gritted out through his teeth, “How did you hear about that?”

“Well... um...” She looked away.

Sure, now she’d gone back to skittish. Maybe he couldn’t blame her, even with his boy-next-door looks he knew he was intimidating when he was angry, but still, he wanted answers. Sam was the only one who knew, and if he’d told anyone, he was dead meat. But... what if it was the admirer himself? It could be a clue.

When she looked like she’d run away scared, he tried to gentle his voice, despite his pulse pounding in his ears. “That was a secret. Who said I had an admirer?”

“Um, Sam Henry. He’s... he’s in British Literature with me, and he was talking about it,” she answered hesitantly. Mark fumed and she finished in a rush. “Oh, but you shouldn’t be mad at him. He was quiet about it, in a way.

Actually, um..." Her face twisted, making her look eight instead of the eighteen she probably was. "He didn't say anything to me, I just kinda overheard. He was talking to this other guy, Grady, like they were trying to figure out who it could be or something. I guess I shouldn't have said anything, huh? But really, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Like I said, I think it's way cute."

"Thanks," Mark bit off and tried to smile. He really did. But right then he wanted to punch his best friend. She left, shooting him a twisted-up smile over her shoulder—half apology, half worried.

"What's this about an admirer? And why are you so pissed about it?"

Mark had forgotten about Dan for a second. Grudgingly, he decided that Dan's opinion on it might not be a horrible thing. After all, his mentor was like a third parent, his boss, and his therapist all rolled into one. "I'm not pissed about that. I wish Sam hadn't said anything, though. God, he's a jackass sometimes." He took a seat on the stool nearby and rubbed at his face. "And it's probably not an admirer. I've just gotten a couple things in the mail that weren't signed and didn't have a return address. It's a little weird, but that's all."

"Like what?"

So he explained about the gifts, and that with how spread out they were, it hadn't even occurred to him it could be an admirer until he got the cookies and told Sam about it last week.

Dan sat there quietly with a thoughtful expression for so long it made Mark nervous. "What? I should be seriously worried, right? I knew it! Damn."

"What?" Dan shook his head and smiled reassuringly. "No. No, I don't think so at all. There's nothing threatening about any of it, right?"

"No."

"Well, then." Dan nodded once, but still looked thoughtful. "And the cookies were the most recent? Are those the same ones you let me eat last week?"

"Yes, but I thought they were from my mom when I gave you some. Sorry about that, I never thought—"

"No, no, that's fine. And the sketch? Did it look like it was actually from the play, or just someone's interpretation from it? Was it a real drawing or a computerized one? Did you take it out of the frame to check for a signature?"

Dan's head was tilted, and as he asked about the sketch his words were careful, almost like he was talking about a bomb instead of someone's art.

"Yeesss," Mark answered slowly. "It's real, and, yeah, I checked for a signature but there wasn't one. And I have no idea how to tell if it's an interpretation or not. Why?"

"Oh, no reason, just curious." Dan's extreme pretense of innocence was a bit too much, even if it was short-lived before the neutral expression took over.

"I'm calling bullshit. You know something." Mark pinned the professor with a glare.

"No, of course not. If I knew who it was, I'd tell you. I was only thinking. I'm familiar with a lot of students and some of them, like you, I know pretty well, so I was just running through a list of who has artistic talent and bakes." Dan looked around at the paint. "Well." He clapped his hands together. "I need to go clean up. Len is making pot roast, and our nephew has promised a chocolate dessert."

"Your nephew? You haven't mentioned him in a while. How is the little guy liking his new school?" Mark had never met the kid, but knew he'd lived with Len and Dan over the last year. It seemed like a touchy subject with Dan, so Mark hadn't asked for too many details.

"He loves it. Thanks for asking. I wish he'd make some more friends, though." Dan turned to go, stopped, swiveled all the way back—but then just stood there looking thoughtful.

"What?" Mark asked.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing."

"Dan, what? There's obviously something on your mind."

Dan tilted his head in that way again, so Mark waited. "Do you ever get the feeling there's something you should say, but don't know what that something is?"

"Oh, yeah. I do that literally all the time. Just last night when my dad called, I knew there was something about school that I wanted to tell him, but didn't remember until an hour later."

"Yeah, that's what I meant." Dan seemed to be struggling with it, trying to rack his brain probably, and Mark wanted to help.

"Was it something to do with the play? The set? Maybe about class on Monday?"

"Yeah, that's it. Class Monday." Dan perked up with obvious relief. "I was going to tell you we'll be watching a movie."

"Oh, okay. Sounds fun. Why did you want to tell me about it?"

"Well, no reason, really." Dan dipped his head down just enough that Mark could barely see the small smile. "But I'm thinking you'll like the project that goes with it."

"And why's that?"

Dan looked back up at him for a long moment before answering, "Well... sometimes students in college think they have things figured out, including themselves. But there are places they forget to look."

Mark snorted. "Yeah, *suuurrrre*. You go on and keep thinking that. No, wait, you'll be too busy thinking up cryptic professor-like answers to simple questions. You know. To make sure you sound smart."

"Oh, to be twenty again and know everything. *Carpe diem*, kid."

"Shush, or I'll grab the brown brush and turn you into walking art." Mark reached for the other paintbrush, joking of course, and Dan backed away, laughing as he walked out of the room.

Mark watched him go for a second, grabbed another drink of his water and went back to work on the archway. He didn't think too much on Dan's odd answer. All of the pretend, mysterious hints or quotes he gave on a regular basis were just the professor's way of thinking he kept students interested in his classes, trying to pique their curiosity or challenge what they thought. Mark was used to it from Dan.

He smiled as he painted, until he remembered what little Ms. Chatty Cathy, or Carrie, or whatever the hell her name was, had said. It was a hard decision, whether he'd have to figure out a way to pay Sam the revenge he so deserved for opening his big mouth, or to just tear Sam a new one.

"Mark?"

"Yep." He looked over his shoulder at one of the girls from the costume shop.

"I found this outside the door. It has your name on it." She smiled, and set down a paper bag with the handles tied shut.

"Thanks," he said as she walked away, but then looked down at the bag. There were no frills, wrapping paper or bows, but he had a sneaking suspicion it was another gift. He didn't even need to open it to see what was inside.

The handle of an umbrella was sticking out of the top.

When Mark got back to the dorm after his set work—nice and dry, thanks to his new umbrella—it was to find Sam smiling all innocent-like. The feeling of betrayal returned, fast as lightning, and he tore into Sam. He couldn't believe his best friend, the person he trusted most, would blab about him behind his back.

Sam sat quietly while Mark ranted, until he ran out of steam, and plonked down into his desk chair. That's when Sam finally spoke, and using that ever-logical science-brain of his, defused Mark's fury with two simple points.

"I think you're forgetting something here, buddy. When you told me about the anonymous gifts, not once did you say they were supposed to be a secret. Not once," Sam went on, like he was talking to a child or trying to calm a tiger. Which, Mark guessed, wasn't that far off. It was still irritating, though. "And even then, the only person I talked to about it was Grady, one of our best friends and the only other gay man in our group."

"But why even tell him?"

"Because, you doofus, it was the only logical plan. I don't know all the theatre people you see on a daily basis. And not only does Grady know them, he also knows more gay guys on campus than either you or I do. I figured, between me, him, and Carlos, we have everyone you interact with covered."

"Don't I know everyone I interact with?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Obviously, you're too close to it to think logically about clues and watch your back to see who might be watching you. It's like... we're trying to figure out M-Theory, right?"

"That makes no sense at all."

"Sure it does. M-Theory unifies—"

"Oh, shut up." Mark couldn't help but smile. "I don't want to hear how you're going to try to make this relate to string theory."

"Fine. My point is that four minds are better than one, and that way we're much more capable of solving your little mystery."

"I don't think it needs to be solved. It's a waste of brain cells. For all we know, there is no mystery." Mark didn't believe that, of course, but had to try to curb Sam's enthusiasm. He still hadn't told Sam about the umbrella yet, and wasn't sure he wanted to add to his friend's excitement. "And if Grady is the only one you told, how did the chick from your Lit class know all about it?"

Sam's expression changed completely, his nose going all scrunched and his eyes all squinty. Mark almost laughed. "It wasn't my fault that the nosy little freshman overheard. I thought we were alone." Sam seemed to completely forget about Mark's anger and their conversation, and went on to huff about how the chatty freshman, Carrie, had been trying to get Sam's attention for over a month. He wasn't interested, but was running out of ideas on how to shake her without being mean. Especially now that they had a class together. He described her like a squid, clinging, which made Mark smile. Apparently, it was beyond his capabilities to stay mad at Sam for long. By the time they were ready to meet Grady and Carlos to go to the on-campus Open Mic Night, Mark had forgotten all about it until they walked outside.

"Hey, where'd you get the umbrella? It's big enough for two—make room for me under there." Sam nudged in close to get out of the downpour.

"Oh, um, well..." Mark sighed. "It was another gift. I got it today. It wasn't sent this time, though. It was left at the theatre building for me."

"You ass. Why didn't you tell me earlier? And how do you know it's from the same guy?"

"There was a note. It just said, *Here's to keeping you dry*. And it was the same handwriting as before."

"This is weird. An umbrella isn't romantic."

"No, but it's useful." Mark bumped his shoulder against Sam's and laughed, and then quickly changed the topic while they walked. He didn't want to share his theories or tell Sam how just that week Taylor had said he noticed Mark didn't have an umbrella. There was no way it could be Taylor. Unless he was sending the gifts as some mean joke. They could barely stand each other. Of course, there *had* been that smile.

An hour later, they all sat at a table along with Grady's boyfriend, Jason, Carlos's girlfriend, Elizabeth, and two of her friends, Kenzie and Rachel.

Rachel was next to Sam and kept doing that hair flip thing some girls did and batting her eyes at him. Sam was either clueless or not interested. It was rather entertaining to watch.

Open Mic Night was always fun, and Mark usually got up to sing at some point. But he just wasn't feeling it that night. He hadn't planned a song like he usually would have and tried to use that as an excuse, but the girls were egging him on and Carlos wasn't helping.

"What, are you nervous?" Carlos teased. "Is it stage fright?"

"Don't be ridiculous, I don't get nervous. And the day I get stage fright, you all have permission to smack me over the head to knock some sense into me. I'm just not in the mood for it."

"Oh, wow. Never thought I'd hear that one. Mark Giorgetti isn't going to do everything he can to try and be the center of attention?" They all turned at the snooty, familiar voice.

"Jeff." Mark nodded at his ex-boyfriend before turning back around, but that was the only acknowledgment he'd give. Ignoring Jeff was always best.

"I'm serious. The attention whore that you are, I'm surprised you're not dancing on tables. What's really hilarious, though, is that you think you're some big man on campus. But the only time that's true is in that tiny little theatre group. No one else on campus even knows who you are."

"Jeff, just go away," Grady growled. All the guys looked like they were gnashing their teeth and the girls had varying expressions of confusion.

"Oh, don't be like that, Grady. I'm not saying anything we don't all—"

"He said to go away. And I'm adding that you should shut the hell up." That voice was familiar too, but it was the last one he'd expect to defend him. Mark turned to find Taylor there, standing not too close but kind of looming over Jeff.

Jeff's eyes were big, but he wasn't backing down. "I never—"

"What you've never done is learn how to be a decent human being. Mark didn't do anything to deserve the way you harass him and talk shit. And you're the one with the big-man complex that's only in his head. So go find some friends—or at least people that can actually stand you—and leave the rest of us alone."

Mark watched as Jeff stomped away. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't fuckin' *believe* it. "I... um..." Taylor was shaking his head and smiling, like he'd found humor in the confrontation. Maybe he had. "Um, Taylor? Why'd you do that?"

"That guy's an ass. He goes around like that all the time, and it pisses me off."

"But why would you defend *me*? I thought you didn't like me."

Taylor cocked his head to the side. "I never said that. Back when you were dating that weasel, I didn't really like you. But you can't blame me for that. If you picked a guy like him for a boyfriend, you had to have been either just like him or a really stupid judge of character."

"Gee, thanks," Mark muttered. Sam snickered beside him, and even Grady looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"Naw, I mean that's what I thought then. You seem like you're okay." Taylor winked at Mark. "Have a nice night, all."

Mark swiveled back to the table. "What the hell just happened?"

Grady finally let a little laugh go, more of a snort, and the rest of the table followed. Laughter, it seemed, was the theme for the night, and time flew. Mark was heading for a last trip to the bathroom before leaving when he tripped and fell into someone.

"*Ugh*, damn. Sorr—" He looked up into warm green eyes. Landon's eyes. "Sorry."

The corners of Landon's mouth curved into an almost smile. "Yeah. Hi."

They stood like that, looking at each other and not moving. The standoff was broken when Landon fidgeted and looked down. Mark did too, and saw he still had his hands on Landon's chest, where they'd landed when he tried to catch himself. Damn, that felt nice.

"Sorry." Mark dropped his arms to his sides and stepped back. "We really should stop meeting like this."

The little bit of a smile that was there disappeared. "I suppose." Mark could barely hear him over the noise of chatter and music. Landon looked down again and to the side, and Mark worried he'd said something wrong.

"I didn't mean it like that. I mean, we could still meet, just not by physically running into each other, you know?" Landon looked up, their eyes met, and

Mark smiled. "I mean, much more of this and I'm going to get the reputation of a klutz."

That curve was back for a second before Landon bit the bottom corner of his lip, like he was trying to stop the inevitable smile from coming out. "Much more of this and people will think you're literally falling for me."

Hot damn. Landon was adorable when he flirted. Mark's smile grew but Landon's didn't. His mouth dropped and even though the lighting wasn't good, Mark could see a blush bloom fast.

"Did I really just say that? I didn't... I mean... that wasn't a come-on. I was just kidding."

"Oh." *Damn, he's straight.* That explained why he looked on the extreme side of uncomfortable. "Well, no worries then, because it didn't sound like a come-on. But it *was* funny."

"Good. Um, I should..." Landon gestured towards the front exit and Mark remembered he'd been on his way to the bathroom.

"Yeah. Me too." He started to go but stopped. "Hey, I'm Mark by the way." He held out a hand.

Landon squinted at him. "I know. We're in class together."

"Obviously. But we've never officially met, so..."

That cute lip-bite was back. "Landon Hayes. Nice to *officially* meet you." Landon took his hand to shake and Mark didn't let his mind go to places it shouldn't, like how nice Landon's hand felt, warm and firm. But then Landon's hand lingered before he pulled away slowly, which really confused Mark. *Is he or isn't he?*

Mark almost did something really dumb, like blurt out his question, but was saved when Landon walked away. "See ya," Mark called after him. *Wow, either any bit of gaydar I have is really screwy or that boy gives off strange vibes.* He thought about the other vibes he'd gotten from Landon, and admitted there was a good chance he was simply shitty at reading people.

He watched Landon walk away and took note of the burnt-red knit cap he was wearing. Then his eyes slid lower, and lower. It was impossible not to stare at the very fine ass in those jeans. Now that was a view Mark could get used to. *Nice.*

Down boy. On hiatus. Quit looking, because you're on hiatus. And he's probably straight. And he's a little odd and maybe rude. And you need to quit staring because you really have to pee.

Mark laughed at his own thoughts as he finally made his way back to the bathroom.

Mark expected Sam to hound him about the anonymous gifts, but the topic wasn't brought up at all for the rest of the weekend. He should have known the reprieve was too good to be true.

Monday arrived the way each one did, first with Sam's snoring—which Mark had gotten used to last year and barely noticed anymore—and then with breakfast at the cafeteria with Sam, Grady, and Carlos. Everything was normal until Sam ambushed him about the whole secret admirer thing right in front of Grady and Carlos while they were eating. Yes, Sam had already mentioned he thought it was necessary for their *investigation* to let Carlos in on it, and Mark had to admit, once Grady knew, it would be pretty shitty to leave Carlos out, but did Sam really have to bring it up right there? In the cafeteria, where anyone could hear?

So they'd sat around, discussing Mark's incoming mail like it was the only fascinating thing that had happened all year. It seemed to Mark that his three friends found an awful lot to conjecture about considering they had almost nothing to go on.

"Why an umbrella?" Carlos asked.

"It was raining." Grady's guess was obvious and came with a shrug.

"Yes, but for all the mystery man knew, Mark could have already had an umbrella. And wouldn't he need to buy it ahead of time? We don't carry nice big ones like that at the campus store. I'm pretty sure none of the little shops in town would have them either—not this time of year," Sam offered, like he was some expert on umbrellas.

"Well, actually—" Mark hesitated. "When it was raining earlier in the week, someone in one of my classes mentioned I looked drenched to the bone and offered to lend me his umbrella."

Sam smacked him on the shoulder. "What the fuck, Mark? Why didn't you bring this up before? It's gotta be him."

“No. It can’t be.” Although, Mark’s previous argument against it being Taylor didn’t hold as much weight now that he knew Taylor didn’t hate him. “At least, I really don’t think so. For one, I don’t think he has any artistic ability, and whoever drew that sketch does.”

“He could have asked a friend to do it. Aren’t you going to tell us who it is?” Grady leaned in close.

“Oh, hell no. I don’t trust you monkeys with that kind of information. You’d try to be all sneaky, asking him questions for your *investigation*, and somehow or another I’d wind up looking like an ass.”

“Hey, excuse me? We would *not* do that!” Sam protested.

Mark raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, fine. But it doesn’t matter. That guy mentioned it, but everyone in the class heard, and that doesn’t mean anything. I spent three days last week complaining about the cold rain, and I’m sure dozens of others saw me running around getting wet.”

Sam huffed and they went on, almost like Mark wasn’t part of the conversation or his opinion didn’t matter. Not that he gave them much of one. By the end of breakfast, he couldn’t wait to get out of there, and wasn’t all that surprised to see he barely had enough time to grab his bag from his room before heading to class.

He got there with a few minutes to spare and sat in the same seat he’d taken last week. He saw Dan at his desk, looking absorbed as he searched for something in a desk drawer. Natalie walked in, came immediately over to Mark, and settled beside him. He filled her in on the set progress and she caught him up on the drama currently brewing in the theatre department. There was always drama in the theatre department, and he’d heard part of it already this weekend, but he enjoyed listening to the way she told the stories, so rushed and animated.

Still, she couldn’t hold all of his attention because his eyes kept flicking to the back of the room. Landon was in the last row, one seat over from last week, with his nose buried in a book. His clothes were dark again, all earth tones, and his cap was dark green and pulled low. The earbuds completed the antisocial look. Mark wondered briefly what kind of music the guy was listening to. He didn’t look like someone who would like country or pop music. Would it be rock? Grunge? Rap? But then Mark snorted, because the obvious answer was that no matter what genre of music it was, it was probably all indie bands. That would suit Landon.

Natalie cleared her throat and narrowed her eyes, and Mark realized he hadn't heard a word she'd said. He started to apologize, but Dan walked to the front of the class to get their attention.

When everyone quieted immediately, Dan smiled and began. "We've all heard people say that life mimics art, or that art mimics life. And it *is* both. Artists, whether painters, musicians or playwrights, take their inspiration from life. Yes, even sci-fi. But what does art do to society? What does it tell us about what roles are and aren't acceptable to take? And I'm not talking about which acting roles you should go for." Dan paused, probably expecting a chuckle, but there was silence. "But in life. In the past, what part has it taken in the role a woman takes, versus the role she feels she *should* take? You can't tell me there was a mother alive who watched *Leave it to Beaver* in the fifties, and no matter how good of a mom she was, didn't feel like a failure in comparison. And what has it told children, who watch and learn what they should or shouldn't be because of a movie they saw or their favorite television show?"

A girl, Masa, cut in, "But that's TV, not theatre."

"Well, we have to consider theatre in all its forms. The stage, the cinema, or television. Because it's all art." Dan went on. "And since the invention of television, it has even more impact. What impact do you think it's had on each generation over sexuality? Or on gender in general? All of these are the reasons for the movie today, *Stage Beauty*, and your first project of the class, which I'll assign later." Before anyone could ask about that, he walked to the back of the room and picked up the remote. "Mark, would you mind getting the lights?"

Mark got up and turned off the overhead lighting as the screen began to glow. There was just enough light to see his way back to his chair. The movie was already cued past the beginning credits, and Mark shifted to get comfortable.

The first glimpse of costumes tipped Mark off that it was a historical period piece, and he was a little disappointed. Even though he enjoyed some plays set in earlier eras, any movie set before the 1930s wasn't on his favorites list. But then he recognized Billy Crudup. Damn, that man was hot in his younger years. The first time Mark had noticed the actor was in *Inventing the Abbotts*. Mark had been only fifteen when he saw it, and was instantly attracted to that dark hair and tight body. Since then, he'd watched other movies the actor had parts in, and although Mark greatly admired his acting skills, had never felt that same attraction.

In this one Billy Crudup was a stage actor, like Mark, but unlike Mark, in the movie Billy Crudup exclusively played a woman's role. Or, more accurately, the role of a man pretending to be a woman. The first glimpse Mark had of him in a dress—ruffles, over-the-top makeup and all—Mark didn't recognize him.

But as the movie went on, Mark was enthralled. Spellbound by the way he moved, the way he spoke. At no time did Mark forget that it was a man, a man Mark usually viewed as the epitome of masculinity, because with each feminine gesture the contrast only heightened Mark's awareness. He liked it. A lot.

A few times he squirmed in his seat, and Natalie nudged him. "Stay awake," she whispered, so off base it was laughable. He wasn't about to correct her.

As confusing as his reaction to the delectable actor in a corset was, he didn't want to think about it now. If anything, he didn't want to risk missing a scene with Billy in it. It wasn't until the second time Natalie nudged him that he noticed how heavy his breathing had gotten and how unbelievably turned on he was. *Oh God*. He peeked around at the others, panicked someone would notice, but the room was dark and everyone else was watching the movie. Nobody paid him any attention except for Natalie, and that was only because she thought his heavy breathing was snoring.

He adjusted in his seat as discreetly as possible. *Damn, damn, damn*. He was completely hard and his skin felt hot. *This doesn't make sense*. He'd never been attracted to women, so he knew that wasn't it. And he'd seen guys in drag before and that hadn't done anything for him. What was different about this? And why today, in front of an entire class?

The movie was close to wrapping up and panic fueled him. The best course of action in situations like this—like when he had to share the shower room with Tim Derringer after gym class in high school—was to think of something else. Anything else. He ignored the screen and focused on the poster by the door he could somewhat see in the dim light.

Think about sports.

Think about the paper due in Educational Technology later today.

Or, better yet, think about Mom. No man could think about his mother and still be turned on.

Before much could help him or he even had a chance to focus, the lights came up and Dan walked to the front of the class. *Oh, no. No, no, no*. Mark

sank lower in his seat. He knew he was going to be stuck there, squirming and embarrassed, while Dan brought up whatever point he wanted them to learn from the movie. And then the class would be expected to discuss it for another twenty minutes. What was Mark going to say? What would his enlightened contribution be? That apparently he got wood from seventeenth-century corsets? Or maybe something along the lines of how Billy Crudup's skirt was so nice and hooped in that one scene, that all Mark could think about was how perfectly someone could fit under it without anyone knowing, and imagining what was underneath.

Mark fidgeted, and his pulse pounded. He felt exposed. Raw. But instead of being put on the spot, Mark was surprised by Dan's announcement that his torture wouldn't be prolonged any further.

"We'll have a discussion on the movie when we get together on Friday and go over the project then, but something's come up so we'll be wrapping up early today."

That was it. Dan moved towards his desk and other students starting packing their things. Mark grabbed his bag and bolted for the door.

"Mark, wait up." Natalie called.

"Later. I gotta go." He didn't even turn around, just kept his bag in front of him, hoping nobody noticed his bulge, and headed outside without bothering with his coat. For once, the cold air was beyond welcome relief. The only comfort he had was that even if someone did notice, it wasn't like they would know why he was in this state. Hell, *he* didn't understand why.

Chapter 3

“I’ll just say, watching something that intimate in a room full of strangers gives you a weird feeling, you know?”

Mark’s head snapped up. “Huh?” His mind had been drifting, like it had been on and off for days, but Ron’s words sounded too much like his own thoughts.

Across the cafeteria table, Ron’s nose crinkled. “What? Don’t tell me you’d be one of the guys telling everyone to keep the porn on?”

“Porn? No.” Mark shook his head. “I wasn’t listening. What are you guys talking about?”

Carlos piped in. “He was at a party last weekend, and as a prank, someone put porn on the flat screen. It took, like, twenty minutes for people to notice. Then when they did, whoever put the DVD in had taped the player shut.”

“Yeah, like some idiot. I mean, all you guys had to do was turn the screen off,” Sam pointed out.

“Maybe, except people were drinking and didn’t think of that right away,” Ron admitted and snickered. “Then, like I said, there were a bunch of guys yelling that they should just leave it on. You should have seen the looks some of the girls were giving them. I’m sorry, I like sex as much as the next guy, but having porn playing in the background when...”

Mark tuned out again. Porn. Yeah, that was close to how the movie during class on Monday felt, but not quite. Intimate, though, yeah that word fit a little too well. He still couldn’t put his finger on why. But did the why really matter?

He already knew he’d thought Billy Crudup was hot, so that part of the equation was easy. The muscular type usually caught his eye. Not bulky, but toned and sleek. But who’s to say his tastes couldn’t change or expand? He’d thought about it and decided he would be okay with that. He’d always believed in “to each their own” and all that.

So, over the last two days he’d looked at attractive guys on campus and pictured each of them in women’s clothes. Corsets, miniskirts, you name it. The only thing it did for him was give him a few chuckles. Especially when he imagined Tommy Johnson, the lineman on their football team who probably

weighed in around three-fifty, and was a total asshole, in a pink halter top and short shorts.

“Earth to Mark.”

“What?” He turned to Sam who had knit brows and worried eyes. “Sorry. Zoning again.”

“Yeah, you’ve been doing that a lot, buddy.” Sam looked around and lowered his voice so the other guys at the table wouldn’t hear. “Everything okay? You’re not still pissed at me for telling the guys about your admirer, are you?”

“No, I wasn’t even thinking about that.”

“Well.” Sam tilted his head towards the exit doors. “Is one of those guys the reason for your distraction?”

Before Mark could ask the obvious question, Ron interrupted. “Well, I’ll catch you guys later.” He stood and grabbed his tray.

“Yeah, I’m meeting Elizabeth to study,” Carlos added and followed Ron out.

Sam gave them a little salute as a good-bye and turned to Mark. “Well?”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” Mark admitted.

“Isaac and his friend. You were staring at their table.”

Mark looked straight forward and saw Landon sitting next to a short blond kid who was talking animatedly about something, waving his arms and laughing. Landon sat and ate, not saying anything but smiling at his friend. Seeing Landon smile like that, Mark had to admit he was more than just a little good-looking. Matter of fact, he looked downright gorgeous today. There wasn’t anything special, except... *Oh, wow*. Landon wasn’t wearing a hat. And Mark finally had one little mystery solved. Reddish-brown hair was cut short and spiked up in the front. *Cute*.

“You’re staring again. And grinning. Something you want to tell me?”

“Oh, um, no. And I wasn’t staring the first time. Or at least I wasn’t meaning to. They just happened to be in my line of vision. What did you say that guy’s name is?”

“You mean Isaac? The one who talks a mile a minute?”

Mark laughed. "Yeah, it does look like he does that. How do you know him?"

"He's Tina's brother, so I met him a couple times when she and I dated last year. He's cool and all, but a bit on the derpy side. And he seriously never shuts up. I think it turns a lot of people off, so I'm glad to see he's found a friend who will put up with him. So, who's the other guy and how do you know him? And don't lie to me—meaning to stare or not, the way you were looking at him it's obvious you know him. Or just really, *really* want to." Sam did that ridiculous eyebrow wiggle that never looked right on him.

"Christ, Sam, you should really never do that. Ever. Especially, if you ever want a date. And it's not like that. He's in a class with me, that's all. And we've run into each other a few times." Mark couldn't help but smile at that. "I don't really know him other than his name is Landon and he's quiet." Looking at him now though, Mark had to, once again, seriously readjust his first impressions. The antisocial vibe was nowhere to be seen, and instead of brooding, he looked borderline adorable.

"Whatever you say, man. Keep drooling while you're at it. Just a heads-up though. I have no idea about this Landon guy, but I know that Isaac's straight, so don't go getting any hopes up until you find out which way Landon swings."

"I'm not getting hopes. I'm on hiatus. Besides, you're straight and I'm not. Sexuality doesn't always work like gravitational pull." He smiled, proud of himself for that one.

Sam cocked his head, mouthing, *Gravitational pull*. "Oh, I get it. So humor. Much funny... Wow."

Mark picked up a fry covered in ketchup, threatening to throw it. "Shut it, Mr. Sarcasm."

"Well, seriously. You're such a dork. Just be careful."

"I will," Mark sighed. "Besides, you're probably right. He didn't seem to mind me touching him at all, but..." He purposely trailed off and waited for Sam's reaction.

"Touching? Whoa, wait up here. Touching? That doesn't sound like hiatus territory."

Perfect. Mark laughed. "Not fun touching. Although... I did get to feel up a mighty fine chest. When I said we've ran into each other, I meant literally. I fell and he caught me, that's all. I got mixed signals, but it doesn't matter."

A *ding* sounded and Sam grabbed for his phone. "Nope, not mine. Must be yours."

Mark reached into his jacket to get his phone and swiped the screen. There was a new email from the school post office. He wasn't expecting anything, so that meant...

"What is it?" Sam asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just a text from my mom saying 'hi'. You know how she is with all the cutesy messages." The lie was out of Mark's mouth before he knew he was going to say it, and he had no clue why. Maybe he was more irritated with Sam for telling than he'd realized.

"Yeah. She's sweet. Wish my mom had that typical mom thing. Instead, I get a postcard from wherever the hell she's traveling, and stress every time a couple months passes with no word." Sam frowned as he picked up his tray and stood.

"Hey, she's an international photojournalist. It's her job."

"You don't have to tell me, I'm the one that had to live with her. Anyway, I gotta run. I've got class in twenty."

As soon as Sam was gone, Mark opened his email. Sure enough, there was a package waiting to be picked up.

Hmmm. Am I excited about this, or scared as hell? The pulse-pounding, butterflies-doing-the-cha-cha-in-his-stomach feeling wasn't clear enough to tell.

Seeing as the post office was right upstairs, he couldn't think of any excuse to put it off. Other than going over to say "hi" to Landon, just so he could say they'd talked at least once where Mark hadn't fallen like an idiot. But what would he say? The only topic that came to mind was the movie they'd watched, and Mark would rather fall on his head than discuss that. So, he cleared his table and took a left outside the cafeteria to go upstairs.

There was someone different at the window this time, a sophomore guy that Mark sort of knew. Hoping his cheeks weren't turning red, he showed his student ID and was handed a box. There was no return address on it, just like the others, and it was a local postmark again. It was wider and longer than the package of cookies, but much flatter. It weighed almost nothing, which for some odd reason made him more nervous.

What could it be?

Mark didn't want to open it there but it didn't fit in his bag, so he zipped it up inside his jacket before heading outside. The whole way to the dorm, his mind raced with possibilities. The other gifts were sent spread out over a month, but this was the third gift in a matter of days. Didn't they say that stalkers became more and more obsessed as time went on? Like a serial killer starting with one kill a year, then once a month, until they're on a rampage.

Oh God. I really am a drama queen if I'm jumping from cookies and umbrellas to serial killers.

Walking through the common room, he said hi to a few people he knew, but used studying as an excuse to get away quickly. Once inside his room, he made sure the door locked behind him and placed the package—carefully, because you never knew what could be inside—on his bed. He took off his jacket and shoes, and even took the time to empty his bag before sitting on Sam's bed to stare at the box.

"Okay, man, you can do this. It's not going to blow up, and nothing's going to jump out at you," he muttered to himself.

Mark took the edge of his scissors to the tape and lifted the lid. There was a lot of tissue paper and a bit of material showing. With two fingers he lifted up the material and...

"What the *hell!*" He let go and white lace panties fell to the floor. "Oh shit! I was right. I was *right* and Sam can go screw himself." Mark dropped onto his bed and flopped back. "Oh, for fuck's sake. There's some psycho chick out there sending me her underwear. This is seriously disturbing."

After he'd finished his mini freak-out, he sat back up. He needed to see what the note said and if it gave him any clues. But pulling back the tissue paper, he didn't find any note. What he found was a pair of pink stockings still in the packaging. "Seriously?" He picked them up, his eyes growing wider as he took in the hot pink pinstripes and frilly little bow. "And what the hell am I supposed to do with these? Save them for her for when she decides I'm hers for the keeping? *That's* not going to happen."

But then he read the words at the top of the package. And then read it again. Yes, he wasn't mistaken; it very clearly stated that they were stockings made for *men*. Mark picked up the underwear, still gingerly but slightly less disturbed, and looked them over. They may have not been in packaging, but the

tag was still on, and it read men's size medium. "Holy shit!" he whispered fiercely.

He felt the lace ruffles, running the back of his fingers over the softness before he caught himself and dropped them back on the bed. Who would send him lace underwear? Hell, what kind of a freak sent underwear to anyone? His heart rate slowed down as he thought about it. So far, the gifts hadn't been sexual. But these were. Or intimate, at the least. And the others had all been personal—the music, the sketch and the cookies really were all personalized, even if he'd protested when Sam suggested it. So how was women's underwear—no, men's that looked like women's, he corrected himself—personal to him?

Then he remembered. The movie... his reaction... getting more turned on than he'd ever been without a naked man in the room. And all because he saw a sexy muscular man dressed in women's clothes.

Oh, no. No one had seen him. No one could know. Could they? Fuck. Someone had to have noticed. It was the only thing that made sense.

If that was the case, at least that narrowed down the possibilities for his secret admirer. Between this and the umbrella, it had to be someone from his Theatre and Society class, right? But who? There were eighteen students in the class, many of them he knew from other theatre classes or working in the theatre. There were only five or six who weren't in the normal theatre group. That didn't mean anything, though.

Thinking back, he remembered that Clara had been upset last year when she'd found out he was gay because she'd had a crush on him. But would a girl really send him men's underwear that was made to look feminine? It made more sense for them to come from a guy. And a gay guy at that—obviously. He thought of Max trying to flirt—trying and failing because that was back when Mark was with Jeff—but while Max was a theatre major, he wasn't in the class.

They felt so nice. Looking down, he saw that while he'd been thinking he'd picked the underwear back up, softly touching the white lace. Holding them in both hands now, he ran his thumb over the texture and wondered. What would they feel like on? He held them up and cocked his head, scrutinizing them. They looked like they'd fit.

Crazy or not, he thought, *Screw it.* He double-checked that his door was locked and got undressed. By the time he was pulling down his boxer briefs, his hands were trembling. He couldn't believe he was doing this, but...

Well, why wouldn't he? It wasn't like wearing lace was the wildest thing he'd ever done. Besides, all they were was underwear made out of a different material than what he was used to. He kept telling himself that until he saw the lace slide up his legs. Then he slowed down for no reason he knew of. Once they were all the way on, he held his breath and turned towards the full-length mirror hanging on the wall by the door.

"Oh," he whispered and ran his palm over his hip. "Oh, myyyy."

A low, quiet, stuttered laugh filled the room. Perhaps it was a little on the hysterical side, but nonetheless filled with excitement. They were snug, like they were made for him, and soft. Mark turned to get a view of the back. *They looked fucking amazing.*

And if the underwear felt that great, what about the tights? Or stockings? Or whatever the hell you were supposed to call them. He glanced at the bed and the package, then back at the mirror. Then back at the package. Grabbing the scissors again, he cut along the top of the plastic, careful not to ruin the contents. He pulled them out, unfolded them from around some weird cardboard holder, and ran one through his fist. They were very silky and made a nice little *whoosh* sound.

Mark sat on the edge of the bed and brought a leg up, held the top of one stocking and stopped. He couldn't just shove a foot in. They were like silk and delicate. *Damn, how do you even put them on?* This was probably one of those things his mom taught his sisters how to do, but he laughed imagining his mom having the same talk with him. *Okay, so think.*

There was an image from somewhere in his early memories of seeing his mom do this, and he thought he remembered her putting a hand in first. So, he slid his hand in all the way down to the end, feeling the elastic pull against his fingers, but realized quickly that he had no clue why his mom did that. How would that possibly help at all? Was he really going to have to resort to looking it up online? Hell, no.

Logically, slow was the way to go. And that's how he managed it from there, but the damn things kept snagging on his skin. Even though there was still a long bit of material hanging off his foot, he was proud that he'd gotten it, inch by slow inch, up to his calf. He reached to start on that extra bit, slid off the edge of the bed and landed on his ass.

Dammit.

This was stupid. He was being outsmarted by a simple sock. That's when the solution came to him. It was so easy that he questioned if he was wasting his parents' hard-earned money on college if he was so dense that he hadn't thought of it right off the bat. It was like dress socks, only longer—just roll them up.

Deciding it was safer to stay on the floor, he took the half-on stocking off and rolled the edges. He started at the toe and worked ever so slowly up. They still snagged on his skin, but nothing ripped, so the first stocking was a win. After that, the second was a breeze.

Mark stood and looked at his reflection. They were a little naughty, a little fun and silly, but he thought they were also a whole hell of a lot sexy. He smiled when he saw only one bow and turned to find the other one was on the side. The top was loose enough to adjust a little, but he couldn't get the bow all the way to the front. Oh well, lesson learned for next time—don't twist the stockings.

The panties were just see-through enough that he noticed a dark pink line running down the front that didn't seem to fit. He dug under the leg opening and found a strap. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what they were for, and he hooked them to the top of the stockings.

"Oh, fuck, yes," he whispered as he admired the effect. He liked those. He liked them a lot.

Mark was getting hard as he watched himself, his hands roaming slowly over the fabric and his skin. Jutting his right hip forward just a little made the light catch in a perfect way so he could see through the almost sheer material. His thick cock gave a shadow and sent a new thrill through him. He was reaching to adjust himself and, yes, play a little, when he heard a noise by his door.

There was the sound of keys, a scraping, and a click. "*Shit.*" Mark dove for his bed and under his covers. He managed to get the blanket barely over himself, bounced off the bed and rolled onto the floor. "Owww. Fuck, ow, ow, ow."

"What? Um... Mark?" Sam was laughing at him. "What are you doing?"

Mark turned his head and glared. "What the hell, Sam, you know our rules. Knock!"

"I'm sorry. I thought you were working." Sam looked him over and grinned. "And you didn't answer me."

Mark's heart was still racing and didn't show any signs of slowing. He looked himself over too, just to make sure nothing was showing that shouldn't be, and pulled the blanket tighter around his waist. "What does it look like? I'm adding to my collection of bruises by falling on the floor for the second time in ten minutes." *And the fourth time this week*, he added in his head. *God, this was becoming a problem.*

"Twice, huh? In *ten minutes*? Wow, you've got some stamina." Sam's little knowing smirk made it more than obvious what he thought Mark was doing. Not that he was far off.

"Oh, shut the hell up and get out. Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"I was. It's done. But no worries. I'm meeting up with my lab partner—just came by for a book." Sam grabbed a textbook off the top of his desk, took another quick look at Mark and headed for the door. "The room is all yours to fall on the floor as often as you want."

"Smartass."

"Yeah, that's why you love me." He opened the door and Mark was just about to sigh with relief when Sam stopped and turned around. "Um, by the way, those would look a lot better if you shaved your legs."

"Huh? How did you...?" Mark sputtered, his mind racing and his skin burning with embarrassment.

Sam nodded to Mark's leg. "Your knee is sticking out. Of course, I also got an eyeful as you were rolling off the bed. I've gotta say, they look mighty nice on you." Sam smiled and left without giving Mark a chance to reply. Or maybe he'd given Mark plenty of time and Mark was too shocked to do anything but a guppy impression.

"Did that really just happen?" *Yes. Yes, it did. Oh, holy shit.*

Mark untangled from the blanket and stood, a little shaky but the panic was fading fast. Sam's smile at the end helped. It wasn't teasing or cruel, because that just wasn't Sam. He took another look in the mirror and burst out laughing.

He hadn't noticed it before, probably because he hadn't looked for it, but his dark leg hair stood out like a sore thumb under the sheer material, and in some places it even poked through the fabric. Sam was right, if he wanted to pull these off he'd need to shave. But did he want to pull them off? He'd only been trying them on for kicks, right?

It was something he'd have to think about, but he wasn't planning on any drastic measures yet. He fingered one of the ruffles and really looked at himself. Mark imagined wearing this under his jeans while walking around campus and his pulse jumped. He might not know what that meant, but he was okay with not having it all figured out that very second.

One thing this did mean was that whoever was sending these things to Mark had to be paying closer attention than he'd realized.

Chapter 4

“For other projects I’ll let you pick a partner, but since some of you don’t know each other and, quite frankly, I’m always interested to see the results when I pick at random, I’m going to assign partners.”

Everyone was quiet, but Mark saw heads swiveling to nod at each other as Dan picked names off a list. It wasn’t a big class, and as the list got close to the end, Mark hadn’t heard his name yet and he was pretty sure the only one left was...

“Mr. Hayes,” Dan finished Mark’s thought while he ran a finger down the page. Mark didn’t know why he was bothering to search. He had to know Mark was the only one left, didn’t he? “You’re with... Mark Giorgetti.”

There was something about how casual Dan sounded that made Mark positive the professor’s choices were anything but. He didn’t even know what the project was yet, and was already dreading it.

“So, what’s the project?” Natalie asked before Mark had the chance.

“It’s an easy one, Nat. I want you and your partner to pick either a play to experience—by viewing it or reading it—or a movie. Make up a list of questions to ask the person about the story and what impact it may or may not have on people as a society. I want you to brainstorm with each other, be creative, because some messages may be harder to find than others. I once had a student who picked the cartoon *Toy Story*, and he came up with more insight than another student who had gone to see *Hair*. So be creative and have fun with it. After you’re finished discussing, write a summary of what you’ve found. Bare minimum is five hundred words, but other than that, it’s up to you.”

“So I can pick—” Taylor started.

“No porn.” Dan interrupted, glaring and smiling at Taylor at the same time. “It has to be something a general audience would see.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.” Taylor’s smirk said otherwise. “I was going to ask if I can go see, like, *Anchorman 2* or something like that.”

“Yeah, that will be fine. As long as you collaborate with your partner. Why don’t you all find seats together and I’ll give you fifteen minutes to discuss and

make plans before I force you to listen to me lecture for the next thirty minutes.”

Mark turned in his seat to better see Landon where he was sitting, yet again, in the very back. The guy didn't look like he was going to move or even acknowledge Mark, hunched down in his seat the way he was, but then he shot a quick glance Mark's way and started to pick up his stuff. He didn't look like a happy camper. Was he disappointed to be stuck with Mark, or did he begrudge having to move?

Mark hated sitting in back, but there was something in that uncomfortable glance that made him snatch his bag and go up the few wide steps before Landon could finish standing.

“Hey,” Mark said, and was relieved when Landon looked surprised but pleased to see Mark standing next to him in the back. It was a full smile this time and, *oh holy hell*, what that smile did to Mark now that he was up close. Mark decided right then and there that if something as simple as moving to the back got him a sweet smile like that, he would do just about anything to keep them coming. But for now, he figured he should probably just sit down instead of standing there like an idiot. “See, I made it all the way up the stairs and I didn't fall even once. Aren't you proud of me?” he asked as he moved the seat next to Landon so it was angled to face him.

“Um, yeah.” Landon put his bag back down and took out a notebook and pencil. “Most people learn to walk at one, but twenty is good too. Very proud.” His tone was dry, and his eyes showed mischief.

Mark chuckled. “Ha ha, funny guy. I'll have you know I was a very accomplished walker until the day I met you. Then one look at you and there I was, tripping all over myself.” *Uh-oh. No flirting with the maybe-straight boy. You remember what happened the last time and—*Yep, there it was. Landon broke eye contact, opened a notebook and fiddled with his pencil while Mark tried to figure out how to apologize without sticking his foot in his mouth. *Dammit.* “I, um...”

“So,” Landon interrupted. “Have any idea on what we should see? Or would you prefer to read a play?” Landon asked and glanced up briefly through his lashes. Mark's pulse skittered while something in his chest yanked, quick and sharp and warm. Not only did Landon not look upset, but that sweet smile was amplified. The way Landon was trying to hide it was the most adorable—and at the same time *sexy*—thing Mark had ever seen.

In his mind, he did a little happy dance as he answered. "No, going to see one sounds better to me. I have to do so much reading for my other classes right now that my eyes are killing me. What about you? Movie or play?"

"I like both." Landon looked down at his notebook to doodle while he spoke. "Being a theatre person, I'm guessing you'd prefer a play, but I don't know if there are many plays running right now to choose from. At least not ones close by. I guess we could go online and check."

As lost in Landon's voice as he was—was there a hint of someplace southern in it? Mark was a sucker for a southern accent—it took Mark a second to make the connection. "You know I'm a theatre person?" he asked.

"Yeah, most of the people in this class are. It's required for a theatre major, right?"

"Oh. Yep. But I'm in the education program. Theatre minor," Mark replied, distracted by the way Landon's fingers moved as he scribbled out little cartoons along the edge of his paper. "You draw?"

"A little. Not much." Landon's gaze flickered up to Mark. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason." Then the other shoe fell into place and Mark looked over his shoulder at Dan. Did he do this on purpose? Dan knew Mark had tickets and no one to go with him, but... No, Dan knew better. He wouldn't set Mark up like that. "I know of a play, but," he stopped and considered the intelligence of what he was about to suggest. "I, um..." Why was he nervous?

Landon looked up again, right into Mark's eyes this time, and stayed there. "Yes?"

The intensity of that bright green had Mark swallowing before he answered. "I already have tickets, but I'm not sure you'll want to go. You see, they're for tomorrow night. You know, Valentine's. And you, um, probably have a date. Or plans."

"No date. Why do you have tickets? Who were you going to take?" Landon winced at the end, and then rushed on. "None of my business. Sorry. I don't really care, you know, just wanted to make sure I wasn't stealing your boyfriend's ticket or something. Don't need some guy pissed at me for going out with you on a romantic night." He sucked in a hiss of a breath, winced, and kept babbling. "I didn't mean *going out with you*, going out with you. Just that we'd both be there. Not that it would be romantic. I mean, because it's

Valentine's. Valentine's is supposed to be romantic. But this would just be—" Landon clamped his mouth and eyes shut and buried his face in his hands. "This is why I should never, ever, talk." The words were muttered, but Mark understood them just fine.

And he was having a hell of a time not laughing at the absolute cuteness that was Landon Hayes. "Oh, quite the contrary. I think it's why you should talk more." Yeah, laughing wouldn't be good. He highly doubted Landon would appreciate that right now, especially since he could see red creeping onto the strip of skin visible around Landon's hands.

"So I can sound like a babbling buffoon? No thanks."

"No, because at first I thought you were a snob or a jackass, and you have no idea how relieved I am to be wrong."

Landon's hands dropped. "You think I'm a..." He sat back in his seat, hurt flashing across his face before he hid it and that vibe, the one Mark really didn't like, floated off Landon like steam. "Oh."

"No!" Mark hadn't meant to say that so loud. The room went silent and he guessed he'd caught everyone's attention, but he didn't really care. "Landon, I was kidding. I swear. Do you always take everything so literally?" Landon squirmed and looked away but didn't answer, so Mark rushed on. "Either way is fine by me. Just the first of many interesting personality traits I get to learn about you. That, and I'm sure it will help greatly in our friendship."

"Friendship, huh?" The indifferent vibe went down a notch, but Mark hadn't been gifted with the smile yet.

Mark feigned surprise. "Of course. It's obvious, isn't it? The way we keep bumping into each other, and now getting assigned as partners. It's fate," he announced, as if Landon really should know better.

There was a ghost of a smile as Landon picked his pencil back up. "And how is me being literal to the point of awkward going to *help* in our friendship?"

"First off, that's not awkward. You want to see awkward, I'll introduce you to my friend Ron. That man blurts out the most ridiculous things at the worst times. But we still love him. And I like it when people talk a lot. So, you see, it's going to help because now I'll know to never tell you to 'shut up'. Because you might do it, and that would be *tragic*."

Landon laughed and a thrill shot through Mark, like an electric zing. It was close to the one he felt when he got a standing ovation, only this was so much better because he knew, right there that very minute, he'd accomplished something great. And it was him, not some character that had done it.

"If you like people who talk a lot, you should meet my roommate, Isaac."

"He's the blond you were sitting with the other day at lunch, right?" Mark registered Landon's surprise before he'd even realized what he'd said, or what he'd given away. "My roommate, Sam, pointed him out. He used to date Isaac's sister and said that Isaac has a motor mouth, but that he's a really nice guy."

"Yeah, he is." Landon tilted his head to the side, and Mark would swear there was something he wanted to say, but wasn't letting himself. Mark waited, but Landon only shook his head and got them back on topic. "So, what's the play?"

"It's a dinner theatre, actually, and they're doing *A Servant of Two Masters*. I've heard it's cool."

"Me too. I—"

"Hey, Mark." Mark turned to see Taylor walking towards them. He stopped one row down and leaned against the back of a chair. So strange. Almost no interaction with the guy for the two years he'd known him, and suddenly he was everywhere, approaching Mark left and right with smiles. "Nat and I were wondering if you'd want to go see *Breakfast at Tiffany's* with us. It's showing tomorrow at the Cineplex for their Classics Saturday matinee." He acknowledged Landon with a nod. "You too, of course."

"What happened to *Anchorman 2*?"

"Aah." Taylor put on a poor excuse for a pout. "She said she'd rather watch porn than that. I told her that could be arranged and she smacked me."

Mark laughed, but when he looked over, hoping to see Landon's smile, Landon was ignoring them, drawing on his paper. "Well, thanks for the invite, but we already have plans."

"Alrighty, then. Have fun, guys." Taylor winked at Mark and walked away. Mark was confused, and Landon didn't look thrilled.

Landon stopped drawing and was giving him that wary look again. This time Mark didn't want to let it pass. He raised his eyebrows and was about to

tell Landon to spit it out when Landon finally asked, "Why didn't you say yes?"

Mark leaned closer. "Because we're going to see something else. The matinee is earlier in the day, so I guess we could have made both if you'd wanted to, but you weren't exactly showing excitement for the idea." From this angle he could see the little cartoon characters better and chuckled. "I like this one best." He tapped his finger over one that was obviously supposed to be Dan. It was cute and funny.

"Yes, well." Landon didn't say any more, but he smiled, and that's all Mark really wanted.

It did funny things to his insides—a skittering around his stomach, a warm tingle that started in his chest and spread to his skin, and, yeah, his cock was taking notice too. *Stop staring and drooling, you idiot.* "So, yeah, um. The dinner starts at seven, and I can drive us there if you're okay with that." Mark hoped his voice didn't sound as shaky to Landon as it did to his own ears. Landon was quiet for a minute but it was a different kind of silence than before. His green eyes sparkled, his smile held a hint of mischief and confidence, and the combination, for some reason, made Mark's heart race. "What?" *Oh, God!* Did his voice just crack? *Really?*

"You didn't answer before, and I've decided that it is my business if I'm going to risk life and limb just for a class project." Even if Landon's voice was casual, Mark sensed the answer was important.

Mark had to think back. "Oh! You mean where I got the tickets? My mom sent them to me."

Landon rolled his eyes, and the exasperation was clear. "No, you dork. Do you have a boyfriend or not? Last I heard you were single, but things change. And, I mean, I always see you with that guy, Sam. And you look pretty cozy. But Taylor's been making eyes at you for weeks, so I thought maybe there was something there, and..." The words were rushed with frustration until the end when Landon trailed off, looked embarrassed for all of a second and then smiled. "I did it again."

"Yes, you did." And Mark loved it. "Did you really just call me a *dork*?" He tilted his head to the side and grinned. "'Cause, you know, thanks. I've been homesick, and right then you sounded just like my baby brother."

Landon snorted. "Glad I could help."

Their eyes met and held and neither spoke a word. Mark thought he could gladly stay that way for the rest of class until he realized Landon was waiting for him to answer. “No boyfriend. I’ve been single for over a year.”

Landon did that quick jerky nod thing. “Good to know. I mean, just so I won’t have to worry about getting mauled or anything.”

“Oh, I see what kind of man you think I am. I’ll have you know, I don’t make a habit of mauling on a first project assignment. You have to make it to the second assignment for that kind of fun.” Mark purposefully misunderstood and enjoyed the shock, sputtered snort, and blush he got for it.

Landon mumbled something that sounded dangerously close to, “I wish.” Or maybe that was Mark’s wishful thinking. He didn’t get to find out because Dan interrupted.

“Okay, people. Time for me to teach, and for you to pretend to listen.”

This is not a date. This is not a date.

Mark adjusted his tie—again—and smoothed it over the blue dress shirt he’d pulled from the back of his closet. Even though it was clean, he’d rewashed it. He didn’t want to smell like dust, after all. And so what if he’d borrowed an iron to get the creases out of his black dress pants? And used the iron on the shirt, and the tie, just to make sure.

He took a final look in the mirror and groaned. Mark hadn’t seen himself this clean and pressed to perfection since he was ten and his mom was still in charge of what he wore.

This is not a date. This is not a date.

“Hey, man.” Sam strolled in, did a double-take and whistled. “Holy shit. Have a job interview I don’t know about?”

“You know damn well where I’m going. Don’t be a jackass.”

“Yeah, but still. *Damn*. I know impressions are important and all on a first date, but I’ve never seen you quite this, um... prim.” The last word was said with a laugh barely in check.

“It’s *not* a date.” Mark’s voice was petulant, even to his own ears. “I... it’s... Oh, fuck-a-duck. The tie’s too much, right?”

"Just maybe." Sam settled himself on his bed and rested against the wall as Mark pulled off the tie. "There you go. And open the top two buttons—that'll help."

"I just wanted to look presentable because it's a nice dinner theatre. It's not like running to grab pizza or a dark theater with sticky floors."

"If you say so," Sam sang out and when Mark glared at him, laughed. "Oh, come on. You can't think I'd believe for a second this doesn't have anything to do with Landon. You haven't shut up about tonight for two days, and you asked me at least six times what I thought you should wear."

"Two—not six." Mark didn't try to deny more because he wasn't about to lie. Not to Sam when Sam could see through him so clearly. "Fine, it's not a date... technically. But I wish it was. Happy?"

"Ecstatic. And the hiatus?"

"Screw the hiatus." Mark turned his desk chair around to straddle it and rest his arms across the back. "There's something about Landon that's..." Mark shrugged. "I'm not stubborn enough to ignore that. He's just so—"

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard. Adorable. Sweet and shy. And if I hear one more time about the way he bites his lip or blushes, I swear to God I'm going to dye your hair purple in your sleep. Or shave off your eyebrows."

Mark snickered. Sam's *I'm serious* face was just too funny. "I said that once, you idiot. Stop exaggerating. And you'd never do either of those things. You love me too much."

"Yeah, well." Sam narrowed his eyes and scrunched his nose. "I don't love you that much. So, do you think Landon's your secret admirer? You said he had some mad drawing skills, so that could make sense."

"No. Absolutely not. To tell you the truth, I'm almost one hundred percent positive I know who it is."

"Who?" Sam perked up.

"Now, this is just between us. I mean it, Sam. No sharing with Grady or Carlos." Sam nodded, crossed his heart and locked his mouth for good measure. "Taylor Whitcomb."

"No shit? Seriously?" Sam didn't look convinced in the least. "Mark, other than him being decent the other night, that doesn't fit. I can't see him sitting long enough to sketch, and Taylor baking? No way in hell."

“Yeah, that’s what I thought at first. But he could have gotten someone else to do the sketch or bought the cookies. Or maybe he has hidden talents. Who knows? It’s not like we really know him. What I do know is that he’s been overly friendly to me for weeks, and he even asked me to go to a movie. Do you remember when I said someone brought up that I didn’t have an umbrella? Well, that was him. And the next day I got an umbrella. Plus someone mentioned that he’s been leering at me a lot lately.”

“I still think Landon is a better bet. Taylor’s more the type to come right out and tell you what he wants. If he was going to send anything, it would be sex toys, not Christmas music or umbrellas.”

Mark rested his chin on his forearms and stayed quiet.

“What?” Sam asked. “I know that look. There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“The other day,” Mark started. “You know, when you came back to the room and I’d fallen off the bed?”

“Yessss?” Sam waited patiently, and Mark had to give him credit. There wasn’t a snicker or smirk or the littlest hint of censure, even though Sam had to know exactly what Mark was referring to.

“The stuff I was wearing? That was another gift. That’s why I think it’s Taylor.”

Sam stayed quiet for a couple seconds. “That makes so much more sense now.”

“See? That’s exactly something Taylor would do.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about.” Sam waved a dismissive hand. “I mean about you being embarrassed by it. I have to admit—” Sam stopped and must have noticed how Mark had stiffened. “No, moron. Geez, you know me better than that. But that’s exactly what I’m trying to say. You never said anything before. I thought I’d done a good job of showing you I was cool with it, but you acted all uncomfortable, which you seriously shouldn’t have been. And even though I already saw you, and you know I saw you, you haven’t brought it up since. Like it didn’t happen or it was nothing. So, I had to wonder how long you’d had this little secret, ’cause it didn’t feel like something that should be a nothing.”

“Sam, what in the hell are you talking about?”

“You. You hiding shit from me. I know that just ‘cause we’re best friends doesn’t mean we have to talk about everything. Like sexual details that will gross the other out and crap like that. Even though I do remember a long, detailed conversation about why we don’t like boxers that included ball support and butt sweat. Of course, that was at three in the morning during finals week, but still. Do you have any idea how many times I bit my tongue this week, trying to be a good friend and have patience in case you weren’t ready to talk yet?” Sam put a foot up on his bed to wrap an arm around his knee. Mark was still trying to figure out what to say when Sam got a strange look and continued, “You do know that, right? That if you wanted to wear girl’s clothes, or to wear makeup and grow your hair long, or hell, if you decided you wanted a sex change, that I’m here for you. Bros, yeah? I mean, I’m not saying that’s the case here, but if it’s what made you happy, I’d stick right by you, and if anyone gave you shit, I’d be the first in line to knock ‘em out.”

Mark’s smile stretched, and his eyes burned a little. Damn, he was a lucky son of a bitch. “Yeah, Sam, I get that.”

“Okay, then. Just making sure. But knowing the embarrassment thing was all because you thought... I mean, the whole secret admirer thing—that makes it a little better. You were the same way about the sketch and stuff, so I think I can forgive you about not talking about the lacy things.”

“Gee, Sam, thanks for the forgiveness.” Mark shook his head. “And just to clear everything up, I like my man bits where they are, I’m not into makeup—I don’t think—and my jeans and flannels are comfortable. And that was the first time I’d ever tried on ‘lacy things’. But, also for the record, I um...” He took a big breath. “I liked ‘em.”

“Ah, yeah. I already figured that one out.” Sam looked way too proud of himself. What did he know that Mark didn’t?

“How?”

“All the leg hair clogging the drain in the shower today. Way to commit, man.”

“Oh, God,” Mark groaned. “See, you have no reason to worry about me hiding things. You always have a way of knowing everything, don’t you?”

“Pretty much.” Sam eyed him up and down. “Speaking of... you’re wearing them now, aren’t you? For your date.”

“It’s not a—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. You’re hot for him. Trust me, by the end of the night, Landon’s gonna be grabbing a hand full of lace.” Sam leered with a smirk.

“Ugh. He’s not going to be grabbing anything, because it’s not a date. Not yet, anyway.” Mark squirmed in his chair—God, why did Sam have to put that image in his head? “Besides, even if it was a date, Landon’s not like that. He’s way too shy.”

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot to tell you.” Sam sat up. “Okay, now don’t get pissed until I explain.”

“Saaammm, what did you do?” Mark whined.

“Nothing. That’s my point. You can’t get pissed. Just listen. I ran into Isaac at lunch and—”

“Oh, shit.”

“Listen. I didn’t say anything. I asked how’s he’s been—you know, since I haven’t seen him in a while—and he went on for at least a half hour. He’s the one that brought up his oh-so-awesome roommate and went on and on about him. I didn’t have to say jack-shit. Oh, did you know Landon’s from Tennessee?”

“Ha. I knew I was right about his accent. He has the sexiest, deep voice—”

“Whatever.” Sam was quick to interrupt with both hands up. “I don’t need details on how he gets your motor purring. My point is, the only thing I did say was that Landon looked like the quiet and shy type. Since you’d said that, it was the only thing I really knew about the guy and I was kinda trying to get Isaac to stop talking. But you know what he did?”

“I’m not sure I want to know anything, but go ahead.”

“He laughed his ass off. Isaac said that Landon wasn’t a talker like Isaac was, but he’s not all that quiet either. I should warn you, Isaac did say he’s a bit of a grumpy pants. His words—not mine. He also said that he’d never met anyone as confident, or less shy, than Landon. Doesn’t that seem a little odd?”

“Not at all. I’m different around you than I am with other people.”

“Maybe. But it also means you shouldn’t exclude him from the list of possible secret admirers.”

Mark sighed. "Fine. But it's not him."

"Then why are you wearing the underwear for him?"

"They're not for him. They're for me. I like them. They—" Mark stood up and just stopped himself from running his hands through hair he'd spent way too much time trying to get to look messy in a good way. "Grrr. Fine. They make me feel good and tonight I wanted to feel... *you know*. Happy now?"

"Ecstatic. And I suppose it's almost time for you to go so Landon can make you feel extra good."

Mark looked at the clock. "Shit." He grabbed his keys off the dresser and put his wallet in his back pocket before heading to the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Sam questioned.

"If you want a kiss good-bye, I think you're forgetting that you're not my mother."

"No, dumbass. Your shoes."

"My shoes?" Mark looked down. "My dress shoes. Shit," he whispered. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten all about digging them out. He looked around his room in a panic and started towards his closet.

"I think they're still in that box under your bed. And you probably need to clean them up a bit, since the last time you wore them was when it was snowing. From what I remember, you put them away covered in salt residue."

"Shit. Shitshitshitshit." Mark dove to the floor to scramble under his bed. Hearing Sam's rolling laughter behind him, he'd never wanted to hit his roommate so badly. Couldn't he have reminded Mark of the shoes earlier?

Chapter 5

Mark forgot all about his nerves, or the fact he was five minutes late, the second he saw Landon waiting for him in the common room. He looked amazing. The knit cap was gone, the dark green shirt made Landon's eyes practically glow, and the small happy smile made Mark's heart stutter.

"Hey. Sorry I'm running late."

"No problem. The drive shouldn't take long. We have plenty of time."

"Yeah." Mark just stood there, unsure what to say. A student on the other side of the common room laughed, and that finally restarted Mark's brain. "Ready to go?"

Landon nodded and turned. Mark reached out a hand towards Landon's back and dropped it. *Not a date*. When they got to the door, they reached for it at the same time, and their hands collided. Mark quickly pulled away. "Ah. Sorry. Go ahead."

The walk to the car was pure torture. Neither of them spoke and Mark could feel the tension inside him building. He wanted to reach out and touch Landon, to tell him how gorgeous he looked, but he wasn't sure if he should. This wasn't a date. He was so off his game he felt like an idiot.

Once they were in the car it was a little easier, if only because Mark's hands were busy driving so the insane urge to touch Landon couldn't be indulged even if he wanted to. "So, you're from Tennessee, right?"

Landon looked at him in surprise. "Um, yeah. And you?"

"Minnesota."

"Oh," Landon replied.

And the silence reigned once again. *Think, Mark, think*. But the only thing he could think of was the temperature difference between Tennessee and Minnesota. And what kind of a boring nitwit started off a night talking about the weather? Especially when he really, really, *really* wanted to impress Landon? *Come on, Mark, you can be entertaining when you want. Even witty at times*. Then the phone call with his mom popped into his head—his sister's first date and all the laughs they'd had about it. So he went with that.

He kept telling stories about his big, insane Italian family for the entire drive to the theater. Landon didn't say much, but he laughed a lot, and overall Mark thought they'd gotten over their awkwardness. Until they reached the lobby.

Landon had finally been talking, just idle chit-chat about what he'd heard about the play as they'd taken off their coats to hand to an attendant by the coat room, and Mark went and had to open his big mouth. But could anyone really blame him? With the coat on, Mark hadn't gotten the full effect, but with it gone he took in how formfitting Landon's shirt was, how it showed off wide shoulders and veed down to a narrow waist. And the rest of him? The slim cut to Landon's slacks fit him like a glove and the view Mark got as Landon turned to hand over his coat was nothing short of artwork.

The second Landon looked at him, he blurted out, "Fuck, you're gorgeous."

Landon's eyes went wide, and he darted a look at the people around them before dropping his eyes to the floor.

"Sorry. S'pose I shouldn't have said that so loud, huh?" Mark whispered. "Or maybe shouldn't have said it at all."

"No. Um, that's okay," Landon whispered back. Mark wanted to kick himself when Landon didn't say anything else and still wouldn't look at him.

Man, I'm such a fucking idiot. When would he learn? He gestured with his left hand, about to put his right on Landon's lower back to guide him, and dropped it fast before Landon noticed. "How about we go over here?"

They moved out of the way of the crowd and people-watched for a while before Mark worked up the courage to look at Landon. What he saw wasn't what he was expecting. Landon was looking right at him, not people-watching, and he had a very satisfied smile on his face.

"You look gorgeous, too," Landon said in an intimate, hushed tone.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

Landon shook his head. "You didn't. I just wasn't expecting it. But I liked hearing it."

The twisting in Mark's gut stopped, and he smiled. "Good."

"To tell you the truth, I wanted to say that to you back at school. How nice you look all dressed up, I mean. But I wasn't sure how you'd take it."

“I’d take it as a compliment. And coming from you, a high one.”

Landon did that bite thing again, but it was starting to irritate Mark as much as intrigue him. On one hand, he wanted oh so badly to lean in, suck that bottom lip into his own mouth and save it from the abuse Landon was giving it. And on the other hand, he knew the lip-bite was to prevent a smile and he wanted the smile. Desperately.

He turned so his shoulder was against the wall and leaned in to Landon. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Bite your lip like that. Like you’re trying to stop yourself from smiling.”

“Well, that’s probably because I don’t want to smile.” Landon’s manner was flippant, but Mark just tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, waiting. “I had braces when I was younger. I always had a dorky smile and it became habit.”

“Oh, but the braces explain why you have such a perfect smile now.” Landon rolled his eyes at that. “You do,” Mark insisted. “If it weren’t for the—” Mark was stopped from embarrassing himself—what with how he was about to wax poetic about Landon’s smile—by a theater worker opening the doors next to them, almost hitting Mark in the back. “I guess we should find our table.”

Landon nodded and smiled at him with no lip-biting getting in the way. *Screw it.* As they turned to walk inside, Mark stepped closer and placed his hand on Landon’s lower back. Landon jolted, looked at Mark out of the corner of his eye, and settled in against his side. *See, sometimes a risk pays off.*

Dinner was fabulous, and the play was one of the best Mark had ever seen, but the company was better than both. To be fair, Mark hadn’t caught all of the play. He was fascinated listening to Landon laugh, or simply watching Landon’s profile, how he reacted to a scene or a particular line. During the intermission, he watched as Landon talked with the other people seated at their table. They were complete strangers, yet Landon was perfectly at ease. He was the picture of a confident, strong man as he charmed the sixty-year-old woman sitting next to him with his southern grace. It was a side of him Mark hadn’t seen before. It was great, but it troubled him too. Was Sam right? Was the shy person Mark was starting to get to know not the real Landon?

By the end of the play, he'd almost forgotten about it. Landon was saying good-bye to Mrs. Peterson, so Mark offered to retrieve their coats. It wasn't until they were alone out on the sidewalk and Landon turned quiet that the thought wiggled itself back in. Mark tugged on Landon's sleeve to stop them at the edge of the parking lot.

"There's something I've got to ask you."

Landon faced him, but a look of panic crossed his face before he looked down. He sighed, big and a little shaky, before he said, "Yeah. Okay. Ask away." He looked like a little kid the way he shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the loose gravel.

"Ugh. There you go with that again. Being all adorable. So, I've gotta know, is it all an act?" Landon's head jerked up, confusion clear on his face. "The shy thing," Mark clarified. "Sam said you're not shy at all. Or that's what Isaac told him. So I don't get it. Is that Landon," Mark gestured towards the building, "the real you? Or is this?" Mark flipped his hand toward the man standing in front of him.

Landon closed his eyes, and Mark watched him swallow. "Both. I guess." That didn't help Mark at all so he waited for more. "No, I'm not shy. Or, at least, I've never thought of myself that way." Landon finally looked at Mark. "Normally, I'd say I'm confident. Normally, I'd say I'm comfortable with who I am. But... but... I'm not *normal* around *you*," he finished on a growl and turned back towards the parked cars.

As he stepped away, Mark caught his sleeve again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Uhhgg. I don't know." Landon spun on him. "No, I do. It means that any time I'm anywhere near you I get completely tongue-tied. I've never had that happen before, and I don't know how to deal with it. You're right. That's not me. But the first time I met you—" Landon laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "God, the first time I met you, it was at the play last year, and I went up the line of actors and congratulated everyone on a great performance, and then I got to you. You looked at me, and I swear I was struck dumb and mute. I stood there like an idiot." Landon, talking with his hands, frustrated and fierce, was a sight to behold. Mark felt hope in everything Landon said, but knew he'd have to wait until he cooled down before going anywhere near him. Landon paced away and growled again. "And to make it even more humiliating, that blond god you were dating, the one who was so beautiful he looked fake, came up and

made some joke, and I scurried away like a little chicken with my tail between my legs.”

“Chickens don’t put their tails between their legs.” Mark hadn’t meant to say that out loud, and the glare he got for it shut him up pretty fast. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, well.” Landon crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. “I’m only a freak around you. Happy now?”

“Actually, yeah.” Landon’s glare intensified so Mark rushed to explain. “Landon, do you know how long it took me to get ready for tonight? Or that I had a tie on until my roommate came in and laughed at me. And that was an hour before it was even time for me to leave.”

“So?”

A shaky chuckle escaped. “So, I was a nervous wreck. All because of you. I was sweating bullets just asking you to come with me tonight because I was scared you’d say no. If you want more, I can give you more.”

Landon shook his head as he looked down.

Mark recognized it now for what it was; Landon was trying to hide his blush, but Mark went on. Those red cheeks were a major turn-on, because it showed he was getting to Landon. He stepped closer while he spoke. “I was late tonight because I was so excited I almost left without my shoes. And last week I could barely sleep because I was afraid I’d scared you away at the Open Mic night, and—”

“I think I get the picture,” Landon said quietly, grinning.

“Oh, I don’t think you do.” Mark closed the distance between them and matched Landon’s intimate tone. “I know we went to the play for the project, and I wasn’t trying to trick you into going out with me, but maybe, for the rest of the night, we can consider this a date?” Landon didn’t answer, but he had that same look as before, the wide eyes and stuttered breath, and Mark decided to assume he was tongue-tied again. “I hope that’s a yes, because there’s something I’ve been dying to do for weeks now.”

This close, he could feel Landon’s heat and he wanted more. He moved closer, brushed Landon’s lips with his own and waited a heartbeat. Landon’s firm grab of his jacket and shaky exhale against his lips told him everything he needed to know.

Exploring, tasting, he kissed Landon slow and sure, so there was no way Landon wouldn’t understand exactly how much Mark wanted him. It was

wonderful and amazing, and one of the best parts was that Landon kissed him back in exactly the same way.

Landon's arms snuck under his jacket and around his back, and they fit so damn perfectly. Mark groaned and pushed closer.

"Oh, fuck," Landon breathed against his lips. Mark used the opportunity to lick and taste. Damn that was good.

Mark had forgotten they were standing in a public place until he heard the sudden echo of footsteps approaching. It sounded like a large group of people, and though Mark didn't want to, he knew he had to step away.

"I suppose I should have waited for your answer before I did that, huh?"

Landon's laugh was more of a huff. "You know very well you had my answer." He backed up a step at the same time Mark did, so there was a respectable distance between them.

"Coffee? I think there's a diner close to here," Mark suggested.

"Yes. That sounds perfect," Landon said with a smile that was fast becoming Mark's favorite sight.

The crowd passing gave him a few seconds to compose himself. They watched as the group split up between two cars not far from where they stood. Mark turned left, and when Landon fell in step, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to take his hand. Landon jolted again at Mark's touch.

"I'm sorry. I—" Mark started to pull away, but Landon held onto his hand firmly.

"Stop saying you're sorry. I was surprised, that's all." He winked and tangled their fingers before starting back towards the road.

"This is okay then? In public, I mean. Because if it's not—" Landon shut him up with a peck on the lips. "All right. I take it that means you're out?"

"Since I was fifteen."

They talked about the play while they walked and looked for the diner. The night air was chilly but not uncomfortable. At least, not for Mark. He noticed Landon shivering a time or two and, after two blocks, wished he hadn't suggested they walk. Right as he was going to ask if Landon wanted to turn back, Landon spoke up.

“Hey, there it is,” Landon pointed out a brightly lit window across the street and about a half block up. He smiled and tugged on Mark’s hand, his enthusiasm obvious. The street was clear so they jogged across and kept up the pace, laughing the whole way to the diner’s front door. Landon let go of Mark’s hand to open the door and waved Mark in with a flourish.

“Ah, so you’re a gentleman, huh?” Mark chuckled as he stepped in. He took in the worn, faded vinyl booths, the clatter and murmurs from the dozen or so other people, and the strong smell of coffee. It was a typical diner, through and through. The paper hearts hanging from the ceiling were proof of why Mark should have put more thought into this. “We can go somewhere else if you’d like.”

Landon turned to him, a quizzical smile in place. “Why? This is great.”

“It’s just not... well, it doesn’t really fit the occasion. You know? Considering it’s Valentine’s and all.”

Landon rolled his eyes. “It’s warm, it’s cozy, and they have pie. Come on.” He nodded his head to the side, indicating that Mark should follow as he made his way to a front corner booth by the window.

They took off their coats, and when Mark put his on the seat, his gloves fell out. *Dammit, I forgot I had those. I should have offered them to Landon.* Or... “I have an idea,” Mark started as they got settled across from each other in the booth. “When we leave, I’ll run and get the car and pick you up here.”

Landon gave him a narrow look. “Why would you do that? I’m pretty sure I can make it a few blocks safely.”

“No. I just mean because it’s cold. You were shivering the whole way here.”

“Well, yeah.” The look on Landon’s face added the unsaid, *duh*. “I’m from the South, and it’s frickin’ freezing way up here.”

Mark laughed. “I suppose. Back home it’s worse than here, so most of the time it feels like a heat wave for me every time I come back to school. Hey...” Mark had a thought. “Is that why you wear a hat all the time? Even indoors?”

Landon looked hesitant. “Um, partially, yeah.”

The waitress, a pleasantly plump woman with gray hair and a large smile, appeared. “And what can I start you young gentleman off with this evening?”

“Actually, you wouldn’t, by chance, have any banana cream pie, would you?” Landon’s accent sounded stronger as he turned on the charm. The woman seemed to eat it up as she remorsefully told him no, but listed every other pie and dessert they had available.

Mark barely listened. All he could think about was how banana cream pie would taste on Landon’s tongue. He watched those plump lips as Landon spoke and pictured himself licking whipped cream off of them.

“And you, dear?” She aimed the question at Mark, jolting him out of his fantasy.

“Oh, um.” He realized he had no idea what they had or what he wanted. “Uh, same as him.” She nodded and left. Mark rested his forearms on the table and leaned in towards Landon to whisper, “Please don’t think I’m an idiot, but what did I just order?”

“Don’t think you’re a...” Landon shook his head. “Weren’t you paying attention?”

Mark hunched his shoulders up in a half shrug. “I was thinking about something more important.”

“Like what?” Landon sounded much more amused than offended.

Mark looked back down at Landon’s mouth, licked his own lips, and admitted in a low voice, “Kissing you.”

“Ooh,” was all Landon managed at first along with a long exhale. “I... ah...” He cleared his throat. “Well, then.”

Mark knew he’d caught Landon off guard but wasn’t sorry at all. He smiled. “What can I say? You’re very distracting.”

Landon chuckled silently and shook his head again. “You lay it on thick, huh? I should have known you’d be a flirt. Not that I’m complaining.”

“Good. Because you seem to bring it out in me naturally.”

Landon tilted his head to the side and gave Mark a shrewd look. Whatever he’d been about to say was aborted by the waitress bringing their coffee and pie. *Ah, French silk. Good.*

“So,” Mark said after the waitress walked away to help another table. “What were you saying about the cold only being a part of why you wear the caps? Is it more of a fashion thing? Because it’s a good look on you.”

“No, not really.” Landon focused his attention down at his pie and forked off a bite, but didn’t bring it to his mouth. “But it’s a long story, and I’m not sure it’s really first date material.”

“Oh.” Mark was disappointed, but he was intrigued as well, knowing there was a long story that hopefully, someday, he’d get to hear. He took a bite of his pie to stall and cover the awkwardness.

Then Landon sighed. “Actually, it’s not that big of a deal. I have a couple scars and the hat hides them. That’s all.”

“Okay,” he said lamely, not knowing how to respond to that. Mark was filled with questions—what were the scars from and where were they, because he’d never noticed them—but he kept his focus on eating instead and waited. The last thing he wanted to do was to pry into something that clearly made Landon uncomfortable.

Landon’s low chuckle surprised him. “Mark, shit, it’s fine. You don’t have to look so nervous. Really.” Mark looked up to meet Landon’s eyes. All he saw was a calm sincerity that made him relax. Landon went on to explain, “I didn’t mean to make it sound like some ominous mystery. I’m sorry. I’m just not used to being the one to bring it up. Usually people see the scars and bombard me with questions.”

“Well, I’d like to know what happened, but how about instead of bombarding you with questions, you just tell me what you want to tell me.” Mark put down his fork and gave Landon his undivided attention.

Landon took a drink of his coffee first, looking contemplative for a moment. “Well, the simple answer is I was in a car accident. It was a few years ago, right before I was supposed to start college. I had a broken arm and a head injury. Hence the scars. And this.” Landon tipped his head to the left and tugged on his ear. The tip was missing completely, making the top a flat, horizontal line instead of rounded.

Mark winced, thinking of the pain Landon must have gone through. “Ooh, ouch, babe.” Mark felt stupid as soon as the words were out, but Landon laughed.

“You’re telling me. Anyway, I was in the hospital for a long time, and even after I went home, I had to go in for rehabilitation for the head trauma. After the accident, I started wearing my hair long enough to cover my ears and so the scars wouldn’t be as obvious. But last summer my mom insisted I get my hair

cut because her side of the family was having formal family portraits done. Since the hair around the scars takes longer to grow out, I've had to keep it shorter than I like. So, I wear the hats. It's easier than everyone asking what happened."

"Yeah, I get that. I don't know if this'll make you feel better or not, but I never noticed the scars." Now that Mark looked closely, he could see a line visible along Landon's hairline by his neck.

"I'd say you must not be very observant, except I know they've faded and aren't as visible as they used to be. Rationally, I know that, but I'm still stupidly self-conscious about them."

"I'll have you know, I'm extremely observant of the things that are important. Like your eyes, your lips, and your killer ass. How am I supposed to pay attention to any other part of you when I have those to stare at?"

Landon's burst of laughter had a few heads turning in their direction. "Like I said. Flirt."

Mark picked up his coffee and smiled. But his smile faded completely as he pictured Landon in the hospital, hurt beyond what Mark could even imagine. "That sounds like it wasn't a simple fender bender. You're okay now, right?" Instinctively, he reached across the table for Landon's hand, needing to touch.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm not exactly like I used to be, but that's not a bad thing. The accident made me take stock of my life, you know? Appreciate it more. It's the reason I decided to come here for college. That, and the fact that my mom was always overprotective—what with me being a scrawny, gay boy out in a small town filled with bigots and all. And after the accident? Damn, she was in gorilla-hovering mode for months. I had to get out of there for both of our sanity."

"Yeah, I can relate." Mark relaxed back into the booth as the waitress came over to refill their coffee. "Where were you going to go to school before? Somewhere in Tennessee?"

"Yeah. I'd been planning on going to art school. If you can believe it," Landon leaned in and whispered, "I wanted to make comic books for a living."

"I could see that. The cartoons I saw the other day were awesome."

"Thanks." Landon's smile was timid and it flickered a little. "But that was the dream of a kid who spent way too many hours in his room doing nothing

but drawing. All that time in the hospital made me really think about what I want to do with my life. Only one thing made sense—I want to help people. Other than that, I wasn't sure. It wasn't until my dad was in therapy after the accident that it came together for me.”

“Oh, shit. Your dad was in the car, too? Was he hurt?”

“Not physically, no. But he blamed himself for a long time. He was driving, and, um... drinking. That's the part of the story that gets to be long.”

“I'm not in any rush, and I'd like to hear it.” Mark extended his foot to slide it between Landon's under the booth and gave Landon's hand a squeeze. He wanted to reach out, even if it was something as simple as the leather of their shoes touching. “I mean, if you want to tell me,” he added sincerely.

For the next several minutes, Landon told him about his parents' divorce when he was nine, and how his dad gradually slid into alcoholism in the years after. He could tell Landon was trying to give an abbreviated version, but he couldn't help but ask questions, to draw more out of Landon. He wanted to know everything. And the more he learned, the more in awe of Landon he became.

After yet another refill of coffee—they asked for decaf this time—Landon continued. “I dreaded going over to his apartment when I was a teenager, mainly because I hated to see him like that, but even when he was at his worst, I never once doubted how much my dad loved me. A lot of people don't understand that, or they don't believe me, but it's true. Just because someone has an addiction, that doesn't make them horrible or mean. So, after the accident, when he went into rehab, to see him struggle, to watch how hard he worked to fight his addiction...” Landon cleared his throat and then suddenly smiled. “And the counselors who encouraged him and believed in him? They're my heroes just as much as he is. You see, they didn't just help him quit drinking. No, when my old man does something, he goes the whole damn distance. He turned his entire life around. And they were there for him. Now he jogs every day, last year he started taking night classes, and—” Landon laughed. “I think he's actually addicted to learning. It's hilarious. He calls me every week to talk, and there's always something new he's learned that he wants to tell me about. Oh, and he has a girlfriend, too. She's great,” Landon ended with a big smile.

The way Landon's eyes lit up as he spoke and the expression on his face, tranquil and energized at the same time, Mark was pretty sure, right in that

moment, that he fell just a teensy bit in love with Landon Hayes. He wasn't completely off his rocker—he wasn't about to go down on bended knee or anything—but the beginning of something was definitely there, and Mark liked it a whole lot.

Mark's adoration must have been written all over his face, because a lovely shade of pink bloomed on Landon's cheeks as he looked down at his now-empty pie plate.

"It's funny—how something good can come out of something bad, isn't it?" Mark offered.

"Yeah. Actually, I've never told anyone else this before, and you'll probably think I'm nuts, but to be honest, I'm thankful for the accident. I'm glad it happened." Landon looked up at Mark under his lashes. If he was waiting for some type of criticism, he'd be waiting a long time.

"So am I," Mark said over the lump in his throat. "Well, maybe not glad, exactly, since you had to go through all of that pain, but grateful. Because of your dad, but also because it brought you here. With me."

"Cheesy, Mark. That's a bit on the cheesy side." Landon joked, but it was weak. "Yikes. I really can't believe I practically blurted out my entire life story. Really not-great first date conversation, huh?" He sighed quietly, and fiddled with his fork.

"For us it is. Usually a first date is spent getting to know all the superficial stuff. We already know a lot of that from going to school together, so it fits perfectly that we'd dive into deeper waters. Hey, I already told you all about my crazy family on the drive to the theatre."

Landon's smile looked grateful. "Yeah, I suppose."

"I have a great idea," Mark announced and pushed aside his pie plate. "How about we order another dessert?" The pie had been extremely good, but more than anything, he really didn't want their night together to end yet.

Landon eyed him skeptically. "On one condition. We each pick a different kind and share."

Mark laughed. He liked that condition. The next time the waitress passed, Mark flagged her down so they could order. The next couple of hours flew by, and it wasn't until Landon noticed it was almost one in the morning that they decided to call it a night and head back to campus.

Their conversation continued on the drive back to campus until Mark pulled up in front of Landon's building and put the car in Park. Over the hum of the engine, the sudden silence in the car was loud and filled with anticipation. Mark shifted in his seat while he tried to decide if he should offer to walk Landon to the door, or just lean in for the kiss he wanted right there in the car.

"There's something I've been wondering all night. Well, not all night, but for the last hour at least," Landon's voice was hushed and intimate in the small car.

Mark turned to face him and inched closer, mimicking Landon's tone, even as his heart rate sped up. "What's that?"

"How apple pie and chocolate cake would taste mixed together."

Mark almost laughed, until he caught on. "Let's find out." Mark moved in slowly, sliding his hand around the back of Landon's neck and guiding him in. Only a breath apart, they both stopped for the briefest moment, smiling at each other while their eyes locked.

Landon was the one to close that last small gap between them, capturing Mark's lips in a soft kiss that lead to another and another. Mark loved the way Landon's lush lips felt against his own, and the gentle kisses lasted until he couldn't hold back anymore. He used his tongue to part Landon's lips and deepen the kiss. He got a deep moan out of Landon as a reward.

He slid his tongue over Landon's before he sucked on it, tasting. Landon responded immediately by wrapping his arms around Mark—one at his tailbone and one tangled in his hair—and tugged Mark as close as they could get. Mark's tongue explored some more before he pulled back for a breath. "Mm, I'd say they mix perfectly," he mumbled, his lips still pressed to Landon's.

"Oh, hell yeah," Landon growled and dove back in.

Mark felt the heat radiating off of Landon and snuck a hand up under Landon's shirt. He wanted to touch that hot skin—*all of it*—but knew he couldn't. Not in the cramped front seat of his car, at least. But, damn, he wanted more.

It didn't take long before the windows were fogged and Mark could barely catch his breath. He was nowhere near happy when Landon broke the kiss, panting, and leaned his forehead against Mark's.

"I should go in."

Mark hated hearing that, even if it was true. A glance at the clock on his dashboard showed it was almost two. "Yeah, I suppose," Mark grumbled and pulled back reluctantly.

His disappointment must have been obvious, and funny, because Landon laughed. "We're still meeting up tomorrow, right?"

Mark perked up and smiled. "Yep. Do you want me to meet you here?"

"No, Isaac has family visiting this weekend, so they could be stopping by at any time. How about I'll meet you at your room? Say, eleven?"

Mark nodded and leaned in for one last kiss. Landon kept it chaste when Mark tried to linger. "Grrrr," Mark actually growled, which got him another happy laugh.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Landon whispered as he opened the door and got out. He shot Mark a wink before he closed the door and jogged to the front door of the building.

Mark watched to make sure Landon made it in okay, and also because the view was spectacular.

Chapter 6

“Good morning, sleepyhead.” Sam’s amused voice was way too cheerful. Mark grunted and turned onto his back to stretch. “Have a nice dream?” Sam snickered.

Mark cracked an eye open to look at him, knowing he shouldn’t ask, but... “Meaning?”

Sam laughed and stopped pretending to read a textbook. “Meaning? ‘Oh, yeah. Landon. Mmmm, *Landon*. Yeah, baby.’” Sam crooned in a horrible imitation of Mark’s voice.

“Fuck you.” The pillow he threw at Sam’s head hit square on, but instead of shutting him up, it only served to make Sam laugh harder.

Sam went on, groaning between words. “Ohhhhhh, yeah. Mmm. Right there. Yeah, right there. God, Landon, yes. Yes. YES.” Sam finally stopped when he collapsed on his bed from laughter.

“You are such an ass. I didn’t say any of that, you perv. Even if I was dreaming about Landon, I don’t talk in my sleep.”

“Yeah, and I’m the Dalai Lama.” Sam sat up and leaned against the wall to face Mark. “You’ve always mumbled in your sleep.”

“If I do, then why haven’t you ever said anything?”

“Entertainment value, of course.” Sam smirked again. Mark was starting to seriously dislike that smirk. “And, okay, usually I can’t understand much of what you say. Just a lot of yeahs and mhmms. I may have exaggerated a bit, but this time I definitely heard you whisper Landon’s name. You may have also been grinding your mattress a little, but if you’d really been into it, I would have just left.”

Mark groaned and covered his face with his arm. “Oh, God.” Sam wasn’t laughing anymore so Mark knew he was serious, and the hard aching in his cock supported what Sam said.

“Chill. I just thought you deserved some payback for embarrassing me the other day, giving me shit about my snoring right in front of Grady and the other guys.”

"Yeah, at least my murmurs aren't as bad as you." Mark was taken aback by the flash of panic in Sam's eyes.

"I, um, talk in my sleep?" Sam's brow furrowed and he cleared his throat. "Do I, ah, you know... ever say, like... a name or something?"

"No." Mark looked closer and saw Sam's relief. What was that about? "You don't talk in your sleep at all. I was talking about your snoring. Loudly. Why are you worried about what you'd say if you did?"

"I'm not. I was just curious. Maybe my subconscious would have told me who the love of my life is supposed to be or something." Sam smiled and changed the subject. "So. How was your hot not-date last night? You must have gotten back late, because I didn't go to bed till almost one and you weren't back yet."

"Mmm." Mark smiled, remembering. "I tell ya, it was so good we can take the 'not' part out. After the play we made it into an official date."

"Official, huh?" Sam smirked. "Goodnight kiss and all?"

"Oh, hell yeah. More like a goodnight make-out session that lasted for, God, I don't even know how long."

"Way to go, stud. About time you jumped back in the saddle—or got jumped, at least."

"You think you're so funny, dontcha?" Mark asked as he rubbed his face with both hands, trying to wake up. Sam hummed his agreement. "Well, funny man, I need coffee." He glanced at the clock. "Damn, it's almost ten. Coffee, breakfast and a quick shower. Landon's coming over at eleven to go over our questions and write up our report."

"Oh, *realllly*? Do you want me to make myself scarce?"

"No need. We really are going to just work on the project. Until lunch, anyway." Mark stretched, scratched a bit and got up. He didn't bother to hide the tent in his briefs since it wasn't anything Sam hadn't seen before, and from the sounds of it, much more innocent than what Sam had witnessed that morning. As he grabbed a pair of sweats to put on, he remembered something he wanted to tell Sam. "By the way, you were right. Landon isn't that shy at all. It was just nerves or something because he likes me. Which is great, since I'm seriously into him, too." Mark shot Sam a toothy grin. "I still don't think he'd send someone underwear though, even though I wish they were from him."

"I agree completely." There was something odd in Sam's tone, like excitement.

"Why do you sound so happy about that? Yesterday you thought it was him."

"That was before you got a visitor last night. Guess who."

"The president. I don't know." Mark rolled his eyes, but laughed at Sam's enthusiasm. It was too early for this.

"Taylor. He showed up when I was getting ready for the dance and asked if you were here. And not just that—he was *nervous*. Ha! I never thought I'd see the day, but he was all fidgety, like he didn't know what to say once I told him you weren't here. I tried to make conversation with him for a minute, but I had to get ready, so..." Sam shrugged. "You were right. Mystery solved."

"Huh." It felt rather anticlimactic to Mark. More than likely, because he'd already suspected Taylor ever since he invited Mark to tag along to the matinee he was going to see for the project. *Wait, that didn't add up.* "But Taylor knew I was going out with Landon last night. I said so when..." Mark thought back to their conversation and realized he was wrong. "Oh, I guess I never said when Landon and I had plans. Just that we couldn't go to the movie yesterday afternoon with him."

"Trust me, he was bummed when I said you were out. I kind of felt bad for the poor guy. I saw him at the dance later, though, so he couldn't have been completely heartbroken. He came over and talked with us for a while. I don't know if he was just trying to put on a good show because he's after your bod and figures being nice to your friends will give him an in, or what, but he was being really nice the whole time. Like, charming-nice."

"Who knows?" Mark walked into the bathroom to grab water for his coffee pot. After he was done, he asked Sam, "How was the dance last night? Did you have fun?"

"It was fine at first, but I got bored. When all the couples were getting lovey-dovey, I decided it was time to head out. I got back here around eleven or so and watched a movie. Which reminds me." Sam said the last sentence slowly and paused. It was one of those ominous pauses that gave Mark a bad feeling.

He stopped halfway through filling a filter with coffee grounds. "Uh-oh. What did I do now?"

“Nothing. Nothing bad, anyway. I just thought I’d let you know that you should really close your browser on your laptop when you offer to lend it out.”

“What the hell, Sam?” Mark’s mind scrambled, trying to remember what the last thing he looked up online was, and when he remembered, “Oh, shit. Who the fuck said I gave them permission to use my laptop? And why would you give it to them?” He’d been looking at shopping sites for men’s lingerie, and if anyone saw that...

“No one, dickhead. You said *I* could borrow it to watch movies on your Netflix account. Which is what I did after the dance last night. But what if one of the guys had been here with me? I’ll be careful in the future, I promise. I know that you’re not quite comfortable with this yet, so I just wanted to give you a heads up, that’s all.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Mark finished pouring in the coffee grounds and turned the pot on to brew. “Don’t scare me like that again, though.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you. Sorry.” Sam did look genuinely sorry, and then thoughtful. “I liked the thing you were looking up. It was nice, like actually *real* lingerie.” Mark shot him a questioning look. “I mean...” he trailed off and tilted his head to the side. “It’s not kinky or anything. I half-thought that if you bought underwear type stuff, that it would either be something like the last one you got in the mail or something, I don’t know... on the risqué side.” Sam looked serious, and just because of that Mark smacked him. “Ow! Hey, be nice. All I’m saying is what you picked out was more—” He pursed his lips and hummed, thinking. He finally decided on the right word. “Elegant.”

Mark thought about the sleepwear set he’d been looking at. It was like a tank, except in black satin with a lace trim. *Simple* had been his goal, but elegant? “Elegant.” He snorted out loud and looked over at Sam. “I don’t mean to be the pot calling the kettle black, but you know what? You’re strange sometimes,” Mark chided.

“Yeah, well.” Sam shrugged. “What can I say? You’re the one who picked me as a best friend.” Sam leaned forward and pulled his knees up to prop his arms on. “That black shiny one was pajamas, right? Lisa used to have some just like that except in peach.”

“Oh, great. So if I wear them they’ll remind you of your ex-girlfriend,” Mark grumbled, but then thought about what he’d said. “Not that I’m going to even buy them, but—”

“Why wouldn’t you? They’re nice. And they look comfortable,” Sam added sincerely.

“Be-because—” Mark sputtered, “God, I can’t even imagine the shit you’d give me. And, um...” He trailed off, unsure what other excuse to use.

“I wouldn’t tease you. Not about this.” Sam winced and sighed. “Listen, I know we give each other shit, and if I was crossing the line by giving you a hard time this morning about your dream, I’m sorry. But you have to admit you’d have teased me just as badly. This is different.” He nodded at Mark’s laptop, even though it was off and closed. “If I teased you about this, it would be like giving you shit for being gay. Right?” Sam didn’t really look sure but he barreled on, “Matter of fact, I think you should buy it. Right now.”

“What? I’m not going to—I—”

But Sam wasn’t listening to Mark at all. “I’m not taking no for an answer. If you don’t buy it, I’m buying it for you.” Sam nodded once, his mind made up apparently. “This will be good for you.” He snapped his fingers and stood up. “I have an idea. I’ll kill two birds with one stone. I’m going to run for breakfast, and bring it back here. You’ll have the place to yourself for a while so you can decide which one you want, and by the time you’re done with your shower, I’ll be back with food. It’ll save you some time since Landon will be here in less than an hour.” Sam walked towards the door, but stopped and turned when Mark called after him.

“Sam?” Mark managed, but then had to swallow over an unexpected lump in his throat. “You rock.”

Sam popped an imaginary collar. “Yep. I know.”

Mark caved almost as soon as Sam was out the door. Sam was great, giving him time to choose and all, but Mark didn’t need it. He knew exactly what he wanted; the black satin looked so nice—sexy and comfortable at the same time. Just imagining feeling that soft fabric against his skin gave him goose bumps. He wasn’t sure why, out of all the options he’d found, he’d picked that one, except that it was something he could see himself in. The panties and stockings he’d gotten from the admirer—Taylor, apparently—were sexy and fun, but they were something you wore for a lover. He’d been looking for something that he’d wear for himself.

After he put in the shipping information and pressed *Confirm*, Mark took a deep breath and let it out in a whoosh. "Holy shit, I did it." He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head.

Does this make me a cross-dresser, or do I just have a fetish for soft materials? He paused a moment to consider that. *Hmm. Maybe a little of both?* It was something he'd have to explore.

A quick look around his room proved he needed to straighten up, quickly, so Landon wouldn't think he was a complete slob. After shoving the last of his dirty clothes into his laundry basket, he grabbed a towel and hopped into the shower. Good to his word, Sam returned with what looked like the mother lode of food right as Mark finished getting dressed.

"Wow, I must be a pig if you think I'll eat all that."

"Some of it's for Landon, dipshit. What kind of a host doesn't offer his new boyfriend some food for a study date?"

"Don't go jumping the gun. He's not my boyfriend yet."

"Yet being the operative word."

Mark rolled his eyes at his friend's mothering. There was a knock on the door and his pulse jumped. Sam took a step that way, but Mark beat him to it. "Don't embarrass me," he whispered at Sam just before he opened the door.

And there he was. Landon looked at him from under those beautiful, heavy lashes, and Mark's pulse gave another jump that kick started it into double time. "Hey."

"Hey." Landon's shy smile had his brain spinning with so many thoughts he couldn't pick one from the next.

So Mark just stood there, and smiled, and looked his fill. The knit cap was brown today and it matched the scarf, one of those decorative, wraparound kinds. Mark reached out and tugged on it. "I like this," he said quietly. "Especially, since I can use it to do this." He pulled Landon to him, their lips meeting for a sweet hello kiss. And then another, until the kisses blended together. Mark wrapped an arm around Landon's waist to pull their bodies flush, and they melted into each other, lost in taste and touch.

A throat cleared behind Mark and he jumped. "Jeez, Mark, let the guy at least get in the room before you devour him," Sam chided, laughing.

“Shit.” Mark stepped back, opened the door wider and gestured vaguely behind him. “Yeah, ah, that’s my roommate, Sam.”

Sam and Landon both chuckled at Mark’s awkward introduction. Landon stepped in past him, and Mark scanned his room to make sure he hadn’t forgotten a mess anywhere in his hasty cleaning. Sam was sitting on his own bed, looking comfortable and not about to go anywhere.

“Hey, man.” Sam nodded his greeting. “It’s great to finally meet the man my best bud’s been drooling over for weeks now.”

Mark’s, “Hey,” collided with Landon’s, “Weeks?”

Sam ignored Mark’s glare and addressed Landon with a smile. “Well, yeah. It was only, like, the second day of term the first time I caught him staring at you in the cafeteria. The drool puddle on the table was embarrassing.”

It was official—Mark was going to murder his roommate in his sleep. He would have gladly started right then, but when he glanced at Landon his anger faded marginally. The happy, almost smug look on Landon’s face saved Sam’s life for the moment.

“Really?” Landon asked, eyes narrowed at Mark.

Mark sighed and bit the embarrassing bullet, considering he’d told Landon almost the same thing last night. “Yeah. Well, not the drool part.” Mentioning that he wasn’t actually staring at Landon the first time seemed like a moot point—he’d stared plenty before and after that day. He scratched the back of his head and remembered his manners. “Here, let me take those for you.” Landon handed over his coat and bag and Mark put them next to the futon, where he figured they’d be out of the way. “Sam grabbed us some food.”

“Cool.” Landon’s smile was stretched so wide that Mark was almost thankful to Sam for being a traitor. But then the silence stretched a second too long, Landon looked down and the lip biting started.

“Oh, no.” Mark glared at Sam. “What’s about to happen is completely your fault, so I don’t want to hear any whining out of you that I forced you to witness it.” Sam looked understandably confused. Mark moved quickly, grabbed Landon to yank him close and sucked on his bottom lip, smoothing his tongue over it. “You can’t keep doing that, babe,” he whispered against Landon’s mouth, gave another peck to his bottom lip, and pulled back to look into his eyes. “Your poor lip is crying out in pain every time you do, and I can’t stand to see something so luscious suffer.”

Landon's eyes were wide as he sputtered and laughed. "I... uh..." He looked over at Sam. "Is he always this outrageous of a flirt?"

"Um, no. Yikes." Sam was laughing quietly as he stood up. "Okay, boys, that's my cue to get outta here. I know you said you were only going to work on your paper, but I'm starting to think you were lying."

"We are going to work on our paper." Mark turned back towards Sam. "But considering I'm scared to hear what will come out of your mouth if you stay, I wholeheartedly agree that you should leave."

Landon sat down on the futon and rummaged through his bag before pulling out his laptop. "Don't go kicking your roommate out. He didn't do anything wrong."

"See, your new man likes me." Sam stuck his tongue out at Mark. "So." Sam started in on the questioning Mark knew would come eventually. "What's your major?"

"I already told you, he's a psychology major," Mark answered before Landon could. He settled on the couch and grabbed the plate he knew Sam made for him, considering Sam would never touch a pancake covered in that much syrup, and hoped his friend would behave.

"I forgot. What's your minor?"

"GWS studies," Landon answered for himself this time.

"I never understood that. I mean, why do they list it like that? Gender *and* Women studies. Like women aren't a gender and are something different altogether." Sam sounded truly puzzled.

"No. It's Gender, Women, and Sexuality studies," Landon clarified. "Like in Gender studies, Women studies, and Sexuality studies. There aren't enough classes in any of those to be classified as a major on its own, and a lot of the classes overlap, so they're put together."

"Oh." Sam looked thoughtful, and Mark had to admit that he hadn't known that either. "So you actually study sexuality," Sam said slowly, in a way that gave Mark a bad feeling. "Holy shit, Mark. You're dating a sex expert!"

Mark groaned. "*Ugh*. You promised you wouldn't be an ass. Or embarrass me."

"No I didn't. You told me not to embarrass you. I never agreed." Sam's smirk was triumphant.

"I am so, so sorry," Mark said to Landon. "Please ignore him. He's leaving now."

"No, I'm not. I have another question."

"No. Nononono," Mark pleaded with his voice and eyes.

Landon's abrupt laughter filled the room. "Oh my God. You guys are worse than brothers."

"Not worse than. We are brothers. Okay, so not blood, but better." Sam snatched a bagel off the tray and stepped back. "So, my question." Mark groaned, yet again, but Sam ignored him, as always. "If you study gender and sexuality and all of that, you must be pretty open-minded, right?"

"I like to think so." Landon quirked his eyebrow—just one, and Mark wondered how he did that—like he was waiting for a punch line.

"Okay, good. Three questions. Do you think it's sweet, sexy, or creepy to send someone sexy underwear? Is it normal for a person's sexual preferences to be flexible? And since you study this stuff, you wouldn't have a problem with a guy that, let's say, cross-dressed or something like that, right?" Sam ticked each question off on a finger.

"*Sam,*" Mark warned.

"What? It's just hypothetical questions." Sam was the picture of innocence. Correction—the picture of very false innocence and Mark wanted to kill him. There was no way Landon wouldn't see through that.

Landon settled back in the corner of the futon, looking like he was putting a lot of thought into the questions. "My answer to the first one is all three, depending on the intentions. The last one, no, I'd never have a problem with that. The flexibility one I think would take a lot longer to answer, but it would be interesting to talk about some time." Landon paused, gave Sam a look Mark couldn't read and went on. "Honestly, I don't believe it's a black and white thing. Everyone's different. I think if it's normal for that person, then it's normal. Any other questions?"

"Oh, please, please don't encourage him," Mark begged Landon. "And you." He turned to Sam. "Can we not scare the nice guy away?"

"He's not scaring me away. Besides, he got us all this great study food," Landon said with a smile.

Sam shot Mark a nasty look, laughed and grabbed his coat before going to the door. "Fine. I'll be the awesome guy that I am and save any other silly questions for next time." He stopped when he got to the door. "Landon, it was great to meet you. And Mark, I'll be gone all day. If I don't hear from you by dinner, I'll know it's because you're too busy saving his poor lip from crying."

"Shut up, you ass." Sam was out the door before Mark could find anything to throw at him.

"Your roommate is seriously great," Landon offered.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to live with him."

"True." Landon fiddled with the notebook and pen he'd set next to his laptop. "We're not really going to spend the whole time working on our paper, are we? I mean, it's not due until Thursday."

"Did you have something else in mind?" Mark moved closer with anticipation, hoping he was right about where this was leading.

Landon pushed the notebook aside and closed the distance between them. He pressed a firm hand to Mark's chest and moved it up slowly to his neck. "Something like what we started at the door would be good," he whispered, low and rumblingly.

"Yeah, I like that idea." Mark turned in and captured his lips. They were eager and pliant at the same time. The kiss deepened and Mark explored, slipping his tongue in for taste after taste. Intoxicating.

Landon's hands slid under Mark's shirt, those long fingers sending trails of heat over his skin. Mark moaned quietly, wrapped one arm around Landon and used the other to steady them as he pressed Landon back to lie on the futon. Landon went willingly and spread his legs to make room for Mark's hips.

Their lips never parted and Mark was drowning in the kiss.

"Oh God," Landon breathed against Mark's lips. "So good."

Mark couldn't agree more. If he felt that kind of heat, that intense of a spark, just from a kiss, what would more be like? He hummed as he mouthed up Landon's jaw. "You smell so good," Mark whispered as he moved to nibble and tease Landon's neck. Landon made the most beautiful breathy little noises as he arched up against Mark.

There was a thud just before a yelp filled Mark's ear and ripped him out of the moment. He started, jumped and looked down at Landon.

“Crap.” Landon broke away and rubbed at the side of his head where he’d hit it against the arm of the futon. Mark couldn’t help his silent laugh. Even now, the damned cap stayed on. He wanted to pull it off, but stopped himself and ran his fingers over Landon’s ear instead. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” Landon leaned up to resume their kiss, but Mark stopped him.

“Do you really need this on? Are you cold, or just...” He tugged on the brown knit cap.

Landon yanked it off and threw it to the floor. “I’m so used to it I forgot I had it on.”

“You know what’s funny. Until a week ago, I didn’t even know you were a redhead.” Mark ran his fingers through the thick, short hair. “And I’ve discovered something.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m a sucker for redheads,” Mark confessed as he leaned down to resume his nibbling on Landon’s neck.

“That’s... that’s good,” Landon replied on an exhale, tilting his head to give Mark better access and knocking his head in the same spot again. “Fuck.”

“Sorry. Maybe the bed would be more comfortable,” Mark offered sheepishly.

Landon blinked up at him. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

Mark helped Landon up and led him by hand to the bed. Suddenly self-conscious, Mark asked, “This isn’t moving too fast for you, is it?”

“Mark,” Landon kissed the curve of his neck, “let’s get one thing straight. I’m not a wilting flower or a southern belle.” He looked up at Mark through his heavy-lidded eyes and Mark’s cock throbbed in anticipation. Landon smirked, slowly pulled his shirt over his head, his scarf going with it, and reinvaded Mark’s space. “You?”

Mark didn’t reply, too engrossed in the sight and feel of Landon’s upper body as he let his hands roam. Broad shoulders, long, defined muscles that rippled under Mark’s touch. Everything about him made Mark’s mouth water. That sexy collarbone called to him first, so he swiped his tongue in a broad stroke over it, then moved to Landon’s neck and did the same. “Holy fuck, you’re hot.”

There was a quiet whimper and Landon's long fingers twisted in Mark's shirt. "Mark, please."

He didn't need to ask what Landon wanted. Not willing to stop touching, he fumbled with one hand at his T-shirt. Landon helped, and a second later they tumbled onto the bed. Landon's hands roamed over Mark's back, the light touch making him shiver.

They didn't have much more room on the bed than they had on the futon, but that was fine by Mark. The tight space meant they stayed close, their limbs tangling together, as they kissed until they were out of breath. Landon's body felt amazing, smooth and hard in all the right places, and Mark was lost to everything but sensations.

"Mmm," Mark hummed when Landon slid down to kiss and nip at his chest. Landon moved to his nipple, first licking in long, messy strokes, then sinking his teeth in, just enough to make Mark whimper and beg for more. "Landon, oh fuck." Mark put a hand on the back of Landon's head, more to ground Mark than to guide Landon.

"You like that?" Landon asked with another lick.

"Yes," Mark's voice shook with pleasure. "It's perfect."

"Good." Landon looked up and flashed Mark a smile before moving to Mark's other nipple and giving it the same treatment. "God, Mark. Your body..." He flicked Mark's hard nipple with his tongue while he spoke. "It's so... so fucking hot. And edible... I want to lick every inch."

Damn. Mark could picture that all too well—getting a tongue bath from Landon. He pushed into the touch at the same time that he grabbed onto Landon's arm to pull him up. "I want..."

"What, Mark? Tell me what you want," Landon asked, his voice husky.

But that was the problem. Mark wanted everything, but he didn't think that was exactly the answer Landon was looking for.

Mark was usually more confident in the bedroom, but this felt like an entirely new experience. With Landon it was different, important, and the desire to please Landon was so strong it left Mark fumbling.

Instead of answering, Mark pulled Landon up and kissed him. "Pants," he gasped as he decided that the one thing he truly needed right then was to be able to feel Landon everywhere. Mark reached down between them and tried to

open the top button of his jeans with shaky fingers, but he was uncoordinated with need and excitement.

Landon sat up, pushed Mark's hand aside and finished the button for him before attacking his own tight denim. Mark shimmied out of his jeans, lay back on the bed and waited, enjoying the view immensely. Landon's skin was flushed and his lips were swollen, which was sexy as hell. And watching Landon wiggle out of his tight jeans was a sight to behold.

Black briefs hugged his narrow hips and firm ass, and when he slid those briefs down... *Hot damn. Now that is something drool worthy.* Landon's cock was long and beautiful, and Mark couldn't wait to get his hands on it. His mouth around it.

Mark licked his lips and stared, transfixed. "You're gorgeous."

The corners of Landon's mouth tilted up. "Well, I think *you* are a bit overdressed," he teased.

Mark knew how to solve that problem. He hooked his thumbs in his waistband, and was about to get rid of the offending material when he wondered what it would be like if he had on the lace instead of cotton? His cock jerked. For a brief second, he closed his eyes and pretended, just for his own pleasure.

Opening his eyes again, he watched Landon as he took his underwear off slowly. His dick slapped against his stomach, and he heard Landon's low hum of appreciation. As he kicked the briefs the rest of the way off, to the end of the bed, the smooth skin on his calves rubbed together. He could almost imagine the sound the stockings would make if he had them on. Landon's eyes tracked every movement like he was memorizing them. Mark enjoyed the tactile sensation one more time, the silky skin so much more sensual than the rough hair that used to be there, before he bent his knees and spread them, putting on a show.

Landon sucked in a sharp breath, but stayed where he was, absorbing the sight of Mark.

"What are you waiting for?"

"I... I never thought I'd see you like this. Laid out in front of me and so damn beautiful." Landon's tone was hushed, reverent. Mark didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't say anything. Landon climbed back on the bed

and slowly, oh so slowly, slid his way back up Mark's body with his hands and mouth, starting at Mark's thighs.

"*Landon*," Mark choked out, but couldn't finish. His brain shut off and he could only gasp and moan as Landon mouthed his balls. "*Yesss*."

He kissed the inside of Mark's thigh while he cupped Mark's balls in one hand, and smoothed his other over the hard length of Mark's cock. Mark pushed up, his body naturally responding to Landon's touch.

"Oh fuck, Landon," he moaned again. He wasn't going to last long, he knew it. If Landon put that talented tongue on his cock, Mark was done for. "Come up here. Please. I need... I need your mouth."

Landon looked up and met Mark's stare. His eyes—those gorgeous, sexy eyes—were so fucking green and so filled with lust. "Mmm, yes," Landon agreed, but then did exactly what Mark didn't want, and licked a long stripe up Mark's cock. Well, no that wasn't true, he did want it. Too much.

"No, not there. Not yet." *Please, not yet*. Shaking with need, Mark grabbed Landon, dragged him up the bed, and flipped their positions all in one move.

Landon's chuckle was raspy. "Maybe you should be more specific," Landon said while trying to catch his breath.

"You're a bit of a smartass, aren't you?" Mark smiled down at Landon fondly, tracing a finger over the arch of his cheekbone.

Landon threaded his fingers through Mark's hair, scratching at the nape of his neck. "Maybe a bit," he conceded, his voice husky with want.

Mark used his weight to press Landon back against the bed and kissed those lush, swollen lips exactly the way he'd wanted to, deep and desperate. Landon wiggled and Mark adjusted, sliding an arm under Landon's back to pull their bodies closer. When Landon bent his knees so his thighs cradled Mark's and pushed up, the friction was delicious.

"Mmm, babe. Oh, hell yes." Yes, that's what he needed. To feel Landon wrapped around him. They fit together so perfectly. Gradually, their tempo accelerated, setting every cell in Mark's body on fire.

Mark wanted to prolong it, to tease and pleasure and make Landon just as needy as he was. But soon, beads of sweat rolled down Mark's back and he couldn't hold out anymore. He braced himself up on an arm and made enough room between them to fit his other hand snugly around Landon's cock.

Landon whimpered into Mark's ear, and it was so damn sweet, Mark almost lost it. He loosened his grip enough to fit his dick alongside Landon's and moved his hand faster.

"Fuck. Yeaahhh," Landon hissed. *"Jus' ... just like that."* Landon grabbed tight to Mark's ass with one hand and dragged the fingernails of the other down the flesh of his back, digging in and making Mark howl.

Somewhere in the back of his brain he had enough sense to worry someone would hear, so he tried to be quiet, but that required more control than Mark had. Especially with Landon writhing and panting beneath him.

Heat coiled low in his stomach and spread. *"I'm... I'm gonna... soon."* That's all Mark managed before Landon kissed him. That's all it took. In the next second, his orgasm hit, he saw stars and then black.

Mark collapsed, his body too heavy and happy to move, but tried to keep the bulk of his weight off Landon. Landon was boneless beneath him, other than the still-hard cock sticking into Mark's stomach. *Oh.* Shit, he'd wanted to make Landon come first.

But now you get to suck him.

Mark moved with renewed energy, his mouth watering for a taste, until he saw Landon's stomach splattered in come—a *lot* of come—and observed his blissed-out state.

"That's not all mine."

"Oh, wow. Too bad you're not a physics major. You're a regular Einstein," Landon drawled, with a lazy stretch under Mark. His eyes slowly blinked open. *"Wait. Einstein was physics, wasn't he?"*

"Um, yeah." Mark smiled. Seeing Landon like that, so relaxed and sated, was probably the highlight of Mark's year.

Long fingers skated up Mark's back, causing him to shiver and goose bumps to break out on his skin. Landon's chuckle was slow and husky. *"Sorry."*

"Uh-huh." Mark grazed Landon's collarbone with a kiss, licked a little at his throat and ended with a nip at his jaw. *"I'll get us something to clean up."*

Mark and Landon lay together, silent, long after they caught their breath. Mark was sated, drifting, and comfortable in a way he couldn't remember ever

being before. Landon stretched against his side and Mark pulled him closer, his fingers trailing a line up and down Landon's spine. It must have tickled, because Landon shivered and pulled away from the touch. That was fine by Mark, because the end result was getting Landon closer.

Slowly, Landon moved onto his side and propped up on an elbow. His fingers lightly dragged along Mark's chest and stomach, and his eyes following the path. Mark hummed, kissed Landon's temple and asked, "Do you have anywhere else you need to be today?"

"Is that your way of asking me to stick around?"

"As long as I can have you. Yeah."

"Nowhere else I need or want to be."

"Good," Mark hummed. Landon's touch was soothing. Mark closed his eyes and was close to drifting off when Landon's words snapped him awake.

"I have a small confession to make, but I wanted to ask you about Sam's questions first."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut again. "Damn. I was really hoping you'd forget about those."

Landon snickered. "Not a chance. How about we start with the one I think was about you?"

"Yeah, okay," Mark grimaced and prepared for the worst.

"When did you start cross-dressing, and how long do I have to wait before I get the privilege of seeing you in kickass sexy heels?"

"Privilege?" Mark chuckled. "I don't know. I've never owned heels. I don't really cross-dress. I mean, maybe I do, but..." He sighed. "It's a new thing. And only my, um..." God, how was he going to put this? "Just, you know, underneath things."

"Underwear? Or bras and stuff, too?"

Mark pinched the bridge of his nose. He never imagined in a million years that he'd be having a conversation like this. "Just underwear that's kind of... on the feminine side, I guess. Like I said, it's new."

"Mark?" Landon's voice was so gentle and coaxing, Mark finally opened his eyes to meet Landon's dark green gaze. "I didn't mean to make you

uncomfortable. It's fine if it's not something you're ready to talk about. But for the record, the second I saw your shaved legs and put it together, I haven't been able to get this image out of my head. I like it. *A lot.*"

Landon's soft kiss against his chest sent a tingle over Mark's skin. "What's the image?" he had to ask.

"Of you. Of all this muscle wrapped in something soft and frilly. Actually." he glanced up at Mark and went back to trailing kisses over his chest, stopping to give Mark's nipple a little extra attention. "The picture was more defined than that. Red lace," another kiss, "matching stockings and heels." Landon bit gently and licked over his mark. "You'd look amazing in red."

"Oh, God," Mark gasped. "You keep that up and you'd better be ready for round two." Landon stopped, making Mark whine. "I didn't mean you should actually stop."

Landon smirked. "But I'm not ready yet. And neither are you," he needlessly pointed out while reaching to fondle Mark's soft cock.

"Landon," Mark warned.

"Sorry," Landon said, obviously not meaning it. "I'm curious about something else Sam said, but I'm trying to bite my tongue."

"Why?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I tend to blurt out what's on my mind. I'm attempting to exercise thinking before speaking." Landon said the last sentence in a haughty tone that reminded Mark eerily of Dan.

"Whatever it is, ask. No need for caution around me. I like that you say what's on your mind."

"Fine." Landon paused and twisted his mouth up before asking, "Is there someone he wants to send underwear to, or was he trying to talk you into sending some to me, or what? It just seemed a little out of left field." The scrunched up confusion on his face was adorable, but it cleared and he rushed to add, "Or is it something personal that I shouldn't be asking about?"

"No. Nothing like that. It isn't even a big deal. You see—" Damn, for not being a big deal it was still embarrassing to talk about. Which was stupid. "It's not about either one of us sending anything. Someone's been sending me things and its killing Sam not knowing who it is. I think he sees himself as an amateur detective or something. He thinks it's a secret admirer."

Landon was silent for several seconds. "And what do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. At first, I just thought someone from back home was forgetting to put their name on it. A couple weeks ago, I got some cookies in the mail and that's when I put it together. I flipped at first." Mark laughed. "And not in a good way. Sam laughed his ass off at me when I thought they could be poisoned."

"What?!" Landon stiffened.

"Oh, don't worry. It wasn't anything like that," Mark soothed. "That was just my overactive imagination. They were actually seriously kickass cookies. After a while, I thought it was kind of sweet, until the last gift. Now I'm back to being creeped out."

"But what could be creepy about—" Landon paused with a frown, "about the last one?"

"The last one was underwear."

"Underwear?" Landon whispered, his tone skeptical.

"Yeah. Well, not just underwear. That's actually—" he stopped, looked at Landon's concerned face and plunged ahead. "That's why the cross-dressing thing is new. It was lace panties and stockings. I was curious, so I tried them on. Sam walked in and, well..." He shrugged. "I told him I liked them, and I guess now he's bent on making sure I know he's accepting of whatever makes me happy. It's not too hard to figure out that's why he asked you that question. Even though I'd like to smack him for embarrassing me, I know that was just him being protective. My last boyfriend played mind games with me and made me feel guilty anytime I didn't do what he wanted."

"The blond god?"

Mark snorted. "He's only a god in his own eyes." Landon hadn't relaxed since the topic of the secret admirer came up, and Mark really didn't like the frown. "Hey," he whispered, and tilted Landon's face for a quick kiss, "don't worry. The gifts are innocent, not like a stalker or anything." Mark thought about Taylor. The guy may be forward and ballsy, but he wasn't dangerous.

"Hah, yeah."

"What? You don't believe me?"

"It's not that. It's just..." Landon lay back down, resting his head on Mark's shoulder as he started up the patterns on Mark's chest again. "Are you sure they're all from the same person?"

"Yes. None of them have had a name attached. And it has to be the same person. What are the chances of two different people sending me anonymous gifts at the same time? I know there are coincidences, but that's too farfetched, even for me."

"I suppose. You probably want to know who it is, right? Isn't it eating at you?"

"Yeah, I'm curious. But mainly I want to know so I can tell him he's wasting his time. I'm taken." Mark realized what he'd just said and was quick to correct himself, "I mean, if things keep going well, I *will* be taken. We've only had one date, so—"

He felt Landon's silent laugh shake the bed. "Technically, this is our *second* date. And if you'll have lunch with me tomorrow after class, that will be three."

"True. Man, I can't believe you're not running for the hills. Date two and I maul you at the door, you find out I have a secret underwear fetish and a possible stalker. I'm just a barrel of laughs, huh?"

"I considered running, but something stopped me." Landon pushed up to look down at Mark, his expression completely serious.

"Yeah, and what was that?" Mark asked as he reached up to smooth down a tuft of reddish-brown hair sticking up on top of Landon's head.

"The sex," Landon answered simply, with a shrug.

"Oh really. The sex?"

Landon nodded. "It was really great sex." There was a crack in his stony expression, a quirk to his eyebrow and lips. "I mean, amazing. Why else would I be here?"

"You little shit," Mark growled. Landon cracked up laughing before Mark even touched his ribs, but after that it was fair game. The tickle wrestling began on the bed and ended on the floor in a pile of two sweaty men, covered in come for the second time.

Mark's smile stretched to the point of painful as they lay there. The covers were still on the bed, but he didn't have enough energy to move to get them. "You're right. The sex is fucking *exceptional*. I think I'd even put up with someone crazy like me for it."

"You're a nut." Landon shoved his shoulder. "Come on. We need to get cleaned up. Then we should eat some more of that food before it goes stale."

“Ooh, bossy, huh? I like it.” Mark managed to make it off the floor in time to see Landon’s sweet ass walk into the bathroom. The image of Landon, wet in the shower, had Mark’s interest piqued, and he didn’t waste a second scrambling after his hot man.

The next day Mark sat with Landon in the back of class and got another sweet smile as a reward. The only downside was seeing Taylor look over at where Mark normally sat, then search the room until he spotted him in back by Landon. The disappointment was obvious even from there. Mark didn’t feel bad—he’d never led Taylor on, but he knew he’d need to talk to the guy at some point. After class, Taylor was stalling and trying to catch his attention, but Landon was right there next to him, waiting to go to lunch together. There was no way Mark was going to tell Landon to go ahead on his own to their lunch date, so he ignored Taylor’s look and walked out.

Mark had hoped for an intimate meal with Landon where he could get to know the man who was consuming his every thought. What he got was very different and lunch was more entertaining than Mark could have dreamed. Instead of being a quiet affair with just the two of them, Isaac found them and plopped down in the seat beside Landon, completely unaware that they’d picked a corner table for privacy. Landon looked pained, but Mark shrugged and smiled. He was happy to get to know Landon’s roommate, and it wasn’t worth hurting Isaac’s feelings over. Especially when, not ten minutes later, Ron and Sam joined them. Between Ron’s outrageous stories of his weekend, and Isaac’s nonstop chatter—which was great because the guy was surprisingly hilarious—Mark couldn’t remember when he’d last laughed that much.

By Wednesday, Mark was flying high and driving Sam insane with his happiness. No new presents came, and Mark was relieved. There was little doubt in his mind that they were from Taylor, and Mark assumed he must have gotten the picture that Mark wasn’t single anymore. That is, until Wednesday afternoon when Mark was walking across the quad and heard his name shouted out.

He stopped and turned to find Taylor jogging up to him. “I’m glad I caught you. There’s something I wanted to talk to you about. Or ask you, I guess. Um.”

Mark had never seen Taylor so uncomfortable before. He knew and dreaded what was coming. “Listen, Taylor, I wanted to talk to you too.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” Mark took in a big breath and plunged ahead. “About the gifts. I know they’re from you. I liked them, I mean, they were sweet, and I’m really flattered, but I’m with Landon.”

“Yeah. I *know*.” There was a clear *duh* at the end of Taylor’s sentence, even if it wasn’t said out loud. “What gifts? What are you talking about?”

“The anonymous gifts. The ones...” There was a small chance that Taylor was simply trying to save face, but the clear confusion in his expression had Mark second guessing that theory. “The ones that obviously weren’t from you.”

“Sorry, man. No. Why did you think I was sending you gifts?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I thought it had to be someone from Theatre and Society. You mentioned I needed an umbrella, and the next time it rained the secret admirer sent me an umbrella. Not to mention, I mean, you’ve talked to me more in the last couple weeks than you ever did before, and Sam said you came over to see me the other night.” Taylor had made the most sense, Mark was sure. “Oh, plus someone else in class said you keep looking at me.”

“I looked your way a time or two, yeah. You’re nice to look at.” Taylor winked, “But I have my eye set on someone else. Which is why I’ve wanted to talk to you. Do you think... Holy shit, I can’t believe I’m going to ask this. But... do you think you could put in a good word for me with Sam? Or if that feels like elementary school shit, then maybe we can all hang out together sometime. Or something?” Taylor shoved his hands in his coat pockets and looked out at the quad. “I wouldn’t put you on the spot and ask you to set us up on a blind date or anything, but I don’t have any classes with him, and we don’t have many friends in common, so it’s really hard to find an excuse to talk to him.”

“Sam? As in, my roommate, Sam?” Mark couldn’t believe it.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Sam. As in the slightly geeky physics major who wears a size ten shoe in his mouth most of the time?”

Confusion flashed across Taylor’s face and then he was laughing. “Yeah, that one. He’s so damn cute with that foot stuck in his mouth, though. Actually, he’s cute no matter what he does.” Taylor blurted the last and then looked shocked he’d said it.

“Shit, Taylor. I’m sorry to tell you this, but he’s straight.”

“No.” Taylor shook his head. “But I thought... are you sure? Well, obviously you’re sure, you’re his best friend. Damn.” Taylor heaved a large, unhappy sigh and shrugged. “I guess I shouldn’t have assumed. But I’ve never seen him with a girl, and he comes to a lot of the GLBT events on campus.”

“Yeah, I dragged him to the first couple, and then we met Grady, who never misses an event. So now it’s funny, because Sam’s usually the one dragging me with him,” Mark explained, but he doubted it helped Taylor at all. “I really am sorry it’s not possible. If it were, I would have fixed you up. And I’ve got to say, you have good taste.”

“Yeah, a fat lot of good that will do me. But thanks, Mark.” Taylor’s eyes caught something behind Mark and his mood lifted. “Hey, there’s your man. Hi, Landon.”

“Uh, am I interrupting?” a familiar, deep voice asked from behind Mark, sending a welcome shiver over his skin.

“Not at all.” Mark turned and beamed. Not only did he not have to feel guilty about letting Taylor down, but he was getting to see Landon unexpectedly. “We were just talking about, um...” Mark stalled out, realizing he couldn’t tell Landon what they were talking about without divulging Taylor’s feelings, and his mind failed to come up with another topic on the spot. “Are you on your way to class?” he tried instead.

“Yeah. I guess I’ll see you later.” Disappointment and jealousy showed on Landon’s face before he could hide it. Taylor must have seen it too, because he stepped in, smooth as always.

“No, we’re done. Landon, you are seriously lucky to have such a nice boyfriend. I was just telling him about someone I’m into, and I think Mark actually felt guilty that he had to be the one to tell me the guy is straight.” Taylor clapped Mark on the shoulder. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the object of my misguided affections about this.”

“Of course not.”

“Thanks, man. See you guys around.” With a brief wave, Taylor walked away.

“Um.” Landon looked at Mark in confusion. Mark shrugged and took his hand as they started towards the west quart buildings. “That was odd.”

“You have no idea.” Mark looked at Landon out of the corner of his eye. “You were jealous for a second there, weren’t you?”

Landon rolled his eyes. “Maybe for a second. But no longer than that.” He bumped Mark with his shoulder. “And by the way—boyfriend? Are you spreading that around before you’ve even told me of our changed status?” The lilt in Landon’s voice was teasing.

“*Me tell you?* Here I’ve been waiting for you to tell me. Of course, I’m not against the idea. So whenever you decide the status works for you, feel free to spread it anywhere you want.”

Landon’s laugh bordered on a cackle, “I must be one sick puppy, because that sounded dirty to me.”

“That works, as long as you’re my sick puppy.”

Landon spun to face Mark, keeping an iron grip on his hand while walking backwards and pulling Mark over to the shade of a building. “Yeah.” Landon stopped up against the brick and kissed Mark; short, hard, and possessive. He pulled back long before Mark was ready to let him go. “Okay then. I’ve got to get to class.”

“Yeah, I’ll walk you.” Mark stepped back in a daze.

Landon smirked. “I’m already here.” He nodded towards the building they were leaning against. “You have that group study session tonight?” Landon asked as he straightened up, and started to walk backwards again towards the front of the building. Mark nodded. “I’ll see you at class tomorrow. And then lunch?”

“Sounds good,” Mark called. Landon winked and disappeared around the corner of the building.

Damn. Mark smiled to himself. *I think I have a boyfriend. One fine, sexy, funny boyfriend.*

Chapter 7

Mark left his advisors office ready to burst. *Holy shit, I actually, frickin' got it.* His advisor in the education department had congratulated him on the internship, but her always reserved demeanor didn't come close to the excitement bubbling inside Mark. He needed to share the news with someone who'd understand his enthusiasm, and he only had to think for a second to know which direction to take once he was outside. After all, Dan had not only helped him get his resume put together for the internship at the kid's theatre camp, he'd also written Mark an amazing reference.

It hadn't really sunk in yet—that he was going to get to spend the summer mixing two things he loved, teaching and the stage—and Mark was flying high, knowing that his life was coming together. Hell, he even had a boyfriend. Mark smiled as he entered the building, wishing he could call Landon and tell him the good news. But that would have to wait. Yesterday, when Mark had invited Landon to breakfast, he'd said he had some family thing in the morning, and that he'd meet Mark outside the theatre building before class.

The entryway was eerily silent, which was normal for this time of the day, and the whole place felt deserted. Mark knew that wasn't the case, though. Dan and one or two other professors would be in their offices or classrooms getting ready for the day, and a group was meeting downstairs in the costume shop. Mark headed down the hall towards Dan's office and heard what sounded like a muffled argument. The voices echoed in the halls, so he wasn't sure which way they were coming from until he turned the corner.

It was very obviously coming from down at the end near Dan's room, but it wasn't Dan yelling. More worried for Dan than thinking about his privacy, Mark picked up his pace. He was a little over halfway there when he recognized the other voice and stopped.

Mark was positive it was Landon's voice yelling, but that couldn't be right.

"You promised!"

"Landon, settle down. I saw an opportunity to help and I took it." Dan's voice was more subdued, but the words were still clear.

"Well, I didn't need your damned help!" Landon's voice rang down the hall.

Mark backed up a step, common sense telling him to leave. He wasn't about to eavesdrop or interrupt. But something wasn't sitting right. Landon was the one yelling. *Landon*. Yelling at a professor? Undecided on what to do, he stood frozen to the spot.

"I see that now. But at the time... I thought you were playing it safe and just needed a little nudge. You know, they say the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? You and your stupid philosophical... I—" There was a pause. "*Gaahhhh!* I'm so pissed I don't even know where to start."

What could have made Landon—quiet, sweet Landon—blow up like that? And at *Dan*?

A noise behind Mark reminded him that the building wasn't empty. How many other people could hear what was going on? Before he could do what was smart, he moved closer. The door was open a crack, which explained the volume and clarity.

Mark rapped his knuckles on the wood door and it swung open. "Hey guys. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I thought you should know that everything you're saying is echoing down the hall. Maybe you should—" Mark stopped. Landon's eyes had gone round and his jaw slack. "Landon, you okay?"

"You heard... *everything*?"

"Ah, shit," Dan muttered and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No. I just walked in. But I'm guessing that anyone else in this section of the building has." Mark stepped farther into the room and shut the door behind him. Landon didn't look too good. "Dan, what's going on here?"

"I think that's up to my nephew to tell you," Dan offered, and received a glare from Landon.

"Nephew?" Mark asked. "I'm confused."

"You hadn't told him? I understand you not wanting the general student body to know, but I thought you'd at least admit to your friends that you're related to me."

Landon stopped glaring, but he wasn't smiling either. "Don't take offense, I just hadn't gotten around to it yet."

"You're his nephew? But I thought..." Mark turned from Landon to Dan. There wasn't a single resemblance. "Wait, I thought your nephew was a little kid." Mark directed his question to Dan, since Landon seemed to be avoiding even looking at Mark.

"To me, he is. And for the sake of clarification, he's Len's biological nephew, which is how he can be in my class. But I'm still just as much his uncle considering I changed his diapers, and helped him learn to walk." Dan looked over to where Landon was standing halfway across the room, his hip propped against the wall and his arms crossed. "Hell, I was the one to give him 'the talk' when he was fifteen after he came out."

"*Daaaann.*" Landon groaned as he knocked his head against the wall.

Mark chuckled. "This sounds like payback for Sam embarrassing me last weekend. So this was the family thing you had to do this morning? Yell at your uncle?"

"Yes," Landon gritted out between his teeth. He opened one eye and peered at Mark. "Don't give me that look. I have every right to be pissed."

"Enlighten me. Unless it's private family business. If that's the case, I'll leave you to it. Just don't yell so loud that everyone in the department thinks you're about to kill him."

"That's exactly the problem. It wasn't *family* business, it was my *private* business. Dan promised—*promised*—that if I came to school here, family life and school life would be kept separate. On campus, I would be just another student, and he wouldn't get involved in my private life." Landon's gaze flickered to Dan before meeting Mark's eyes. "That was our deal and he broke it."

"Well, your first mistake was asking him to treat you like every other student." Mark smirked. "He meddles in all our lives."

Landon snorted. "I highly doubt he goes around trying to find boyfriends for his other students." His look was intense as he went on, his words slow and precise. "He set us up. On our project? He purposely assigned partners, just to get us to go out together."

Even with what he'd suspected confirmed, Mark couldn't summon anger if he tried. Hell, he wanted to hug the man. He looked over at Dan but spoke to Landon, "Yeah. I already wondered about that the day he assigned us together. He knew about my tickets."

“Mark, I’m sorry. I know you were adamant about not getting fixed up, and I had every intention of honoring that, but there was more to it.” Mark had never seen Dan look anything but confident, but right then his picture belonged in the dictionary next to ‘shamefaced’. “And you said you didn’t have blinders on—that if the right man was there in front of you, you weren’t going to ignore it. All I did was put you within sight of each other.”

“Thanks.” Mark smiled when Dan squinted in confusion. “Dan, it’s okay. Seriously, do I look mad to you?” Mark turned back to Landon. “What I don’t get, is why *you are*. I know he broke his word, but isn’t the result worth it?”

“You don’t get it,” Landon growled and flung an arm towards Dan. “How would you feel if you finally met a guy you like. I mean, really, really like. And the only way you can get a date is for your uncle to set it up? And not just that. I mean, when I said my mom was hovering, that wasn’t the half of it. What I should have said was that she’s the world’s most overprotective, smothering, meddling woman I—”

“Landon,” Dan warned. “Your mom may go overboard, but she cares.”

Landon sighed and closed his eyes. “Yeah, I know. I just thought I’d get a little freedom from the overboard part here.” When he opened his eyes there was a sarcastic twist to his smile. “The last thing I expected was for her to call and start in with a hundred and one questions about the nice young man that I was seeing, and how Uncle Dan approved of him.”

Mark chuckled. “Seriously? Wow, Dan, I think I’d be plenty pissed too. You don’t go snitching about a guy’s love life to his *mom*.”

“Um, yeah.” Dan winced. “She calls every week, and I just wanted her to stop worrying so much. Sorry about that.”

Landon was calmer now and Mark could tell he was more hurt and disappointed than angry. He closed the distance between them and wrapped his fingers around Landon’s wrist, rubbing his thumb over Landon’s pulse. “So, what did you tell her about me?” he whispered, a seductive tease in his voice.

“Oh, the usual,” Landon’s eyes lit up as he whispered back. “That your ass is very grabbable and you have a mouth made for blowjobs.”

Mark laughed. “Good to know. Nothing about my kissing skills, though, huh?”

“Okay.” Dan clapped his hands. “I really didn’t need to hear that. Why don’t you young men get out of here? Class isn’t for,” he checked his watch, “over an hour.”

“Yes, Professor,” Mark said at the same time Landon chimed in, “Sure, Uncle Dan.”

“Am I forgiven for my misguided, but still good intentions?” Dan asked to both of them.

“I guess,” Landon huffed. “But if you ever meddle again, I’m telling Uncle Len on you.”

Mark was glad to see the ruffled feathers smoothed out, but he was curious about something. “One thing, though. You said that you had every intention of honoring my no-dating policy, but that you didn’t because there was more to it. What did you mean by that?”

“Um.” Dan gave Landon a pointed look. “Maybe you should tell him. I don’t want to get into any more trouble.”

Landon nodded, hesitated, then stepped towards the door. “Yes, but privately.” He tugged on Mark’s hand to get him to follow.

Mark thought about stopping their retreat when he remembered he’d wanted to talk to Dan, but that didn’t feel nearly as important as getting Landon alone.

“Your place?” Landon waggled his brows.

“Sam’s there. But I know of a place.”

Getting Landon alone in his dorm room would be nice, but the spot Mark had in mind was almost as good. He led Landon down a hall and up the stairs to behind the main theatre.

“Here.” It was a small loft room above and behind the stage used for extra props and equipment. “I’ve heard rumors that this is on the top-ten list for make-out places on campus, but I haven’t had the pleasure of trying it yet.”

Landon laughed. “Looks good.” He spun in a slow circle, taking in the odd assortment of things cluttering the room. “No bed though,” he said with a wink over his shoulder at Mark.

“Nope. But that’s probably a good thing. Can you imagine how gross that would be, stashed up here and used by who knows how many people? Yuck.” Mark shuddered. “Besides, I thought we were looking for privacy to talk.”

Landon’s slump of disappointment and small pout would’ve been comical if Mark didn’t feel it just as acutely. “Yeah, I s’pose,” Landon said, resigned, as he took a step closer to a large wall shelf and leaned against it. “So, you wanted

to know about why Dan fixed us up? You see, that's mainly why I was so mad at him. He had insider information that he only had because he teaches here. Uncle Dan didn't just set us up because he thought we'd be good together, he knew that I liked you."

"There's nothing wrong with that. If you told him—"

"No, I didn't. You did. Without meaning to, of course. But..." he trailed off with a heavy sigh, like the world was about to come crashing down around him.

"Landon, you're talking in riddles."

"Remember, last weekend when I told you I had a confession to make?" Landon asked.

Mark thought for a second and the memory—them naked in bed, freshly sated and talking quietly, made his body go warm all over again. "Oh yeah. We got a little distracted, so I forgot about that."

Landon nodded, but he must have been remembering what distracted them too, because a knowing smirk followed. "Anyway, I was going to tell you—" he paused and looked down towards Mark's shoes. "I—I'm your secret admirer. That's why Dan set us up. Because you told him about the gifts, he put it together that it was me, and he thought he'd help out, all sneaky-like."

"Seriously?" Mark's head cocked to the side as he thought back. Landon was his admirer—*Landon*. Except... "You didn't know anything about the underwear."

"That's because I didn't send them. I know you said it would be too big of a coincidence to have two different admirers, and I don't know what else this other person sent you, but I *swear* the underwear wasn't from me."

"I believe you, but that's really weird." Mark walked over to stand next to Landon against the shelf, their shoulders almost touching. Now that he could put a face to them, the gifts didn't seem nearly as ominous, and he found himself almost desperate to slot them in place with what he knew about Landon—to give each of them a new, personal meaning. "What *was* from you? The CD?"

"Yes. It was, well, it was kind of impulsive. I overheard you tell a friend about how you couldn't get in to the Christmas spirit because we didn't have any snow here yet. And, I don't know," Landon shrugged, "I was Christmas shopping the next week and saw the CD, so I bought it. I wasn't even sure if you liked country music, but it's my favorite and it was Christmas songs, so..."

“Are you shittin’ me? You like country music too?”

“I grew up not far from Nashville. So, southern rock and country, yeah.”

“Cool.” *Something else in common. Sweet.* “What else? The sketch had to be you.”

“I drew it last summer from a picture someone else took of the play.” He looked sideways at Mark, one corner of his mouth lifted. “I thought you looked hot. But then I didn’t know what to do with the sketch once it was done. It was sitting in a drawer in my room, hiding under other stuff where no one could see it. I thought, what the hell, and sent it to you for Christmas because at least you’d get to put it up somewhere. I mean, if you liked it.”

“I love it. My mom has it on the mantel back home.” Mark propped his shoulder against the shelf so he could watch Landon’s profile. He took Landon’s hand and lifted it to kiss the back. Landon flushed pink, which was growing to be Mark’s favorite look on him, so he kissed Landon’s hand again before letting their joined hands settle between their bodies.

“And then there were the cookies. I saw you one day in January looking really down, and I guess I hoped they’d put a smile on your face. And they did.” Landon laughed softly. “You have no idea how it felt to see you eating them in class that day. I don’t think you realized you were practically moaning after every bite, and I had to keep my face down so nobody would see me smiling.”

“Oh, really? You’re so cute.”

“Shut up.” Landon bumped his shoulder against Mark, but then stayed there, settling in against him. “And the last one was an umbrella. You did get that, right? I wasn’t sure with leaving it outside the scene shop, but it was going to rain, and I had two, so...”

“Yeah, I got it,” Mark said softly. “Thank you.”

“Um, Mark?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you still think it’s... I mean, I swear I’m not a weird stalker or a crazy person. I didn’t even mean for it to turn into a secret admirer thing. I just liked you, and... Shit. Do you think I was being creepy?” Landon blurted the last question with an exhale.

“No.” Mark leaned in and whispered in Landon’s ear, “Can I tell you a secret?” He felt Landon’s slight nod. “I wished it was you.”

Landon twisted and looked Mark in the eye so they were only a few inches apart. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” This close, Mark could see little flecks of yellow and brown with the green of Landon’s eyes. *God, he’s beautiful.* “Right from the start. If you’d asked me out, I would have jumped at the chance.”

“Well, I didn’t know that then.” Landon smiled as he reached out, first softly rubbing the hollow of Mark’s neck with his thumb, then sliding his knuckles up and down over the same spot, his eyes never leaving Mark’s. “After that first time when I made a fool out of myself, it was so hard to get up the courage to try again. The couple times I was going to, you were never alone. You have all these friends and ten times that in confidence. And me? I was the idiot that every time I got within ten feet of you, I forgot what speech was.”

Mark scooted closer to kiss the corner of Landon’s mouth. “We’re a matching pair then. Because I was the idiot that even after you ran me over in the snow, and I thought you were a rude jerk, still spent a week thinking about you.”

“Well, I am unforgettable that way.” Landon preened.

“Damn right you are.”

“Any other questions?”

From the look on Landon’s face, Mark couldn’t tell if he really expected there to be more questions, but... “Um, actually yes.” Mark felt stupid for asking, for feeling unsure and wanting to hear it out loud, so instead he asked the first thing he could think of. “Why’d you keep Dan being your uncle a secret?” His face heated, but he plunged ahead. “And, you were probably kidding around yesterday, but I thought I’d, um, you know... check, in case you really wanted it official between us. And, I guess I was curious if you meant what you said about lace turning you on, or were you just being nice?”

He looked up, realizing he’d been focused on a button on Landon’s shirt instead of Landon, and for the first time in a week, witnessed the lip-bite to beat all lip-bites. To be fair, the smile did look in extreme danger of escaping and running rampant all over Landon’s face. Maybe even causing harm with muscle cramps in his cheeks.

“Yes,” Landon whispered and took the small step in to press against Mark.

“Yes? How does that answer any of my questions?”

“It’s the answer to the only one you really wanted to know.” Landon put his hand on Mark’s chest, rubbing slowly but much too softly. Mark wanted to push into it, to get closer.

“And how do you know that?”

“Usually, when someone has a list of questions, they put the one they really want to know in the middle. They hide it between things that aren’t as personal. And since you’ve brought up relationship status three times in a week, it didn’t take a genius to figure out that what you were really asking.” Landon moved to within a breath of Mark’s ear and whispered, “My answer is yes, I’m yours.” He gave Mark’s earlobe a tug with his teeth.

Mark’s breath hitched. “Oh, you little brat. Now all I want to do is kick Sam out of our room.” Landon’s husky laugh didn’t help the bulge growing in Mark’s jeans. “One last question,” he growled, pulling Landon closer. “How do you feel about testing out if this room really should be rated in the top ten?”

The instant heat in Landon’s eyes answered before his words. “Hell yes.”

They made it back to class with only seconds to spare, laughing and ignoring Dan’s knowing look as they rushed in. Mark tried to concentrate on the lecture, he really did, but the secretive smiles and nudges from Landon were quite the distraction. By the time Dan let them loose, Mark wasn’t sure if he’d absorbed a single thing the professor had said.

“You never did answer my other questions.” Mark said as they walked across campus towards the campus center for lunch.

“I thought I answered the last one quite well. And enthusiastically.”

“I’ll agree with you there.” Mark hummed and smiled to himself. “I meant about the lace,” he clarified in a hushed voice, so the other students around them couldn’t hear.

“Oh, I thought you were just asking that for filler. Wasn’t it obvious? Yes, I like it. Um...” Landon gave Mark’s body a slow once-over from the side. “A lot.”

Mark nodded. “Good.”

“Matter of fact, if you wanted, I could be your not-so-secret admirer and send you something. Maybe something red?” Landon teased, but Mark could see the sincerity and excitement there too.

“Mmm, I’d like that. I, um,” Mark laughed and shook his head as he opened the door to the campus center, letting Landon in first and following closely behind him. He grabbed the back of Landon’s coat to bring them a little closer before he admitted, “I ordered something else.”

Landon stopped and spun around. “Wow. Do you, um, already have it?” The heat in Landon’s eyes was back.

“Not yet. But you’ll be the first to know.”

Landon slapped Mark on the hip. “I better be the only.”

“Of course.” They started walking again and were halfway up the steps when Mark had a thought. “Except it’s something to sleep in, so Sam might see it on occasion. Since he helped me pick it out...” Mark stopped short at the cafeteria doors.

“Aren’t you coming?” Landon asked over his shoulder. He must have noticed Mark’s stunned look, because a crease appeared between his brows as he turned and asked, “Mark, is everything okay?”

“Mystery solved,” Mark whispered, more to himself than Landon. “I know who sent the underwear.”

“Who?”

“Sam. It makes perfect sense.”

“Do you think Sam has feelings for you?” Landon asked, looking concerned.

“Of course not. He’s straight. But he was borrowing my computer that whole week. Even when he said something about how I should close my internet browser, I didn’t put it together, but I’d been looking up cross-dressing, and bam, a few days later I get the underwear. There’s no way that could be a coincidence. And, not only has he spent the last couple weeks trying to prove how supportive he is, he didn’t blink an eye when he walked in and caught me wearing stockings. Like he expected it.” The more Mark thought about it, the more obvious it was. That was so like Sam.

“That’s right, you’d said he walked in on you, but I was paying more attention to other things at the time.” Landon gave Mark a wicked smile that indicated what he’d been focused on. “Holy shit. That had to be interesting.”

"You have no idea. I dove under the covers so damn fast, I fell off the bed."

"But if it's him, then why would he try to make it seem like it was from your admirer? You guys are close. Why wouldn't he just buy them and give them to you?"

"First, you'd have to know Sam better, but that's exactly what he'd do. He'd never feel comfortable giving me something like that, but he probably thought I'd never really find out who the admirer was, so it was a safe. The only part I'm not sure about is if he meant it to be one of our typical pranks, and then felt badly when he realized that it was..." Mark shrugged a shoulder as he thought of how to put it, "something that maybe shouldn't be used as a joke, or personal or something. Or if he saw what I was looking up and ordered the underwear to be helpful."

Landon stayed quiet for a long moment. Finally, he blurted out, "Are you sure he's completely straight?"

"Wh-what?" Mark sputtered. "Yes, I'm sure. Sam would tell me if he wasn't."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right." Landon sighed, but he didn't look convinced. "For the record, if he was the one who sent the underwear, I think it was to be helpful. Just," he paused, his expression unreadable, "just promise that when you ask him about it, that you'll keep an open mind. Don't put him in a box, just because that's how you know him. And don't treat it like a joke. You know, be sensitive about it, just in case."

Landon actually looked worried, which was sweet in a way. "Babe, I promise I'll be as sensitive as I know how." A large group was walking their way, and since they were blocking the entrance to the cafeteria, Mark took Landon's hand and pulled him out of the way. He wasn't ready to have to share Landon with all of their friends yet, so once they were out of the group's path, he kept walking to the next hallway. He turned the corner and tugged Landon closer. "You know, you are going to make one kickass psychologist one day."

Mark could tell by the bashful downturn of Landon's head that he'd caught his man by surprise, earning him a sweet smile.

"Why is that?"

"Because you care so much about other people. And you don't judge." Mark wrapped his arms around Landon's waist and slid his lips across

Landon's cheek. "You're wonderful. And you may be pissed at your uncle for setting us up, but I want to buy the man a damned fruit basket."

Landon chuckled and leaned in closer. "You are an absolute nut." He turned his head to capture Mark's lips.

Mark could hear the low hum of conversation in the cafeteria, but the hall was vacant and just theirs for the moment. The kiss lingered, and just when Mark started to think that lunch could wait indefinitely, Landon pulled back.

"Tell you what," Landon began as he took a deep breath and composed himself. "I'll go in half on the fruit basket."

The End

Author Bio

Jessa Ryan grew up in Oregon, where she fell in love with rainy days, the beach, and books. Now she lives in Minnesota with her amazing husband and four wonderful children, who not only put up with her crazy writing and general zaniness, but actually look at it as a bonus.

Other than her family, there's nothing she loves more than hiding under a quilt with a mug of coffee, and either a good book or her laptop.

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UNDILUTED

By Dayton Idoni

Photo Description

At war with the shadows, a young man conjures a weak shell of smokeless flame about his body. The darkness in his dirty, dank surroundings is split asunder. Cut away by the youth's amber light. He stands defiantly, half-naked and half-starved, bathed in the blossoming heat which bends to his will. Gazing forward, his mind wonders. Yearning for companionship; desperate to escape the life in which he is trapped, while dreaming of solace.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He was stumbling through the streets without any goal in mind. It was getting colder. He should be searching for a place to sleep, but he kept walking. Today was a bad day. Scratch that, the last eight years were bad. Ever since he realized who he was, what he could do, just how powerful he was, his weeks were full of bad days. He couldn't trust anyone. Those who didn't want to use him for their own goals were afraid of him and wanted to see him dead. He wrapped his arms around his skinny upper body, trying to stop the trembling. He was starving and the thirst was making him dizzy. His control was slipping he could feel it. The air around him was getting restless; he heard the ground under his feet cracking and felt the fire under his skin trying to break through. He was just thankful that it wasn't raining.

They came out of nowhere (or maybe he wasn't paying attention). Before he had a chance to run away, he was lying on the ground his hands instinctively wrapped around his head. They kicked him and shouted at him. He couldn't understand what they were saying too busy listening to his own thoughts. He almost wanted to laugh. He could easily kill them all, it would be a matter of seconds. But he didn't do anything. It wasn't that he wanted to die per se. It was just that he was tired. Tired of running, hiding. Of not being able to trust anybody. He didn't even flinch when the shot came.

It was on his way to get some food when he heard the shot. Without thinking he started to run, drawing his gun. But he wasn't fast enough. When he ran around the corner he saw a black SUV starting to drive away, his shouted "Stop! Police" was more than useless.

He was about to look at the license plate when he heard a soft whimper. Lying on the ground was a body. The Man was tall, maybe a few centimeters smaller than him, skinny and clothed from his head to his feet in black. He wasn't moving. But what made him hesitate to approach the hurt man wasn't that he seemed dead. As a cop, he had seen many things he rather hadn't. In particular, cases involving Elementals were especially gruesome. But that was something else. He had never seen something so disturbing and so beautiful in his whole damn life. The whole body of the kid (now that he was near him he saw that he couldn't be much older than 18) was on fire. It surrounded him like a shield. A bullet hovered only a few centimeters above his throat, stopped mid-air in the glowing wall of fire, saving the kid's life. A soft sob drew his eyes to the kid's face. Black hair, red, full lips and shocking pale skin distracted him for a second. But the bruises that were slowly appearing on his sharp cheekbones and the blood that was trickling from the corner of his mouth threw him back to the situation. His hand closed around a bony shoulder, shaking him carefully.

"Hey kid, wake up!"

The kid's eyes fluttered open. He got an impression of dark green eyes before they closed again. A chuckle escaped the kid's lips:

"Figured I wouldn't die... story of my life"

"Son of a—hey kid stay awake! I'll call the hospital"

Suddenly the fire surrounding the kid was getting brighter.

"Please, no hospital, please... they'll find me... please" he mumbled, his words almost indistinguishable. The fire was starting to fade away.

"What? Hey, no! Stay with me" the fire disappeared

"What. The. Fuck!?"

Sincerely,

Sofia

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: new adult, action, non-explicit, mythical creatures, mystery, alternate universe, magic users

Word Count: 40,109

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Author's Note

I want to thank Sofia for her additional input during the early steps took to create this story. I'd like to thanks to my friends, Kerry and Michael, for beta reading the initial (and somewhat messy) story. And finally, I want to shower masses of gratitude upon Astrid for her phenomenal editing, along with her arsenal of beta readers. You've all been *amazing*!

With regard to the story, I hope that those of you, who have persevered through its pages, enjoyed the adventure! This is the first time I've ever written to a deadline, and I'll admit, I found it incredibly tricky. I think I was a little over-ambitious with the story line and tried to cram in the plot of what could have been a 150,000 word story, into 38,000 words. I've ended up chopping out a lot of what went off in my head, because there simply wasn't enough time to squeeze it all in. However, I thoroughly enjoyed writing this story and the prompt was marvelous! The whole experience was awesome, and I've certainly learned a lot from it. To all those who make this event possible, hold your heads high with pride; you're doing a grand job!

UNDILUTED

By Dayton Idoni

Prologue

She cried softly as she cradled the quiet bundle in her arms. How could she have been this foolish? To think that she could pass her curse along to another living being and not regret it. To assume that she could carry a child in her womb for nine months and not come to love it.

His scarlet skin was still smeared with gore, but his tiny green eyes were clear and inquisitive. Barely even a day old and already he looked out at the world, seeking to unravel its mysteries.

She wiped at her eyes and sniffled, the sound echoing out into the blackness of the cavernous space. The Cathedral of St. Darren had been easy enough to break into, and offered a welcome shelter from the biting snow outside. The dark wooden pews were lined up symmetrically, leading towards the great cross which hung above the pulpit. The red velvet carpet had been recently washed, the strip of fabric dividing the huge edifice into two halves. The stained glass window on the far side of the entrance depicted three figures leaning over a crib; an angel with its huge feathery wings outstretched, a human with a crown of golden sunlight about his head and a primal. The ruby elemental entity stood in a ring of its own fire, smiling serenely down at the baby in the hay.

Beyond the translucent pane, snow fell in heavy clumps, gathering on the lead that protruded from the ancient mosaic.

“How about a story, my radiant little boy?” the mother offered, barely any older than a child herself.

She carried the infant up the center of the construction, cautiously walking along the plush rug.

“I can’t read,” she confessed, “but I know the story and we can look at the pictures.”

She reached the pulpit and pulled the book, which was almost as big as the baby, down from its perch. Settling onto the steps, she flicked through its pages.

“The Holy Bahriel,” she sighed, skipping to the front of the book.

“In the beginning God created the World, and it was beautiful. Then God made the primals from the different elements of his creation. They were

ethereal creatures and were told to tend to His kingdom. Some were made of air and guided the wind about the sky. Some were made of water and ensured the rivers flowed to the sea. Others were made of earth; it was their job to make the plants grow. There were lightning primals, whose static energy kept the world spinning, providing night and day. And finally there were the fire primals, who would eat death away, turning it to ash and from the fertile remains new life would grow.”

The baby in her arms wriggled, his petite hand pointing up to her face as she continued to read.

“After the primals, God made the angels from His holy light. They were His voice and carried His words with them. But His last creation was the one He took most pride in. Finally, from His blood, God made men and because He loved them so much, He gave them a soul.”

Cooing merrily, the child nuzzled into his mother’s bosom, kicking at the book which balanced on her knees.

“The angels and the primals were aghast. They too wanted to live forever. God stated that if the angels and the primals wanted to share a human soul, then they must also share their gifts with the humans. The angels and the primals bonded with the humans, bestowing their elemental powers upon mankind, becoming a singular being. This is how the djinn were created, and now to this day, all races created by God have the opportunity to join Him in heaven, as long as they live honest and pure lives. However the most powerful of the primals were not able to fully fuse with humans. The five elemental Lords were too powerful. Sensing that there would be strife between the djinn and mankind, God offered the elemental Lords a boon. If they would retain their primal forms and keep the peace between the djinn and the humans, He would make them immortal. Thus the Paragons of Five Points was born, and the elemental Lords ensured that a balance was kept between men and djinn.”

The newborn dozed in the girl’s arms; his emerald-green eyes disappeared behind his delicate lids. She stifled a sob, wishing she had the courage to stay with her baby, but what could she do against the evils in the world? The Bahriel spoke of a time long dead, and in this modern one, few she knew of lived honest and pure lives.

“This bit isn’t in the Bahriel,” she said, closing the holy book. “It happened much more recently, during World War II. You see, there was a big war between lots of different countries and lots of djinn and humans were made to

fight each other. Lots of people died. But in a city named Turin, in a country called Italy, a djinnyah summoned one of the primal Lords. It was a giant beast, that the soldiers called The War Weasel. Its master, a woman named Carlote Galampier, and the primal destroyed half the city before disappearing into the air. Ever since that time, djinn have been shunned by the humans. Our world is not a place where people are pure and honest. Our world is full of danger and greed and men that wish us harm because of what happened decades ago.”

The thought caused her to tremble, and a wail escaped her throat. There was nothing pure and honest in what she had done, and until the day she died, she would hate herself for what she was about to do...

Chapter One

Seagulls screeched furiously at the intrusion, flapping their large, feathered limbs. They took to the bright, cool air and sought a safe spot to observe from, landing on the mossy roof of a disused warehouse. The dingy, plastic sheets creaked indignantly under their weight, threatening to topple the tiny flock over the side.

Beneath them, a young man walked sluggishly by, barely noting the gulls' irritated chatter. He pressed on along the deserted dock, focusing on the sloshing of the rhythmic waves as they slid against the harbor wall. On the opposing side of the bay were gray constructions of dilapidated brick and dust-layered contraptions. The once-thriving harbor now lay desolate, its monstrous machinery abandoned to the twenty-first century.

No more than a mile away, the hustle and bustle of the modern anchorage sounded dimly over the gentle rocking of the ocean. The youth strode slowly and deliberately towards it, spurred on by the clanking and calling of human voices.

Towards the salvation of the sea and away from the city. Away from the shantytowns, away from the high-rise buildings, away from the mansions and their denizens. Away from the huge column of black smoke that rose above the city, looming like a giant monster, readying to attack.

He was done with it. Finished with the users, abusers, and traitors who called the city of New Yarllynn their home. Those that weren't trying to exploit him against his will, shunned him like a leper. He'd been bought, sold, traded, stolen, rejected, beaten, and bled. He was an object, a container; the chrysalis that housed his enigmatic elemental power. The only part of him that had worth.

Licking at his cracked, pink lips, he shuddered at their dry, brackish taste. A gust of salty sea air assailed him, scraping against his bare skin. It caused him to sway and halt in his retreat. He wrapped his sickly arms around his slight torso, tearing the black fabric of his tattered T-shirt. His skinny frame trembled as he weakly tried to fend off the wind.

I need a drink he thought grimly.

When had he last eaten? It must have been days ago, maybe even a week.

The scuff of a foot on the cracked concrete, close behind him, caused him to flinch. He danced away from the thud, spinning as he shuffled.

Too late.

A bullish man in his late thirties, dressed in dark jeans and a navy blue shirt, lunged forward. With his bulbous fist, he landed a blow as hard as a hammer and quicker than was humanly possible. It crunched into the eye socket of the boy's face with a sickening crack.

He laughed with delight as the wraith-like youth's skin split open.

"Dirty fucking deserter!" he declared.

It sent the scrawny teen spiraling through the air, hissing through his clenched teeth, smothering a cry. Behind the assailant, two more appeared, each dressed in a similar fashion to the first. The three of them set to work, raining punches down upon the teen like a monsoon. As the younger man crumpled to the ground, he instinctively shielded his head with his arms, wrapping the gangly limbs around his face. He closed his eyes, vainly trying to drown out the agony that flared through his body.

His mind speculated over the details of his predicament. *How have they managed to find me here? I was sure I'd be safe by the sea. How did they know I would try to find a boat?*

A heel to his chest caused something to snap, and a cacophony of pain sang out through his body. He moaned involuntarily, the sound of his own voice aggravating him. The embers that resided in the deepest part of his consciousness flared suddenly brighter.

He could kill them all in an instant; disintegrate them like moths in a flame. He could allow the growing fire beneath his skin to expand, becoming an inferno of uncontrolled rage.

Imagine the smell...

No. He had seen enough death at his hands, navigated through the carnage he'd wrought before, and he was tired of it. Another thought skittered quickly into his brain.

He could let them have their way. Let them end his life. It wasn't that he wanted to die, but what did he really have to live for? Why did he feel compelled to survive? He had no family to speak of, no friends or possessions other than the clothes on his back. His only plan in the world was to stowaway

on a ship and get out of the States. After that, then what? Mayhap he should just let the three men hurry him along to an early grave.

"That's enough," barked a cold, unfamiliar voice.

The savage pummeling came to an abrupt end, as the three men backed away. Not concerned with opening his eyes to glare at the orchestrator of this assault, the dark-clothed teen lay still. In his head, he listened to a familiar pulse which echoed about his ears. The ghost-like heartbeat, throbbing slower and with more vigor than his own.

"Not the lamp we were after, but you'll do just fine," the thug snarled.

Lamp? the youth wondered.

"Elson will be well chuffed when we roll up with your corpse," a tremble of venomous anger trickled into the tone. "You know, because his old man died after you torched half their house down."

The distinct click of a revolver being cocked sounded out over the still wailing gulls.

So Aaron was dead then? the teen mused and then opened his mouth to offer his attackers one word, "Good."

Officer Bronson sat in a squad car, thankfully off duty, outside Smiths' Sea Shipments. It had been a busy day, what with terrorists executing the honorable judge, Hugo Baxter, on the steps of New Yarllynn's Galleries of Justice and then setting fire to the building. Djinn had run riot through its halls, making holes in walls, dropping hostages from the highest floors. The D.O.T. had claimed responsibility for the act, threatening that more death was imminent if the balance between the djinn and the humans was not maintained. Firefighters had the blaze under control, but a plume of toxic smoke still crawled away from the smoldering remains.

He sighed, relinquishing the memory of the burning building, as he gazed at the precarious wooden shack before him. The sign of S.S. Shipments drooped from the wall, a mocking echo of the policeman's melancholy mood. Bronson was unsure how he'd ended up here again. A short while before, he'd left the precinct, spurred on by the rumble in his stomach, yet he found himself staring at the crumbling timber cabin.

Three week prior, Bronson had been called to the scene of a homicide in this exact same location, down at the docks. The body of a woman had been discovered, and the press had gotten wind of it somehow. Bronson and other rookies were called in for crowd control, barring entry to the disused office. Upon arriving, Bronson entered the building to report for duty, only to catch a glimpse of the decaying body.

A dull shock of horrified recognition rippled through his mind as he stared at the half-naked corpse.

Kacey.

His older sister, who he hadn't spoken to for almost a month, lay dead on a rotting desk, her slack-jawed face seeping a black residue into the dark, damp wood.

Cause of death: asphyxiation.

There hadn't been any sign of a struggle, and the C.S.I. unit confirmed that the body hadn't been moved since the homicide had taken place. She had been killed at the location. The murderer was still at large, and so far there wasn't even a serious suspect.

The sudden, explosive echo of a shot being fired snapped his mind back to the present. His body responded quicker than his brain, already moving out of the squad car, and rapidly, yet stealthily toward the source of the sound. Now out of the vehicle, he could hear the muffled reverberation of conversation coming from near the harbor's end. He navigated around the leaning structure of S.S. Shipments and tiptoed towards a walkway between two of the disintegrating warehouses. Familiar with the area after having combed through it on countless occasions to find evidence that would shed some light on his sister's murder, Bronson made his way to a chain-link fence. The rusted corner of the metallic frame was broken and the thin grid curled away from the post, leaving enough of a gap for him to fit through. From there, he could shimmy silently down the passage and discover whatever was occurring on the other side of the structure.

Reaching the end of his hiding place, Bronson peeked cautiously out of the alley and bit back a gasp. Lying on the ground were the distinct remnants of a human body, set aglow by an unnatural ruby-red fire. The smokeless flames licked at the charred remains of the deceased person, rising several meters in height. Around the body, the blistered concrete cracked, and chunks of stone

jutted up from the floor. The whistling of car wheels ricocheted off the abandoned buildings, over the crackling and popping of the fire. Bronson turned his gaze sharply, just in time to see a black SUV speeding away. He leapt out from his hiding place with his gun in hand.

“Stop,” he bellowed. “Police!”

Seemingly unaware, the SUV continued in its rapid retreat, the tires screaming again as it disappeared around a corner.

Bronson plunged his hands into his pocket, retrieving his cell phone. He frantically fingered the keys, intending to call into the station and request a tail for the conspicuous SUV, but a pleading croak sounded from the sizzling mass on the ground behind him.

“Don’t.”

Incredulously, Bronson spun on his heels. To his amazement, what he had earlier mistaken for a charred corpse was in fact a young man, dressed entirely in black. His body was bathed in crimson flame from head to toe, yet what little of his skin was visible seemed unmarred by the fire. Even his long, ebony hair was unaffected by the heat as it hovered around his head in wispy, dark tendrils. His eyes were closed, but his shadowy brows were creased, his young face a mask of concentration. Levitating a few centimeters from his throat, a bullet spun in the blaze, its steel-like sheen changing color from a silvery hue to one of gold.

Bronson took a cautious step toward the young man, unsure of how best to approach the situation. Abruptly, the fire surrounding the youth died away, revealing its fleshy core. Still dazzled by the flames, Bronson gave the boy a quick once-over. Blood seeped from a gash over his right eye, and there was a split on his lower lip.

When the young man didn’t move, Bronson knelt at his side.

With a trembling hand, he nudged the teenager’s shoulder. “Hey kid, wake up.”

The young man’s lashes fluttered open and emerald-green eyes stared out from behind them, meeting Bronson’s gaze. His pupils were elongated, as Bronson had suspected, like that of a goat.

“Figured I wouldn’t die,” the teenager mumbled, his lips twitching into an ironic grin. “Story of my life.”

The smile on his lips faded, and his irises rolled up into the back of his head.

“Son of a...” the rookie whispered. “Hey kid, stay awake. I’ll call the hospital.”

The pasty boy snatched blindly at the older man’s wrist, “Please no hospital,” he pleaded feebly. “Please, they’ll find me... please...”

His voice trailed off as consciousness left him behind, broken and drained.

“What?” Bronson asked, shaking the kid again gently. “Hey, no! Stay with me!”

More vigorously, the officer wobbled the other man’s shoulder, yielding no response. Giving up he sat back, weighing his options.

The only thought that passed through his brain was simply, *What. The. Fuck?*

Chapter Two

Sleep had been an abyss of darkness. Dreamless, empty, like his life. Rising from its depths, he inhaled a deep lungful of air, glad to be away from the ocean's edge and the stinging, salty atmosphere. As his awareness emerged, he tried to force it back down, to allow his mind this brief respite. However, his brain had other ideas and jarring thoughts jostled to the forefront.

Where am I? he pondered, daring to open his eyes a fraction. *What happened?*

He found himself sprawled out on the backseat of a car. Through the sealed window, countless stars seemed to throb against the inky blackness of night. Incomprehensible miles separated him from their glow, and yet, somehow, the radiance of their flame managed to cross the vast lonely span of space. He longed to join them, to burn bright in response to their hailing, protected by the desolate vacuum of near nothingness, which encased the world.

"Good, you're awake," a quiet voice rumbled from the front of the car.

Through the cage that separated the two halves of the vehicle, he could spy a young policeman. The silvery moonlight cast itself through the meshing, obscuring the officer's face with shadow.

"You got a name, kid?" asked the darkened figure.

"Kid?" he responded. "How old are you? I bet there aren't many years between us."

"What's between us is a salt-infused steel grill, and unless you start answering my questions, there will also be several miles between us when I kick you out of the car and leave you here."

"And, 'here' is where exactly?"

"We're in the Rural District, between a couple of farms. I figured you'd want to be away from the sea spray. I also didn't know if you'd go nuclear again, so I brought you away from that giant fire hazard of a city." The young officer pointed to a glow on the horizon, where New Yarllynn hid behind a hill.

Weighing his options, the green-eyed boy thought for a second. He didn't know this man or this place. He wasn't sure how much this cop knew about him, aside from the obvious. When he didn't answer, the older man continued,

“You’re a djinni, then? A fire elemental? I’m guessing you’re quite the find.” He held up the golden bullet, which had altered its metallic compound in his flames. “I’m also guessing that you’re worth a lot to those men who were trying to kill you. Which begs the question; how could someone with your talents possibly be worth more dead than alive?”

“Ren,” the youth stated, dodging the torrent of questions by answering the first.

“What?”

“My name,” he croaked, “is Ren.”

“Ren,” the obscured officer repeated. “Well Ren, you look like shit and you don’t smell much better either. What sort of drugs were they trading you, in exchange for your expertise?”

The cop’s face wrinkled with contempt.

“You assume too much,” Ren mumbled, sitting up, sliding against the black upholstery.

“No offence, but you’re practically a walking, talking skeleton. Only junkies and supermodels look that thin—” he nodded to Ren’s protruding ribcage, through the tattered remains of his T-shirt “—and kid, you ain’t on a catwalk.”

The skinny teen looked down at his torso and the pale skin that constricted around his scrawny bones. There was nothing to him, no substance, and no meat. He was, as the stranger had said, a living corpse, existing solely to haunt the world. His long, dark hair hung from his skull, trickling down into his lap, the wispy strands a stark contrast to his almost opaque flesh. He must have looked ghastly; his outer shell perfectly projecting his inner, broken, persona.

“I’m not a junkie,” Ren protested weakly, annoyed. “I’m just hungry is all.”

“I bet,” the dusky-haired man sighed, “and I’ve got a glove compartment full of delicious goodies. Most of them unsalted too. You’re welcome to all you can carry once we’ve had a little chat.”

Ren narrowed his coal-colored lashes, “A chat? You’re bribing me with food? To do what exactly?”

“First of all, just to answer my questions. I want to know what was occurring at the harbor.”

“And because you think you saved me, I’m going to tell you?” Ren grinned, “You’ve locked me up in the back of your car, and you’ve driven us out of the city to some strange place. I’m weak and half-starved, so you think you have the upper hand? You think you get to dictate what’s going to happen?”

“You’re a djinni, I’ll never have the upper hand,” the officer snapped. “But that doesn’t mean I’m unprepared.”

He briskly picked up a tub of table salt, which had been left beneath his seat, shaking it briefly. “And the door isn’t locked. If you want to leave, I won’t try to stop you. If you try to stay against my will, you’ll be out the door, and I’ll leave you to wander back in the darkness by yourself.”

Ren eyed the tub of tiny, crystal-like grains irritably, imagining their blistering touch all over his body. He hated, that despite all his power, such a simple and insignificant thing could be so debilitating for him. He could shred through this car in a matter of minutes, leaving a charred hole in its place. But those tiny, twinkling shards of salt would render him powerless in a second, encasing his aura, imprisoning his innate elemental abilities.

The police man shuffled about in the front seat, producing a large bar of fruit and nut chocolate. Ren snorted irritably, as his mouth betrayed him, salivating at the sight of the delicious bar of sweet substance.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, pulling the ripped T-shirt about his chest, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

“Why were those men attacking you? And why didn’t you want to go to the hospital?”

“Because I don’t like hospitals and with regards to the men... Why not beat on me?” Ren quizzed. “I was a lone djinni wandering the docks. You know this city is infamous for its dilute bashings,” he spat the last two words, emphasizing the derogatory word used to describe his kind.

Dilutes.

“And if the guys beating on you were common thugs, I’d believe that. But the SUV they drove away in wasn’t exactly cheap. The men that shot at you, they didn’t happen upon you by chance, did they?”

Ren shifted his greasy hair out of his face, and he rubbed at his temples, “What’s your name?”

“I’m Mr. Don’t-Change-The-Fucking-Subject.”

“You know my name. Fair’s fair.”

“I know whatever bullshit alias first jumped into your head.”

“If you don’t believe a word that’s coming out of my mouth, then what’s with the inquisition?” Ren fixed his company with a hostile stare.

The older man considered his words before he answered.

“Theo Bronson,” he finally said, shuffling back into the small seat. “Everyone calls me Bronson.”

“Tab? Theodore Amadeo Bronson?” Ren quizzed, the name conjuring up a long-lost memory.

The rookie looked down at his partly unbuttoned shirt to where he wore his badge, but the spot was vacant, “Only my sister used to call me Tab! How do you know my full name?”

The need to be away from the policeman overwhelmed Ren suddenly. He scanned the small space, looking for a weakness in its fortifications. No doubt the entire frame of the damned squad car was constructed of salt steel. He pulled on the door handle, doubting the honesty of the cop’s words, surprised when it opened. Slipping out into the blackness of night, Ren wobbled weakly on his legs, kicking up beige dust from the dry dirt road. On both sides of the squad car was shoddy fencing, used to keep larger critters out of the fields where vegetables were grown. Beyond them, rows of bulbous green plants bled away from the light of the auto, vanishing into the darkness. The only other visible light was that of the city, several miles away from his current position. The cop wasn’t kidding; they were literally out in the middle of nowhere.

“Where are you going?” Bronson barked, opening the driver’s door and nipping quickly to Ren’s side.

“Away.”

Bronson bumbled up to Ren’s left, as his figure limped from the car, “I thought you were hungry.”

“Fuck off!” the djinni kid spat back.

Bronson clamped his jaw shut and balled his fist. He had to rein in his own emotion and his fraying temper. The skirmish at the harbor, so close to where his sister’s body had been found, and then Ren knowing Bronson’s full name; it was all too coincidental.

This was all connected to Kacey.

He couldn't let this lead fall through his fingers. Bronson contemplated pulling his gun on the retreating teen, but he couldn't just arrest the young djinni. Not after breaking protocol and basically abducting the youth. Ren would probably cry bloody murder at the station, and Chief Shaw would have his balls. Why had he gone against his better judgment and not taken the djinni to the hospital?

Because of my gut feeling.

"Kid, wait," he urged, tugging at Ren's shoulder.

Ren shrugged the hand away and looked over his shoulder to glare at the policeman. As he spun back, the shadowy mass of his mane shimmied over his back like the oily tendrils of a squid. Bronson flinched away, afraid the kid might flare up like a firework.

"I told you to fuck off," Ren hissed.

"And I told you, I want answers."

"You wouldn't believe what I have to say! You didn't believe me when I told you my name."

"I believe you knew my sister, Kacey!"

Ren faltered in his already wobbly stride. "Yes, I knew your sister."

"How? What were you to her?"

The djinni boy came to a stop in the dusty dirt track. "I'm the reason she's dead."

Bronson gasped, the sharp intake of air was the only sound in the vacuum that had formed between them. Had the bastard dilute just confessed to murdering his last living relative? Was this djinni the reason he was all alone in the world?

He pulled his pistol from its holster and pointed the barrel at the back of the kid's head. "Why?"

"Because..." the anger in Ren's voice was gone, replaced with a hollow sadness, "she was unfortunate enough to befriend me."

"Put your hands in the air," Bronson's tone trembled.

Ren slowly did as instructed, wincing at the ache caused by his rapidly healing ribs. He spread his fingers as his hands reached the summit of his

sloppy stretch. Sparks darted between the slender digits, then danced down the length of his arms. Within a fraction of a second, too quick for Bronson to be able to respond, Ren's entire body was burning with crimson flame.

"Stay away from me, if you don't want to burn to death like your sister," the teenager warned over the crackling heat.

Kacey didn't burn to death, Bronson's brain retorted. *What is this kid going on about?*

The immediate area around the djinni was illuminated in amber light. Shadows clawed menacingly at the flickering brightness, trying to reclaim their territory. Bronson's breathing quickened as he held his pose, arms outstretched with gun in hand. He thought about shooting the djinni in the leg, preventing him from escaping. Would it even affect the burning entity opposite him? Bullets hadn't seemed to work earlier, and he'd left the salt in the car. Before he could decide on a course of action, something shifted from out of the shadow.

A young girl in her midteens appeared and stood with her back to the officer. Her stance was confident, and she bobbed from side to side like a boxer looking for an opening in her opponent's defense.

"Are you another one of Whitmore's lackeys?" Ren asked, frowning defiantly at the newcomer.

The girl didn't answer. She just stared at the fiery djinni, her eyes determined and cold. The dust, disturbed by her feet, began to swirl around her body, like planets revolving around a sun. Her shoulder-length, pink hair whipped about her heart-shaped face and the fabric of her black, hooded sweatshirt began to judder, as the air twisted around her body.

She's a djinnyah, Bronson thought, feeling the breeze emanating from her form and knowing that, had she been facing him, he'd have seen her elongated pupils—the same as Ren's.

The spinning vortex increased in intensity, dragging grit from the dirt road. The girl allowed the wind to coil around her arm, as she pointed her fingers towards Ren. The dust and shale particles rushed toward the burning boy, causing him to shield his face with his hands. He hissed, as a sharp piece of rock found its way past his appendages and gashed his cheek.

"If that's the way you want to play," the angered djinni sneered.

He stoked the embers of his ethereal fire, and it flickered momentarily brighter. Focusing his elemental energy into a single point, Ren shot a curl of flame toward the girl. It snapped at its target like the whip of a beast tamer. The girl leapt from the ground, heading skyward, narrowly missing the blistering vine. She leapt over Ren, flipping around midair at a height no normal human had a hope of accomplishing, and landed on the opposite side. As she connected with the soil, she slammed her arms down, dragging a torrent of cool night air down with her. The blast of wind fanned at Ren's flames, and he laughed in maniacal delight as the plume of fire rose even higher.

"Stupid bitch," he shot. "Don't you know that air feeds a fire?"

"Let's see how you fare with a lungful of sand then, shall we?" she retorted, gesturing with her arms.

Able to better see her face from this angle, Bronson could see that the djinnayah had oriental heritage. Her metallic-gray eyes shone with mischief, as she beckoned to the night air. The gust of wind doubled back towards the inferno that had become Ren. It scraped along the ground like a wave moving along the beach, clutching at the dirt as it travelled. The blast of grit and dust poured down over the scene, bathing everything in a cloud of dust. In the cloud, Bronson struggled to see his hand as he waved it about blindly, lost amongst the glistening filth. He felt his way back towards the squad car and, once inside, he slammed the door. He was safe inside—Ren's fire wouldn't be able to penetrate the frame of his vehicle. As the dust settled around him, he flicked the headlights on and searched the vacant space around him.

Nothing.

Both djinn had disappeared into the shadow of night.

Chapter Three

A week later, Ren was sitting in a small room miserably eyeing the cluttered shelves which lined the walls. Jars containing liquids of varying colors were stacked clumsily atop one another. His host, a rotund elderly woman with thin white hair, busied herself with a needle. She dipped it into a bowl of boiling water and then traced the veins in Ren's arm. Finding the spot she sought, she dug the needle into his flesh. It didn't hurt too much, and he watched as warm red blood flowed out of his body and through a pipe into a large glass cylinder. His vital fluid, the price for his protection, dripped into the transparent jug.

Barbara "Babs" Lebue had taken him in after his encounter with the airy djinnayah and the cop. The wizened creature had rubbed her hands together greedily when he'd come knocking at her door. She welcomed him in, out of the streets of the shantytown where the hag had made her den.

"Ren the Red! My boy! You have been sorely missed!" she exclaimed, wrapping her rubbery arms around him.

She offered him healing, food, a roof over his head, and protection from Elson Whitmore, Aaron's son, as long as he was willing to part with his blood. Ren didn't dare return to the harbor—stealing away on a boat was now no longer an option to escape. He couldn't walk to the nearest city or take to the roads, because he couldn't drive. And he knew that Whitmore would have his goons watching train stations and bus routes, hoping he might find him there. Besides, he'd never clear a checkpoint with his djinn eyes. The humans would report him to the authorities as an untagged djinn, and Elson would find a way to get him while he was held in custody. Babs was his only choice, and reluctantly he'd returned to her. He'd have to wait in her territory until enough time had passed for Elson to give up his vendetta, and then he could safely make it out of the city.

The ancient crone was infamous amongst the djinn denizens of New Yarllynn. Her ability to mix potions and tonics were second to none, and she had amassed quite the illegal empire. She certainly had enough cronies at her command to deter the millionaire playboy from trying to snatch him, if he ever figured out that Ren was there.

Staring at the blood slowly slipping out of his body made him think of all that he had wasted while traversing through the hillsides in the Rural District, several days earlier.

As the tidal wave of stone and grit had poured down around him, sent by the girl with the annoyingly familiar face, a large chunk of stone had hit his head. Blood poured from the gash on his temple while he fled in the cloud of dust. It trickled down into his eyes, making it difficult to see. Ren had run as best he could, stumbling in the dark, his fire extinguished and his mood more sour than usual. Elson clearly wanted Ren dead and wasn't going to give up the pursuit, until the teen was in a shallow grave. Now that he had inherited his father's empire, the young man had more djinn in his arsenal than any man ought to have. If Ren wasn't careful, the millionaire would get his wish.

I should have killed him when I had the chance, Ren thought bitterly, watching the sanguine liquid seep from his arm, then along the thin pipe and into the cylinder.

He shuddered at the thought, thinking about the smell of burning flesh. How many more people would die in his fire? Aaron, Aileen, Kacey...

That cop popped into his mind, Theodore Amadeo Bronson, Kacey Bronson's little brother. What were the odds that the rookie had happened upon him in his time of need?

Ren grimaced with guilt as his mind drifted to the thought of the officer. His brilliant blue eyes, his wide lush mouth. The crown of ashen hair, creating a disheveled nest of short waves about his head. He looked like a cherub, much the same as his sibling, but with more facial hair.

His beautiful, dead sister.

Ren had met Kacey back at Blue Brook Meadow, the orphanage where he'd grown up. She had joined a peer-to-peer role model program while attending high school and in doing so, visited the orphanage frequently. She was seventeen at the time, and Ren was ten. Kacey talked a lot about going to college and told him all about her family. She was smart, funny, and had a soft spot for the emerald-eyed boy before the fateful change in his appearance. The two of them would spend hours together, along with Aileen, another orphan who lived with him. Most of Ren's evenings were spent in their company, playing board games and reading stories from the Bahriel. Kacey in particular used to enjoy reading stories about the Paragons of Five Points.

She would talk about Theodore all the time; "You remind me so much of my little brother, Tab," she used to say.

"Tab," Ren asked jealously. "What sort of a name is that?"

"It's his nickname. His real name is Theodore Amadeo Bronson, but I call him Tab for short. One of these days, I'm going to bring him along to meet you."

That day never came. Blue Brook Meadow wasn't destined to survive Ren's stay.

The fire... So much fire.

Ren allowed his memories to haunt him, until Babs returned to the small space.

"It's good stuff this, little Ren," she grinned toothlessly, as she poked at the bag, rousing the teen from his reminiscence. "I can make many strengthening potions from your blood."

"I don't understand how," Ren mumbled. "Or why it's only my blood you're interested in."

"Ah! Your blood is not the only blood that interests me," she huffed. "And I could tell you how, but the knowledge might make your pretty little skull pop!" She made an explosive gesture with her hand.

The black-haired boy shook his head. "It's always blood and gold. I miss the good old days when I used to be able to buy things with money, like the rest of the world."

"Ah, but you do not fit into this world, do you?"

"I prefer to think this world doesn't fit me."

"Then why concern yourself with its currency? Be pleased that you have so much to offer and be grateful for my hospitality."

"Hospitality is something you offer to a guest," Ren corrected irritably. "I'm paying for my board in blood. Don't speak to me like you're doing me a favor."

The haggard witch opened her mouth while her cheeks flamed, as though she were about to retort. Thinking better of it, she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and snorted. The rouging of her face trickled down her neck as the old woman manipulated her flesh, pulling the pink hue along her skin. Her elemental domain was over water and her djinnyah power had manifested in the most bizarre way. It allowed her to maneuver the liquids of her body, giving her the ability to alter her form for short spaces of time. She couldn't manipulate the flesh to a point that allowed her to appear like someone else, but

she could stretch her skin and veins, which allowed her body to bend into unnatural positions. Ren suppressed a shudder, trying to ignore the squelching noise that emanated from Barbara's body.

"What would you buy with this money anyway?" Babs asked. "All the millions you had access to while living with Poppa Whitmore didn't save you from these streets, did they? Or his cage! You'd have been better off coming back to me."

"Maybe," Ren huffed. "But it wasn't like he threw me straight into a salt cell. It wasn't all bad. For a long time, I honestly thought Aaron genuinely cared for me. More than I can say about you."

"Ah, so you would rather I lie to you? Pull the wool over your eyes like that mad man?"

"I doubt you could. I doubt I'll ever trust anyone again. He built up my faith in humanity after taking me in from the streets. He made me feel safe... for years. I used to enjoy his company. Aaron would spend hours teaching me about history, religion, warfare, and his other interests. We'd walk and talk for hours, exploring his estate, watching the forest blossom, then die and finally be reborn. He was the nearest thing I've ever had to a father."

"No little Ren. Fathers love their children. He was the nearest to a monster you will ever be."

The young man scowled. "Like you said—at least you're honest. I was an idiot to think he wanted me for no other reason than my company. He had his bastard son for that. That fucking acorn didn't fall far from the tree, did it? I bet Elson is enjoying his father's millions as we speak."

"They were never your millions to begin with! Don't sound so bitter. It is blood money—dirty, cursed money! You mark my words," she grinned deviously, "at least your blood is clean and it is worth more than all the cash in the Whitmore's bank!"

"Can it buy me a ticket to another place? Somewhere quiet?" Ren huffed.

"You know they don't let our kind on public transport, not without a tag in our ears. They have check points before boarding all vehicles; you'll never get on one. Unless you think the D.O.T. will win their little campaign in the very near future and stop the humans from tagging us."

"I hate the D.O.T.," Ren spat.

“Djinn Opposed to Tags,” Barbara said, adjusting the tube in Ren’s arm. “I do not know why you would hate someone who fights for your rights.”

“Because Elson-bastard-Whitmore leads them, and he wants me dead.”

“Is that a fact?” Babs’ eyebrow twitched a fraction. “I’m not so sure. But regardless, whoever leads them, I do think them fools. The humans fear us, and that is why they do not let us live as their equals. That is why they tag us in the first place, and make it illegal for us to wander about without their metal chips in our heads! That is why they do not let us work for their government. You ever see a djinn nurse or cop!?”

“Don’t talk crap,” Ren grumbled. “The humans wouldn’t willingly let us be in charge of their well-being.”

“Exactly! And how is burning their cities going to convince them not to fear us? D.O.T.? Foolish, foolish, fools!”

“I won’t argue with you there,” he stated.

“Ah ha!” The crone clapped her hands. “I know what you need! Shimmerless Lenses,” she purred. “I have a batch coming in soon! Today maybe!”

“You can get them?” Ren asked, his heart skipping a beat.

“There is little beyond my reach, Ren the Red, but they are not cheap.”

The manufacture of tinted contact lenses was strictly illegal in the U.S.A. There were several political debates on the subject, and the laws regarding contact lenses were often revisited. Most contact lenses that were bought legally would make their owners eyes appear to glow at check point lights, like those of a cat in the headlights of a car. However, Shimmerless Lenses, which were illegally imported into the country at great expense, enabled the wearer to pass through check points unhindered. The unlawful little disc flopped over the iris, seamlessly covering the retina and its surrounding colored muscle. Djinn had been wearing them for the last two decades, disguising their goat-like eyes; hiding in plain sight amongst their intolerant neighbors. As far as Ren was aware, the only way to attain the prohibited optic-camouflage in this city was from Whitmore’s cronies, and Ren was deliberately avoiding them. If he could get his hands on a pair, he could maybe board a bus into Mexico, or a plane to Europe. A land free of djinn tagging and away from all that knew him. He could start a new life. Maybe get a job, buy his own place. Maybe, just maybe, find an ounce of happiness in this dark and twisted world.

Bronson sat at his desk trying his damned hardest not to look at the clock, which appeared to be moving in slow motion. His week had been painfully long, and despite his tireless efforts, he couldn't find the djinni kid anywhere. Ren's words cycled through his mind, over and over.

Because she was unfortunate enough to befriend me...

What did the djinni mean? Befriended him how? And why would he think Kacey had burned to death?

After the short yet impressive djinn battle close to the city border, Bronson found that his squad car had been pelted with shards of rock. The framework was dented in numerous places across the hood and trying to explain that away had been problematic at best.

"It's a brand-bastard-new P.P.V!" Chief Shaw fumed, rising from behind her desk.

"I know, Chief." Bronson shrugged, toying with the pink novelty pencil sharpener he'd acquired from her desk.

"What were you doing in the Rural District? How the fuck did you manage to let a goat fall on the car?"

"It was on the high banking. You know, the bit that overhangs the road slightly, near Talston's farm, where there was that big fire a few weeks ago. I guess it managed to get under the fence."

Her dark eyes twitched dangerously. "As a general rule, don't animals shy away from moving vehicles?"

"Generally..."

"And yet you managed to find the only four-legged fucking freak that throws itself at my pristine Ford, like a hooker at a Merc."

"I didn't actively go searching for a suicidal barn yard companion, Chief." Bronson cringed, placing the plastic gadget back on her desk.

"Suicidal?" Shaw threw her hands up in the air. "Suicidal! You claim the animal bounced off the hood, got up and walked away!"

"Actually, I said it sort of... limped away."

"It limped? Are you certain? I'm only asking because I fail to see how super-fucking-nanny-goat could've been damaged in the collision! Surely it

didn't need to worry about its mortality, what with its seemingly invulnerable hide! Did it happen to be part dilute?"

"Now you mention it..."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to swallow this bullshit, Theo? I know you've been going through some stuff, and this thing with Kacey is still very new, but..." she sighed, biting back her fury, then continued in a slightly calmer tone, "but you're derailing. I'd hate to see one of my most promising officers booted because he couldn't deal with the sad facts of life."

"Real heartwarming, Chief..." Theo tried to vainly suppress the frown that skittered across his features.

"I'm not here to mommy you, rookie, I'm here to ensure you don't fuck up."

Bronson nodded, not lifting his gaze to meet hers.

Shaw raked a manicured hand through her feathered, red hair. "Look, you clearly don't want to tell me what you were doing in the farmlands, and to be honest, I'm not even sure I want to know. Just..." She sat back into the large, black-leather chair behind her crowded desk. "...keep your shit together and don't bring trouble to my doorstep. Is that clear?"

"Loud and..." Bronson mumbled, standing to leave.

Since his scolding, he'd spent the entire week sneaking through police files and rummaging around Kacey's apartment. Trying to find the place where his sister's past overlapped with the powerful djinni kid's. He summoned up the memory of Ren, battered and bleeding on the ground, a plume of vibrant-red flame, coiling violently away from the teen's near-unconscious body. Djinn that could conjure and control the element of fire were rare, and those that did barely had enough skill over the element to light the end of a cigarette. Yet there was Ren, belting out an aura like a bonfire, defying all he knew of the elemental beings.

Redirecting his attention to his monitor the aspiring detective went over what he'd discovered so far. The first day he turned up a complete blank until he ventured into Kacey's apartment. While there, he found a newspaper clipping in a frame on her bedroom wall. The extract was headlined, "Teen Hero Saves Tot From Fire."

Of course!

The fire at Blue Brook Meadow Orphanage. How could he have forgotten?

The early Victorian house in the suburbs of the city, had burned to the ground almost ten years ago, killing two of the children. His sister had been hailed as a heroine after braving the inferno in the hope of rescuing its residents. She risked life and limb rushing into the building while it was savaged by fire, emerging minutes later with Thomas Jenkins in her arms.

Powering up Kacey's laptop, Bronson trawled the internet, looking for articles about the incident. Finding a hit straight away, he clicked on the link that led him to the smiling face of Darren Lampard, who was undoubtedly Ren.

Ren is short for Darren then? He didn't lie to me about his name.

The kid had supposedly died in the fire at Blue Brook Meadow Orphanage alongside Aileen Lamb, an eight-year-old girl. In the pixilated picture, the preteen child smiled happily at the camera, his rounded face unmarred by the subsequent horrors life had in store for him. The pupils in his eyes were still circular, the inevitable stretching of their black diameter still yet to occur.

After that, Bronson had researched the name Whitmore, targeting in particular, those with money.

'...another one of Whitmore's lackeys,' the fiery kid had said.

The only Whitmores in the city with enough dough to be able to hire goons, were the late Aaron Whitmore and his son, Elson. Bronson ran a check on both men, but of course there wasn't anything about them in the police database, and they appeared squeaky clean on all accounts. The millionaire nearly tripled his fortune after finding gold ore on several acres of land which had belonged to his ancestors. With it, he had bought his way into the social hierarchy and was spearheading djinn rights movement and charity work.

On the surface, Aaron Whitmore had appeared to be a beacon of hope, spreading the message of unity between the djinn and humans. However, Bronson was beginning to paint a very different picture of the millionaire in his mind. Surely, the man's discovery of gold beneath his land, shortly after the fire and supposed death of Darren Lampard, was too coincidental.

Yes, it was clear to the young officer that he might have stumbled upon something bigger than he had anticipated. His sister's murder appeared to be the tip of a very large iceberg. A fraction of him wanted to tell his colleagues or seek guidance from the Chief. But his gut instinct warned him that to do so would be folly. He'd hijacked a potential suspect in Kacey's murder and in his

stupidity had allowed him to escape. He'd lose his job, and at the moment, that was the only thing holding his fragile state together. No, he'd wait until he was sure he'd uncovered something big and had concrete evidence. The next time he'd see Ren, he'd get what he needed from the kid and if not, he'd bring him into the station and face the music.

Catching his eye, Shaw strode out of her office, looking harassed.

She cupped her mouth with the palm of her hands and hollered into the precinct, "Drop whatever the fuck you're doing! There's some sort of fucking dilute war happening in the shantytowns near the eastern borders! Suit up and sort it, now!"

Chapter Four

It was like a battlefield. Ren wasn't sure exactly what had happened; only that he had been betrayed. Barbara had sent her gnarled minion to collect the faux lenses, and he'd overheard the discussion. Not trusting the woman in the slightest, Ren took it upon himself to follow the familiar to its destination, where he could intercept the lenses and be armed with the tools to rid himself of the city.

The scar-faced girl made her way through the squalor-stricken streets. When she drew near a large stone building, she stopped briefly, checking for observers. The old Bank of New Yarllynn stood defiantly around the other crumbling constructions. A mockery of its prominent beginnings, the building was now a husk. The pallid shell of the pantheon-like structure had been artfully decorated with the words, "DiEAnDRoTDiLuTeS!" across its arch. The weathered red and green graffiti then dripped away from the prejudicial proclamation, twisting down the cracked columns.

Ren hid in the shadow of the scaffolding that had been abandoned against the side of a tall shop on the opposite side of the road. He leaned against its boarded windows, waiting for Scar to make her move. Satisfied that she hadn't been followed, the spindly woman continued, disappearing into the building. Ren nimbly moved across the wide road, not having to worry about traffic in this near-vacant part of town. He cautiously edged along the edifice, seeking a side door to enter by. A few minutes later, he stood in the cavernous hallway of the bank.

Trapped.

Only too late had he deduced that he was meant to overhear the exchange between minion and master. Babs had plotted the entire event, anticipating Ren's reaction to her conversation. In doing so, Ren had been manipulated into a salt circle, which had been drawn and camouflaged across the floor of the bank. He stood helpless, imprisoned by the tiny grains.

"Lebue," he whispered venomously into the silence.

His only reply was a sibilant snigger, passing through crooked teeth, echoing out into the hollow building.

Not long after, Elson appeared with several djinn. He stalked fearlessly into the downtrodden depository, stopping at its center as though he were untouchable.

“Witch!” he yelled, his thunderous voice echoing about the yawning room. “Show yourself.”

Ren glared from his location, out of sight and veiled in shadows from the newcomers.

Babs slithered forward into the bright daylight which bled in through the now-opened door. Her gap-toothed grin was spread across her wrinkled face triumphantly.

“Young Whitmore, so nice to see you again after so many years,” she croaked.

“I highly doubt that,” he replied, adopting an expression of immense boredom.

“What? No pleasantries?” she snapped, banging her cane on the floor.

“Pleasantries are reserved for pleasant situations,” Elson explained, straightening the cuff of his crisp, snowy shirt. “Now, where is my little adopted brother?”

Lebue shook her head. “First things first!”

“Very well.” Elson waved his hand, and the woman to his right opened the briefcase in her possession.

Ren wasn’t at all surprised to see yet another blood bag in the case. The red liquid gleamed like a ruby in the dancing beams of golden sunlight.

What is it with Lebue and blood? he mused.

“What do you take me for?” Barbara hissed.

“Does my offering offend you, old one?”

Pointing an accusing, worn-down finger at the collection of newcomers, Babs spat on the floor. “How do I know that is your blood, lamp of Undine?”

Ren paused in his frantic search for a way out of his predicament. *Lamp? That’s what that moron at the harbor called me. What does that mean?*

Elson’s voice echoed along to him. “You’ll have to take my word for it.”

“Your words aren’t worth the spit in your mouth! You think I don’t hear what the djinn of this city are saying? You think I’m so far out in the slums that I’m beyond the reach of wagging tongues? You’re a trickster, little Elson, a liar and a corrupter.”

“I’d stop wagging your tongue if I were you.” Whitmore straightened, taking a more opposing stance.

“Hah!” the elderly woman coughed. “Your endeavor will rain destruction down on us all, one way or another, and I plan to be far away from here by the time that happens! Now, give me the power and the means to do so!”

“Give me my little bastard brother!”

“I shall not.” Babs was losing her composure. “Not until you keep your promise and give me your blood.”

It was Elson’s turn to laugh now; the deep sound was chilling, like listening to thick ice cracking along a frozen lake.

“As you quite rightfully pointed out, my promises aren’t worth a damn.”

With that, the young djinn clicked his fingers, and his men rushed towards the hag. In response, several of the crone’s down-and-outs leapt from their hiding places, barring the path to the old woman. They collided with the men, loosening their elemental abilities in protection of their leader.

The scarred woman flung her hood back as she ducked beneath a punch, revealing a spiky layer of mousey brown hair. Her attacker, one of the bulky humans who had accosted Ren at the harbor, readied a second blow, but the frail woman dashed forth. Sparks of electricity cantered along the length of her arms, silvery flecks of snapping energy jostling away from her skin. As her hands found their mark, a bolt of dazzling-blue light flashed into existence. The bulbous man cried out in pain, his spine arching backwards as his limbs twitched uselessly. He fell to the floor, and a pale wisp of smoke twisted away from his corpse.

A few feet away, another couple was engaged in a deadly display of djinn abilities, the combatants unequally matched. Barbara’s minion seemed to shift into the shadows, almost disappearing from view as he dodged the torrent of blows from Elson’s lackey. Ren was impressed with the elderly man’s ability to manipulate light—he hadn’t seen another flame elemental with enough skill to manifest a power worth boasting about. No doubt Babs had fed the man some

of Ren's blood to bolster his abilities. But this fellow fire djinn was already a master of his craft, bending light and shadow about his body. Ren almost felt sorry for the earth elemental who opposed him. The youngster had turned the tips of his fingers into thorny bits of barb and was clawing frantically at his enemy. The bearded elder caught the hand of the well-groomed goon and twisted his wrist, forcing the mossy talons inward, gutting their owner.

In other places, Lebue's champions tackled Elson's entourage with varying degrees of success. Whitmore watched, his face an expressionless mask. His autumn-colored eyes drank in all that they saw as they scanned the lethal scuffle. He snorted softly, lifting an elegant hand and slowly twisting his palm. Like a conductor before an orchestra, the balding man wiggled his digits. The air in front of them shifted, collecting into a solid mass. Thin shards of transparent ice formed before his fingers. He waved his hand nonchalantly, the dispassionate features of his face never once faltering. The pointed poles of glass-like frost propelled forward at his movement, each one finding their mark. Four of the raggedly dressed djinn fell to the ground, dead, Scarface amongst them. Bolstered by the blow to Lebue's forces, the remaining members of Elson's party pressed their assault.

Babs shuffled backwards, aware that the tables had turned against her. The snide smile she'd worn upon her lips had melted into a sneer of outrage. She clicked at the roof of her mouth while her brain appeared to work speedily through her options. Taking the opportunity to strike while she was distracted, Elson sent several bolts of frozen fluid speeding towards her. Barbara barely managed to dodge the projectiles, twisting her body like a snake into inhuman curves around the glittering spears. She rasped in her throat, the bestial noise filled with venom and defiant outrage. Searching the floor, she found a fallen chunk of brick and kicked it over to Ren. It slid through the circle of salt, deactivating the ethereal wall which held him and his fire prisoner.

Ren was free.

Bronson parked his blue and white Ford a few streets away from the old Bank of New Yarllynn. Several other officers had beaten him to the scene and had left their vehicles hurriedly, but with enough room to evacuate if necessary.

Moments before as they'd piled into their cars at the station, another policeman had jumped into the passenger seat of Bronson's ride. The seasoned cop, an old guy named Cassius, seemed incredibly excited.

“Put your foot down, rookie,” he jibed, while they sped through the streets. “If there aren’t any dilutes left to shoot when we get there, I’m gonna be pissed.”

Bronson did as instructed, hoping to see Ren caught in the fray. If there were any dilutes left to subdue, that one had his name on it.

By the time the two men had arrived, the fighting had spilled out onto the street. Police officers hid behind parked cars and riot shields. There was little they could do to stop a brawl between so many djinn. Shaw crouched behind one of the cars, shouting through a megaphone, trying to restore some semblance of order.

A jet of smokeless, ruby fire flared away from the roof of the building.

There you are.

Bronson broke away from the protection of his fellow police officers, seeking a way up onto the roof. Running up the fire escape of the neighboring building, Bronson’s heart beat rapidly in his chest. Reaching the roof, he was surprised to see that no officers had been positioned at a higher vantage point.

Shaw will have them up here soon, I’ve got to be quick.

Quick to do what? Bronson wasn’t sure what plan was formulating in his brain. The confused thought popped out of his mind the second he laid eyes on the flaming djinni, who was fighting for his life on the top of the bank.

The kid was dressed in the same torn clothing that Bronson had seen him wearing the previous week. His long, dark hair twisted and coiled around his face, tugged by the rising heat that enveloped him. Waves of fire danced away from his body, encasing his frame like an aura of flame. The stone about his feet cracked in the heat, and the thin steel rods which helped shape the building sprang up through the floor. He twirled quickly to one side, avoiding a javelin of ice that sought to bury itself in his flesh. A second he melted, sending a pillar of blazing light out to meet the jagged chunk of crystal.

On the opposite side of the structure stood another figure, who panted with exertion. Recognition sprang into Bronson’s awareness.

Elson Whitmore.

The man, in his late twenties, was neatly groomed and wearing a three-piece suit of dark gray. His thinning, brown hair had been trimmed into a sleek, little mohawk which ran down the center of his head. Instead of the clear-blue,

human eyes Bronson had seen him with in all his pictures, his were the elongated, amber eyes of a djinn. The air around him sparkled, almost as if the man were shedding glitter from his skin. He raised his hands, a trail of twinkling dust following his movement, and a third shaft started to form, like that of a horizontal icicle.

“I will kill you for what you did to my dad,” the playboy heckled. “You will bleed for burning him while you fled with those dirty, lowlife, greedy nobodies. How did you convince them to help you? What lies did you spin?”

Before he had the chance to cast the icicle towards his target, Ren sent his own barrage forth. An orb of wobbling, ruby waves sailed through the air, arching towards its goal like the shot of a flare gun.

“I offered them the same thing your fucking father was stealing from me on a daily basis!” the kid fumed. “If he’d gotten out of my way like I warned, then maybe he’d be here now instead of you. But I’m glad he isn’t, that monster deserved to burn. I only regret that I didn’t roast you too.”

Ren sent another orb off in close pursuit, then another and another. Fire rained down around Whitmore, and his expressionless face twitched with concentration. He released his hold over the hovering weapon and dragged both hands up over his head. A thick sheet of ice followed the movement, rising up from the floor and shielding the millionaire from the downpour. Without hesitation, Ren snatched one of the exposed steel rods from the stone and rushed towards Elson. The metal bar in his hand quickly began to glow, turning red, then orange and finally white.

He thrust the molten pole through the wall of ice, its thin circumference easily piercing the thick sheet. The glistening obstacle hissed in retaliation and steamed at the sizzling touch of the rod. Beyond the barricade, Whitmore echoed the sound, spitting air through his gritted teeth as the burning bar stabbed clean through his leg. Ren pressed his advantage, pushing flame through the small hole, seeking to widen it. In a matter of seconds, the fight would be over, and Ren would be victorious.

Without warning, a third djinn joined the combatants. An elderly djinnayah, cloaked in layer upon layer of filthy robes, leapt from an alcove in the roof, swinging her mahogany cane down towards Ren’s head. Her arms bent fluidly, adding momentum to the blow, snapping towards her target like a catapult being pulled taut. The cane struck the mass of dark hair with a sickening crack, felling the flaming djinni. She slithered around the two men, striking the second

with her cane, while he tried to dislodge the metallic protrusion sticking out of his leg. He slumped, dazedly. The older woman knelt before his swaying form, lapping greedily at the wound on his leg. Her face was covered in gore, and she laughed between gargled swallows. Elson regain his composure and kicked at her with his free leg. His face throbbed with fury.

“You dirty, fucking beast!” he bellowed.

The old woman cackled and shifted away from him, towards the roof’s edge, closer to Bronson. As she squelched to the very edge of the building she stopped, turning to Whitmore.

“Thank you for your undiluted blessing, Lord of Water,” she grinned, her lips smeared with red liquid.

She lifted her arms up, like an acrobat signaling the start of a show. The robes fell away from her bent body, revealing the ancient gnarled skin beneath. She stood naked, the few strands of gray hair that clung to her skull wafting like smoke about her face.

What the fuck?

He watched in disbelief as the hag’s body rippled, her skin bubbling and curdling like a putrid broth. Her bent spine quivered as the plates sloshed back to their original setting, straightening her back. The sagging flesh under her arms, around her buttocks and over her bosom tightened, constricting about her bones. Her wrinkled face became taut, smoothing the craggy contours of her face. New snowy hair sprouted from her skull, growing hastily from the top of her head and trailing down her back. Her beak-like nose shrank, and her still-grinning lips parted wider, revealing a perfect row of pristine teeth.

Bronson gasped, as he watched the transformation. The space where the elderly hag had stood was now occupied by a beautiful girl in her late teens. She lithely bowed once, giggling, towards the impaled millionaire.

“I will hunt you down for this, you wretched bitch!” he roared. “No one takes from me! Do you hear?”

In reply, her chuckle turned into a song of maniacal laughing music. The sound spiraled out of her mouth with jubilant insanity.

“Good bye, little Elson,” she sang sweetly. “May your days be few and your hours haunted by the faces of those you’ve slain while on your crazed father’s mission.”

With that she fell away from the roof of the bank, descending swiftly. As she hit the ground, her naked body pooled like a rain drop. It gathered in on itself, recreating her human form, and she briskly retreated from the fighting at the front of the shop.

Elson roared. Tiny flakes of snow flew away from him in all directions, like fatal little throwing stars. Bronson had to duck beneath the wall of the roof to avoid taking a hit to the face.

"This is all your fault!" the hazel-haired man fumed.

Daring to peek over the top of the wall from his hiding place, Bronson saw Elson summon another spear of ice. He clasped hold of the shimmering shaft and jammed it down into Ren's leg. The young djinni didn't stir.

Did that djinnyah kill him?

Bronson grimaced. He wanted revenge for his sister's death, but he wasn't sure Ren was the person to be on the receiving end of it. He cocked his gun and took aim, pointing his pistol at Elson's hand, meaning to maim the man. He pressed the trigger, and a single shot rang out. The bullet whizzed past its mark and ricocheted off the roof, splintering the stone. Elson growled menacingly, trying to dart backward and failing, still pinned in place. He conjured another wall of ice to shield himself from the unseen marksman, leaving Ren on the opposite side of the glittering fortification. A few seconds later the djinni sprinted, in a fashion, from behind his cover and vaulted from the edge of the building, out of Bronson's line of sight.

Taking a leaf from Whitmore's book, Bronson also leapt from his rooftop to that of the New Yarlynn Bank. He landed on the cold slabs, rolling awkwardly. Abandoning caution, he stepped up to Ren and pointed his gun at the teenager's skull.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a female voice stated from behind him.

Bronson reflectively spun around, gun pointing towards the speaker, expecting to find the naked djinnyah. Instead he was surprised to find the heart-faced girl who had dented his car in the brief skirmish with Ren, several days earlier.

"He knows something about my sister's death." Bronson trembled, feeling his resolve weaken. "I have to take him into custody."

"No, you don't. You can't," she replied, narrowing her gray eyes. "He thinks your sister died in the fire at Blue Brook Orphanage, nine years ago. He blames himself for her death."

“Why does he think that? Who are you?”

She didn't answer.

Bronson squinted at the young djinnyah, recognition ringing through his mind. “Aileen Lamb?”

“That is correct.”

“If you're still alive, and Darren is, who died in the fire at Blue Brook?”

“No one.”

Gunfire could be heard on the street below. The police must have found a weakness to exploit in the battle beneath and would be pushing for a speedy end to the fighting.

“We cannot stay here,” Aileen said, glancing about the taller buildings surrounding the bank. “It isn't safe for you.”

“Why? What isn't safe?”

“Your comrades cannot find you here. They will know it was you who shot at Elson.”

“And?”

“And not all of your comrades are allies. Whitmore has spies everywhere, djinn who have disguised themselves as human in order to infiltrate the hierarchy of human society.”

“Who are they?”

“Elson's pack of power-hungry djinn.”

“Is Elson involved with D.O.T.?”

The djinnyah just blinked at him, her pink hair rippling about her pale skin.

“Why should I trust you?” he asked when it became clear she wasn't going to answer.

“Because Kacey trusted me. She was my friend and ally. I want to make the men responsible for her demise suffer equally as much as you.”

“Who killed my sister?”

Aileen's patience came to an end. “Not now! Please, come, we need to get away.”

“What about him?” Bronson pointed to Ren.

“Leave him.” She shook her head. “He is a lamp, he will heal quickly.”

“He’ll also tell my colleagues that I kidnapped him, and if he’s mixed up in this, they’ll figure out it was me who shot at Elson regardless.”

Aileen considered for a second, then frowned at the scruffy kid who lay bleeding. “You’re right. He must come with us. Help me with him.”

She strode over to his body and yanked the remnants of the melting, icy spike from his leg. She then unsheathed a tiny blade, which was strapped to her leather belt, and pricked her finger with the tip of the needle-like weapon. Blood dripped from her slender digit into the unconscious teen’s wound. Fire flickered about the puncture hungrily, lapping at her vital fluids as they trickled into his flesh. The flow of blood from Ren’s injury stopped, and Bronson watched as the wound scabbed over. He shook his head. What else were djinn capable of?

“How in the hell did you do that?”

“So many questions, so little time,” she mumbled, flipping Ren onto his back. “Hey, flamer!” she barked, slapping Ren across the face.

His green eyes flickered open, and fire emerged from his skin, protecting its host.

“You again,” he spat, pushing away from her.

“I’m not here to fight,” she frowned. “My quarrel is not with you this day.”

Bronson stepped over towards Ren. “Come on kid, we’ve got to go. Now.”

Ren pushed himself up off the concrete. “And you too! Where’s Whitmore?”

“Theo shot at him, and he fled, and now we’re in trouble,” the djinnayah stated.

“Oh good, everyone knows my name then apparently...” Bronson shrugged, his eyebrows rising into his creased brow.

“You don’t work for Elson?” Ren asked, scowling at the girl.

“I do not,” she replied.

Ren’s eyes narrowed. He froze, the fire surrounding his body flaring brightly, in keeping with his emotion.

“...but I know you from somewhere,” he whispered.

Shouts rang out from over the rooftops and a salt-smoke cloud wafted up from the street.

“The police are on their way up,” she said, flashing her elongated silvery gaze about. “We need to get up to that roof.”

She pointed to the high building on the opposite side of the street.

“There’s no way I can make that jump,” Bronson harrumphed. “I’m human.”

“Me neither,” Ren agreed, “and I’m inhuman.”

“Take your jacket and your shirt off,” she said to Bronson, demonstrating with her unzipped coat, pulling the fabric over her head like a parachute. “I’ll glide you across.”

“And me?” Ren asked, tugging at his shredded T-shirt.

“Here,” said Bronson, tossing him his police jacket.

Unbuttoning his blue shirt, the cop watched as Aileen flung herself from the rooftop. She ascended skyward, lifted by the wind at her command. It pushed into the improvised parachute and carried the delicate djinn gracefully across the street. She landed with catlike precision on the other building, then turned to wave the two of them across.

Theo lifted the fabric of his shirt away from his back, baring his muscular chest. Ren gazed at Bronson’s half-naked form and then away, embarrassed.

Did the kid just check me out?

Aware that now was not the time to dwell on such thoughts, he strode over to the roof’s edge. Ren limped behind him.

“You go first,” Bronson instructed.

Ren’s jaw tightened, he wasn’t fond of taking orders but there wasn’t time to argue. Mimicking Aileen’s pounce, Ren took to the air, Bronson’s jacket held aloft. His thin frame glided promptly over the gap, the rapid wind pushing him over the expanse. He plopped down, grimacing as he landed, but he didn’t topple. Shaking his head, Bronson lunged from the rooftop. Immediately the wind caught under his stretched-out shirt. It propelled him forward but not upward. The older man was considerably heavier than the two djinn kids who had ventured across already.

This is going to get messy.

Aileen's brow creased as she poured as much elemental energy into her push as she dared. To Bronson's relief, his advance toward the opposing apartment building slowed as the wind blew him in another direction, towards some scaffolding leaning against a nearby row of shops. The stitching of a sleeve tore, and Bronson gasped as he almost lost his grip on the thin material. He collided with the skeletal frame, and the rotting wood splintered under his weight. The nerves in his body twitched involuntarily as he grabbed at the metallic binders holding the wobbling construction together. Luckily, they held precariously against his weight and after a few calming breaths he was able to traverse down to the street. Not far away he saw Ren and Aileen slowly land next to his parked squad car.

How does the wind djinnyah know which car is mine?

Aside from the two djinn, the street was deserted. Every able-bodied man and woman in the area must have been participating in the showdown outside the bank. Bronson wondered if someone had seen their aerial escape and hoped that such wasn't the case. He advanced towards the two teens, replacing his torn shirt over his cold flesh.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he rumbled, unlocking the vehicle and climbing into the driver's seat.

Aileen did as instructed, climbing in beside him, but Ren hesitated on the sidewalk. Bronson was on the verge of winding down the window to ask if the kid was stupid; before he had chance, Ren snapped the door open and jumped in, slamming it behind him.

The kid was angry. Angry and confused.

Chapter Five

It wasn't true. The djinnayah was lying. Aileen had died that night of the fire, with Kacey Bronson. The night his latent djinni powers had emerged and set Blue Brook Meadow ablaze. Lebie had told him as much the following day, when she'd found him tear-stricken and wandering the shantytown streets. He was a bad person—he had structured his entire life around being a bad person. He wasn't a killer, not intentionally, but nothing good could ever stem from any of his endeavors.

Ren sat on the back seat of the cop car, scowling into the back of the imposter's head, his mind clustered with questions. Who was she really and why had she adopted Aileen's name? Why did she seem to show up hand in hand with Bronson? Were the two of them together? How had Kacey's little brother managed to save him yet again. And why? The last time they'd met, he'd told the rookie officer that he was the one who had killed his sister. It didn't make sense. What did they want from him?

The vehicle's other occupants sat in the front, equally as broody. All three of them untangling their own thoughts. The Ford slowed slightly in its retreat as it exited the shantytown and entered the more upmarket areas of New Yarlenn. Ren forced his eyes away from the djinnayah and stared out of the window at the suburban street. Leaves fallen from the bare trees littered the pavement. Their autumnal coloring started to work their magic on his turbulent mind.

Ren loved the autumn. While staying at the Whitmore house, before Aaron had turned on him, he would go walking through the acres of woodland they owned. The entire forest would change color from lush green to red, orange, and yellow.

The colors of fire.

For those few short weeks the world was bathed in flames, and he felt like he belonged to it. Aaron would often walk with him, and they'd talk about the fate of the djinn.

"It's all about energy my boy," the graying man would say. "Fire, water, air, lightning, even the earth. They all move, and movement is energy."

Ren would roll his round, green eyes, anticipating the next part of Aaron's little speech. "And energy is another word for power..."

“That’s right!”

“And the humans fear us because we are more powerful.”

“Indeed! That is why they tag us, like sheep in a field. That is why they create laws, forbidding us from accumulating more power. Preventing us from climbing their corporate and social ladders.”

“Except us.” Ren would grin smugly. “We’re free-range djinn.”

“Yes, we are. But only because we’re defying their laws. And only because of your abilities. Your power. It pays for our anonymity and our camouflage.”

“I know, and it makes me happy to know I’m doing my bit to fight for our rights.”

“Fight?” Aaron’s eyebrows shot up.

“Sorry,” Ren sighed. “I mean, I’m helping with the struggle. I forget you don’t like that word.”

“Peace is won through peaceful means. If we fight for our rights, then there will be fighting. If we secret djinn into positions of power all over the country and then manipulate law and order from behind the scenes, our efforts will be over with no need for bloodshed.”

“Subterfuge and deception.”

“What of them?” Aaron’s mood seemed to darken.

“They’re all mechanics used in war. Elson says we’re at war with the humans,” Ren explained.

“Elson is hungry for change, now. His youth makes him impatient. He seems to think that we can frighten the humans into accepting us. Of course that will never work. Other men have tried that approach and have failed. We need to learn from their mistakes. I hope time will see my son grow into a more rational man.”

“So we’re not at war?”

“No my boy, we’re at odds with the humans. Not at war.” Aaron brushed his firm fingers through Ren’s charcoal hair. “To say we are at war with the humans, is to say we are at war with ourselves. Never forget Darren, that we are human, in the greatest of senses.”

Bronson stopped the car at a crossing, and Ren drifted away from the memory, back to the present. The lies Aaron Whitmore had told him, in order to keep him sweet and compliant, would haunt him until the day he died.

"You guys will have to get out here, but first we need to talk. I've got to take the car back to the station, and my Chief is watching me like a hawk," the young officer stated. "The pursuit engines all have GPS tracking in them, and she'll ask why I deviated from the quickest return route to the station, if I drop you off at my door. I'm already going to be on her radar for disappearing halfway through a shootout."

"As you wish, Theo." Aileen nodded, opening the passenger door.

"I said, we need to talk first," Bronson said, clasping his hand gently around her wrist, pulling her back into the squad car. "I want some answers. I won't bribe you with chocolate this time."

He looked at Ren through the rearview mirror. His bright-blue eyes were full of intent and desperation. The young djinni felt a pang of pity twist at his stomach. Bronson had saved his life twice now; he owed the officer an explanation, even if the truth would wind up getting him killed.

"Then I'll answer nicely," Ren murmured from the back seat.

"My sister's death," Bronson breathed. "Were you responsible?"

Ren turned away from his piercing stare, unable to hold his honest gaze.

"Yes," he whispered.

Aileen shuffled uncomfortably in her seat. "No."

"She died at Blue Brook along with the real Aileen!" Ren snapped at the younger girl, his temper starting to rise again. "They burned to death in the fire I created when my powers emerged."

Aileen spun to look at Ren. "Whitmore started that fire, he forced our djinn powers to emerge! He wanted to make it look like we'd both died so he could steal us away! Kacey tried to get us both out, but you got lost in the confusion. We thought Aaron took you there and then."

"Bullshit!"

"It's true Ren," Bronson sighed. "Kacey died a little over a month ago. She was murdered not far from where I first came across you. She didn't die at Blue Brook. In fact, she managed to save one of the babies. The only two people that were supposed to have died in the fire, are you two."

Ren shook his head, and he trembled on the seat. "But Lebye said..."

He stared at his hands, and streaks of flame darted between his digits. Bronson felt almost sure the kid was on the verge of tears, but he reined them

in, gritting his teeth. He closed his eyes, sucking in a big lungful of air. He exhaled slowly, repeating the process a couple of times and then lowered his hands.

"I stayed in Aaron Whitmore's cage because I thought I deserved it for killing Kacey. For killing Aileen. Three years... Three long fucking years before I tried to get out and... and... I didn't kill her?" His hushed voice was almost a moan. "She wasn't dead..."

Relief flooded into Ren's body, washing into every part of his soul, wiping away the guilt and remorse he'd carried around like a ball and chain. He thought that karma had found him at the Whitmore mansion, ensuring that his punishment was inflicted because of his prior sins. But now he could see that he was a victim of circumstance, imprisoned by a cruel villain, greedy to keep his gifts under lock and key.

"Kacey's blood is not on your hands. That night, Aaron Whitmore was trying to take us away. He was trying to collect the lamps for Carl..." Aileen bit back her words, huffing indignantly.

"What lamps?"

Aileen closed her eyes as a shudder of emotion rippled through her body. "You are Salamander's lamp."

"What are you two going on about?" Bronson asked.

"I don't know," Ren grimaced. "I'm not sure if she's fucking batshit or not! I'm so confused right now. I haven't got a clue what she's going on about!"

Aileen sighed, shifting her silvery gaze over to Bronson. "Did Kacey ever tell you about the djinn Lords?"

"She never spoke about the djinn, at all, period," he answered.

"Well, you've heard the story about the genie in the lamp?"

"Sure, but I fail to see what that's got to do with Kacey."

"Well, Ren is a djinn Lord." Aileen shrugged. "Or rather he is the lamp within which one of the five elemental Lords are encased."

"Are you getting all biblical on me now?"

Ren edged forward in his seat. "You're full of it!"

"You're saying that he's thousands of years old?" Bronson arched an eyebrow.

Aileen shook her head. "No, the Lord is passed through the family line, in the blood, from parent to infant. It travels into the firstborn child of each new generation."

Ren mumbled darkly, "My mum? I have no idea who she was. I find it highly unlikely she was a lamp though."

"She was, and we knew who she was," Aileen sighed. "Her name was Mara Lampard. My comrades tried to track her down before you were born, as did Whitmore. She deliberately got pregnant at fourteen, just to get the Lord out of her body and into yours. Then she abandoned you on the steps of St. Darren's Cathedral, with your name scribbled on your stomach in permanent marker. Lampard. She wanted the whole world to know there was a new Fire Lord in circulation, and her blood was no longer the Holy Grail it used to be. She tried to save herself. I guess she thought you'd make headlines or something, but your sad beginnings never made the press."

The kid looked stricken. He stared at the djinnyah suspiciously, his face contorting into perplexed lines.

"But in the end she did right by you. Whitmore caught her and killed her for passing along the Lord. With her dying breath, she told Whitmore she'd put you on a boat bound for Asia. It took him ten years to track you down."

"And you know this happened how? When did my supposed mother tell the tale, if she didn't live through it?"

"She was my father's friend. Whitmore caught them together, near the Mexican border, and while your mother was fighting him off, my father managed to escape. He saw what happened to your mum before fleeing though."

"Well, that was nice of your father. Leaving her to die while he left."

Aileen fixed Ren with an icy stare. "They both fought! My father died a day later from his injuries, but not before locating help. He managed to find the people I now work for, the people who have raised me and given me a purpose in life. My dad told them where to find us, and they watched over us, both of us, for years. Until Whitmore came along to claim his lamps."

"Now I'm confused," Bronson frowned. "So as a lamp, you are the elemental Lord in human guise, or you share your body with the elemental Lord?"

"We share," Aileen explained, "except it's not really sharing because the Lords never try to take control. They don't even make their presence known most of the time."

Bronson looked to Ren. "Is she telling the truth?"

"I don't know," Ren answered. "It would explain a few things but... but... I just don't know." The kid's already pasty skin paled further. "My blood has the power to amplify other djinn abilities, if their affiliation is with the element of fire. I don't know any other djinn that can do that... That's why I was at Lebue's, I was exchanging my blood for protection from Elson and a pair of Shimmerless Lenses. The fucking bitch set me up! If I am a lamp, she must have known about it."

"Wait a minute." Bronson's eye twitched. "That old djinniah woman on the roof of the bank was the infamous Barbara Lebue?"

"The one and only," Ren rumbled. "Ancient gap-toothed twat."

"Not anymore. She went all vampire-like on Whitmore's leg and then transformed. It was like her mortal clock started ticking backwards. One second she's all bent out of shape and old. The next, she was young and doing cartwheels over the side of the building," the blond man recalled.

Ren snorted to himself, softly. "Really? Crazy, old bitch was after some of Elson's blood. Guess she got what she wanted after all..." His dark lashes narrowed. "Elson's blood..."

"Her arms moved weird, like they were made out of slime or something. Was she a water djinniah?" Bronson quizzed.

Aileen nodded.

"So when she drank Whitmore's blood, it amplified her bendy skin ability, and she used it to bend her body back through time?"

"Lebue can manipulate the fluid cells of her body, which are nearly all of them," the djinniah clarified. "She must have replaced the old cells with new ones, using her power somehow. She must have known Whitmore's blood would give her the power to reverse the aging process."

Ren cut in, "Whitmore is a lamp as well then?"

"Undine's lamp, the Lord of Water."

"And Kacey knew about all this?" Bronson questioned.

Aileen's features turned sympathetic. "She knew."

Ren looked at Aileen. "You're a lamp too, aren't you?"

Aileen closed her eyes again, "Sometimes, djinn Lords can be djinn ladies. In me sleeps the elemental Lord, Sylphid." Aileen bobbed her head. "I'm the lamp Whitmore was trying to capture at the docks the day Kacey was captured. And I'm the one Kacey died protecting."

Bronson ran his hands through his hair. "This is so fucked up."

"I'm sorry Theodore." Aileen's voice trembled. "It's my fault your sister is dead. That is why I've been watching over you. I knew you'd eventually get mixed up in all this, and I owe it to her to keep you safe."

"You've been watching me?" Bronson's tone betrayed the anger that was brewing behind his words.

Aileen blinked, not daring to meet his gaze. Her breathing quickened, and she closed her eyes. Her jaw clamped tightly as she struggled to control her emotions.

"You both need to get out now," the policeman said, his tone almost threatening. "Aileen, if you've been watching me then you know where I live, correct?"

"...I do."

"Take Ren there and wait for me to get home. I'll be back as soon as I've dropped the car off at the station." He turned to the teen in the back seat. "Can I trust you to wait for me there?"

"Sure," Ren huffed. "It'll be safer than stalking the streets of the city."

Bronson pulled his apartment keys out of his pocket and passed them to Aileen. "Keep each other safe."

"We will," she whispered.

"I'm going to need your help to bring down D.O.T. and to see that motherfucker, Whitmore, pay for what he did to Kacey."

Aileen inhaled as though she were about to correct the young officer, but then closed her mouth. She took the keys from Bronson and stepped out of the car. Ren followed her out onto the chilly street, and the two walked off in silence.

Chapter Six

Aileen dropped Ren off at Bronson's apartment as instructed, but then left straight after, stating that she had, "people to inform." She promised to return as soon as possible, but wouldn't disclose where it was she was headed. The short walk had been made mostly in silence, and her presence made him feel uneasy. He didn't trust her, but then again, he couldn't discount her claim that she was Aileen either. She was certainly the right age, and the child he'd known could have easily grown into the pretty, young thing that had led him to Bronson's place. He wanted time to test her memory, to ask her questions and see if her claim was true. But first he wanted to know what secrets she was keeping.

She was guilty until proven innocent.

The moment Ren turned Bronson's key in the lock, barring the way to the world on the outside of the door, he ventured into the sanctuary. As he walked down the hall, he breathed a sigh of relief. None of Elson's mob knew he was there; he was off the grid and out of harm's way for the first time in ages. The thought made him feel quite giddy. Instinctively following his nose, he made his way excitedly into the kitchen. He rummaged through the clean cupboards, noting how shiny and tidy everything was. The gray slate countertop was pristinely maintained. The integrated light-oak cabinets and cream walls were polished to a glossy sheen. The black tiled floor had been recently mopped and a citrus-like smell emanated from the stony grout.

Bronson was clearly a neat freak.

The young djinni drooled with delight as he pulled a packet of sweet popcorn out of a cabinet. He tossed the metallic container into the ceramic sink and inhaled deeply. Closing his eyes, he focused his thoughts inwards, seeking the subconscious place inside his body, where he housed his primal powers. Finding the core of his elemental attributes, he stoked the ethereal embers, sensing them respond to his command. Flames nudged at the barrier of his skin, trying to escape the fleshy prison that held them encased, but he wouldn't allow it. Instead he focused on their licking touch, pushing them through the veins and channels of his body, forcing the fire through his arms. As the writhing heat reached the tips of his fingers, he opened his eyes, focusing on the silvery packet of unpopped corn. A thin stream of radiant fire snaked away from his hands, bathing the deep ceramic sink in a red glow. He watched contentedly as

the metallic container gradually grew in size. It hissed and snapped, dancing around in the cream basin. The sweet smell of sugar filled the kitchen, invading Ren's nostrils.

He grinned wickedly, calming his inner combustion while admiring his handy work. If he chose, he could open the scorching packet and demolish the entirety of its scalding contents, without so much as batting an eyelash.

Such were his gifts.

He controlled and was immune to all forms of heat. Fire, molten rock, light—they all bent to his will and rendered him impervious to their touch. It came in handy when the weather got chilly, or if you needed to heat a tin of stolen beans when you were out on the street. Of course, the downside meant he'd never catch a tan, but when you'd spent the last three years of your life held prisoner in a salt cell in someone's basement, that didn't seem to matter much.

Ren shook his head, rattling the thoughts of his prior life away for the moment. They couldn't have him today; he wouldn't let them drag him down into a pit of despair and worry. Besides, his past life wasn't the dark wretched mess he'd thought it was. Kacey hadn't died at his hands, her death would no longer weigh on his conscience, at least not in the same way it had previously done. And Aileen was not dead either... possibly.

Today is a good day.

Deciding to do things properly, the green-eyed djinni left the packet to cool and nipped back out into the hallway in search of the wash room. He stumbled over some bedding, which had been abandoned on the floor, the pale-yellow fabric smeared with the dirt from his leg. Untangling his foot, he continued down the narrow space until he found the room with the shower in it.

A real shower!

How many months had it been since he'd used a real one? Could it have been a year yet? He turned the faucet, ensuring the water was bitterly cold. He peeled off his stinking undergarments, kicking them from his ankles. They soared through the open space and he focused his power again, burning them in midair, taking great pleasure in watching the thin fabric disintegrate in front of his face. Surely Bronson wouldn't mind if he took a few of his clothes.

He stepped into the cascade of icy liquid, jets of steam streaking away from his flesh as the water boiled at his touch. He groaned in pleasure as the droplets

hissed along his skin, bubbling as they trickled along his body. Looking down, the djinni noticed the muddy color running from his bedraggled form. His black hair, weighted with damp, hung all the way down to his hips.

When did it get this long? Ren wondered, pulling the strands away from his pale hide.

Letting it fall back into place, he cast his goat-like eyes about, seeking soap or something else to lather on his body. A tube of tea-tree body wash hung from the copper piping, which ran up from the tap on the wall. He unscrewed the lid, smelling the crisp, fresh scent of the green gel and allowed it to trickle lazily into his hand. He applied it generously to his skin and long black mane, rubbing swiftly before the soothing fluid evaporated.

After rinsing and repeating several times, he turned off the tap and stepped out of the shower. He didn't bother with the black towel that hung beside the bath, noting that he was already bone-dry. Turning to the mirror above the hand basin, he wiped his palm across its steamy surface, examining the distorted reflection in the foggy glass. He barely recognized the youth staring back at him. The high bones in his cheeks protruded from his face, making him appear gaunt. His eyes had become hollows in his head, circled by dark bruise-like patches. His jet black hair fell down around his ears, framing his features in a veil of shadow.

No wonder Bronson thought I was a junkie, the djinni deliberated.

His appearance irritated him suddenly, and he glanced away, embarrassed.

"Today is a happy day," he reminded himself.

Pushing his self-loathing back into its cage, he again scanned around the bathroom. Lolling off the towel rack was Bronson's electric shaver.

So he chooses to look that scruffy? Ren thought, recalling the light bristles that adorned the policeman's jaw.

Another image of Bronson popped quickly into the teen's head. One of the man shirtless and frowning. The chunky muscles, which were coated with a slight dusting of light hair, on display. The daylight accentuated the brawny proportions of his inviting physique, as he stood half-naked atop the bank.

Willing the image away, Ren plugged the clippers into the socket on the wall and extended their grade to the longest possible setting. He flicked the on switch and brought the gyrating gadget up to his scalp. The blades buzzed

methodically, their pitch heightening as they passed through his hair. Long strands of his charcoal locks fell to the floor, curling about his feet.

Once he'd finished, he scooped up the black tresses and burnt them in the sink, wrinkling his nose at the smell. He huffed out a deep breath and then turned his gaze upward, forcing his eyes into the reflection of the mirror. There, staring back from the now clear glass, was a young man. His shaven short hair spiked up around his youthful features, shimmering in the light.

Clean.

His lip was still split from his scuffle with Elson, but the welt on his forehead was gone. Such were the benefits of housing an elemental Lord in your body.

"Am I really a lamp?" he pondered, facing his reflection.

Lebue's potions had probably helped speed up the recovery, as Ren couldn't find any bruising on his pale chest from his beating at the harbor. But was it really the work of a powerful entity sleeping beneath his skin?

He pressed his spindly fingers to his chest delicately, probing the bruising which marked his bony front. The ribs were already healed under the surface. Luckily, djinn mended quicker than humans, and Ren seemed to mend faster than most djinn.

He closed his eyes, casting his awareness inward. As he listened to the workings of his body, he concentrated on finding that second beat. The thrum of a heart that didn't belong to him. The strong rhythmic pulse throbbed suddenly in his ears, as though summoned by command.

"Are you Salamander?" he asked, staring into the misted mirror.

There was no reply of course, but it made Ren feel unexpectedly jubilant. If there was something living inside him, then that meant everything he'd endured, the countless hours he'd spent trapped in a cell, had not been alone. His secret passenger had shared it all, a silent witness of the world in which he lived. In part, Ren wanted to cry, wanted to believe that here, he had finally found somewhere to be safe and protected. It was like he'd been transported into another dimension, where he wasn't a killer, wasn't a monster, wasn't the sad, lonely creature he'd convinced himself he was. He wanted to believe that his troubles were behind him now, and that he could spend the rest of his days unmolested in this small apartment. However, his greater senses told him

otherwise. He knew that this reprieve was brief, and that within the next couple of days he'd be fending for himself again.

"No," Ren spat at the reflection. "Today is finally a day to be joyous!"

Shaking his head, Ren again rattled his more dubious thoughts out of his mind.

"I've got popcorn to eat," he snorted to the melancholy teen in the mirror.

Shaw was not happy. She pulled up at the station just in time to catch Bronson sneaking out.

"What the fuck happened to you?" she growled as she jumped out of a squad car.

"I um..." Bronson squirmed, trying to come up with an excuse. "I almost crapped myself, Chief."

Shaw shook her head and clenched her fist. "Why? It's not like it's the first time you've had to engage hostiles in a shootout..."

Bronson cut her off. "No, I mean it. I almost literally crapped in my pants. I'm not well."

"Well, you look fine to me," she harrumphed. "What are you really up to?"

"Up to? I'm about up to here with the runs," he replied, pointing to his neck. "I seriously think I need to go home."

"And I agree. You're full of shit!" Shaw tiptoed to get right up into Bronson's face. "Now turn tail and get back to work, where I can keep my eye on you."

Bronson went to his desk and tried to look busy. His mind kept wandering back to Ren.

What had he been thinking?

He'd left two teenage djinn in his apartment. Total strangers. It wasn't like there was anything worth stealing in his home, at least not anything he couldn't easily replace. But the inhuman kids had every opportunity in the world to run off, and clearly people wanted at least one of them dead. Ren and Aileen were his only evidence to prove Kacey was somehow mixed up with D.O.T. and that Elson Whitmore deserved to rot in prison. Was it possible his sister had a whole

other life she'd kept secret from her family? Did she keep secrets from him? And if that was the case, could the djinn kids shed any further light on her murder? Bronson didn't dare to hope. He had seen what the pair were capable of.

Perhaps what he'd read about some djinn being powerful enough to read a man's mind was true. Mayhap, the two young djinnayah had plucked his sister's name from his brain in an attempt to manipulate him. But to what end?

Bronson shook his head, dismissing his train of thought. One thing he knew for certain was that his mind was his own. Djinn might control the elements of the physical world, but they certainly held no dominion over what went on in people's minds, contrary to popular belief.

Again, redirecting his attention to his monitor, the detective went over what he'd discovered so far. Darren Lampard had supposedly died in a fire at Blue Brook Meadow Orphanage, along with Aileen Lamb. Around the same time, Aaron Whitmore, who was nearing bankruptcy, discovered gold on his family's land. The almost ruined man mined the hillside in his estate and that almost tripled his wealth.

Finally, Bronson came across a mention of the Whitmore family in the police files. He'd missed it on his initial sweep, as the file only stated that the murdered men in the case were employees of the Whitmores. The referenced name was Danny Delmar. Mr. Delmar was found burned to death in his car, several miles away from the Whitmore mansion, with two other employees. The police file was still relatively new and under investigation, the crime taking place just under a month ago.

Was Bronson harboring a murderer in his home?

He got up from his desk and turned off the monitor, making his way to fake another attack of diarrhea. He deliberately passed the Chief's office, and as he went by the glass front, she knocked on the window.

"Get lost, Theo," she huffed.

"What's that, Chief Shaw?"

"I said beat it." She waved her hand irritably. "If you're going to keep up this charade because you're that desperate to get into mischief, then do it."

"I'm desperate alright, Chief," he grumbled, acting all offended. "That's what I've been telling you for the last three hours."

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, Bronson rushed his bogus visit to the bathroom and then hightailed it home. His mind swam with visions of returning to an empty apartment, the only lead he had on his sister's murderer gone. Or worse yet, he could be returning to a burned-out shell, with no trace of the baffling djinni boy and djinnyah girl to be found.

Chapter Seven

Bronson stalked into the apartment, his face flushed with exertion. Ren, who was now wearing a clean green hoodie and baggy jeans, shuffled off the black sofa. He'd been watching the music channels, numbly switching between the seven stations Bronson had on his cable package.

"Everything okay?" he asked, watching the cop survey his home.

Ren had tidied everything away after his exploration of the apartment, leaving it in the same state in which he'd found it. He didn't want to wear out his welcome. He'd even stripped the dirty bedding from the hallway, tossing the smeared sheets into the laundry machine.

"Yeah," the older man answered absently. "Where's Aileen?"

"I don't know. She left the minute I let myself in."

"To go where?"

"She wouldn't say."

"Is she coming back?"

"She promised she would. I think she will. She seems very invested in protecting you."

"You cut your hair, it looks..."

"Short," Ren sighed pleasantly, preventing the cop from finishing his sentence.

Bronson opened his mouth, as though he meant to continue, then changed his mind. "Hey kid, you hungry?"

"Not really." Ren frowned, feeling a little guilty about having consumed half the food in the kitchen.

"I'm in the mood for Chinese," Bronson said, pointing his index finger at his guest.

The teenager shrugged. "Um... okay," he mumbled uncertainly.

"What do you want?" the cop asked, pulling his cell from his pocket.

"I... erm... spring rolls... please."

Bronson nodded and punched some digits into his phone. He spoke hurriedly into the mouth piece, his order a blur of familiar numbers, which Ren couldn't decode.

This guy eats Chinese a lot, the young djinni mused.

"...yeah, yeah," Bronson nodded, speaking to whomever he'd placed his order with. "Oh, and make sure everything is unsalted, will ya?"

He ended the call, placing his cell on a black side table as he kicked off his tan shoes.

"Productive day, I see," he stated, gesturing to the flat screen.

Ren grinned weakly, unable to gauge Bronson's mood. "I borrowed some of your clothes. Is that ok?"

"Yeah that's... good," the detective said, rocking on his heels, offering his own half-assed smile.

"Good," replied Ren.

They stood in awkward silence for a moment, both men staring at the same patch of floor. After about thirty seconds of mute discomfort, Ren decided to fill the void.

"You were expecting me to have burned the building down, right?"

Bronson lifted his gaze sharply, his intelligent blue eyes dark and unsure. "A little."

"Well as you can see, everything is still intact."

"Indeed it is."

Silence again.

Ren got the distinct impression his presence was making the cop feel uncomfortable. Deciding to save the policeman the embarrassment of having to ask him to leave, Ren took the initiative.

"Look," he offered, shuffling into the corridor past the taller man, "maybe I should go."

Bronson didn't respond at first, he simply watched Ren walk toward the exit. As the young djinni placed his hand on the doorknob and twisted, Bronson spoke quickly.

“Did you murder Delmar?”

“Who?”

“Daniel or Danny Delmar, the goon who helped you escape from the Whitmores.”

Ren stiffened. “He’s dead?”

“You sound surprised,” the officer observed.

“I’m not,” Ren grimaced, turning to face Bronson. “How did you know it was him who helped me escape the estate?”

“I heard Elson shouting about your ‘greedy nobodies,’ on the roof of the bank. I figured it was Delmar who helped you get out.” Bronson shrugged. “That, and because you mentioned something in the car, about being in Aaron’s cage. I assume they had you held up somewhere.”

“For a long time,” Ren sighed. “What about Tall Paul and Marcus?”

“Both dead. They died about a month ago. Their remains were found in a burnt-out car, not far from the Whitmore mansion.”

Ren nodded, but his body language didn’t betray his thoughts. He just looked annoyed; the expression was a near-permanent feature on his face.

“And that is what’s wrong with you?” he asked letting his hand fall from the door handle. “You’re wondering if I’m a killer?”

“Are you?”

“I didn’t kill Paul and the other two, if that is what you’re asking me.” He scowled at Bronson’s big toe which poked through a hole in the officer’s navy sock.

Bronson couldn’t trust that what the kid was saying was true. He wanted to, and his gut was telling him to, but his brain pressed him to be cautious. It wanted to know more, wanted to see the evidence.

“What happened with Daniel Delmar?”

“The last time I saw him was when I was fleeing from him. I promised them a handsome reward in gold if they helped me escape. It was actually Tall Paul I finally managed to convince to get me out of there, and he talked the others into helping. They broke me out, but Aaron caught us midflight. We fought with him, and I burned my way past him. He was still alive when I left, he must have

died not long after. I got into Tall Paul's car, and we drove away. I got them to pull over in the Rural District. I faked an attack of fire expulsion, because I had a feeling they had something else in mind for me, and I didn't want to end up at their planned destination. So I turned our getaway car into an immobile golden heap and legged it through a field. I burnt it as I ran, hoping they wouldn't be able to follow me, and I'm guessing by my lack of recapture, that they couldn't."

"Where did that happen?"

"Like I said, in the Rural District, not far from where we were the other night."

"At the old Talston's farm?"

"I'm not sure what it was called, but the field I fled through was full of dry, yellowy wheat."

"That fire a month ago? I had to block the entry road until the blaze had been put under control. It cost the Talston's millions in damages."

Ren's face flushed with embarrassment. "I didn't think about that. Maybe I could turn their out-of-commission tractor into gold or something... They had a huge green thing rusting away near the barn."

"I wouldn't worry about it, I'm sure they were insured," Bronson continued. "What do you think happened to Delmar and the others after you got away?"

"Well they didn't go back to Whitmore's, at least not willingly. Aaron and Elson would kill them for setting me loose, which it sounds like they did."

"I see," Bronson huffed, looking very unconvinced.

"Would you like to drive to the spot where it happened?" Ren emptily suggested, feeling his temper fray further. "I can run you through the event."

"Alright," Bronson answered, surprising the djinni boy.

Ten minutes later the two men were in Bronson's Subaru, driving through the busy city streets, headed for the farmland district. The cool autumn breeze jostled in through Ren's window, which he deliberately left ajar. The crisp jet of air ran across the top of his head, playfully tugging at his short strands of hair.

"I'm sorry," Bronson said, filling the silence that had once again blossomed between them.

“For what?” Ren answered dully.

“For dragging you back out here, knowing that it isn’t safe for you.”

“You don’t trust me,” the djinni murmured, stifling his annoyance, “and you shouldn’t. We barely know each other.”

“So then, tell me a little more about you.” Bronson pretended to check his rearview mirror, but out of the corner of his eye, Ren caught the officer’s assessing look.

“There isn’t much to say,” Ren replied flatly. “My mother supposedly dumped me in a cathedral, but you know that already. You were there when I found out that little gem earlier today. Anyway, after that I got moved to Blue Brook Meadow, which I burned down after living there for ten years. That’s when my djinn gene emerged, so I went to the shantytowns and that’s where I first met Lebue. She took a shine to me and took my blood in exchange for protection from the other djinn in the slums. However, Aaron eventually turned up in his flashy car and took me away to his palace in the peak district.”

“What happened to you there? What was so terrible that forced you to run away?”

“It wasn’t terrible to start with. Aaron was kind to me, and I was well provided for. Elson was decent enough too. I’d say we were friends even. I knew that Aaron was pressing for djinn equality, and that he was manipulating people in power. I was fine with all of that. But then I got older, and Aaron let us boys see the darker side to his operations. I knew Aaron’s work was illegal, but I didn’t realize he was hurting people, even killing them.” The kid screwed up his mouth, like the words were sticking to his tongue, marring his flesh with distaste. “He didn’t want equality for the djinn, he wanted superiority, and he’d lied to me for years about the nature of his work.”

Bronson put his foot down on the accelerator as they left the confines of the city and emerged in the farming district. “Do you think Aaron was the man behind the formation of D.O.T.?”

“I’m almost sure of it, although I never heard him say as much. Come to think of it, I never saw or heard any hint of D.O.T. until a couple of days after I managed to escape my cell. But it has Elson’s stamp all over it.”

“Your cell?”

“After I realized what was happening with the gold I created, what it was my powers were funding, I refused to do it. I tried to run away.” Ren scowled.

"The old bastard caught me, and he locked me away in his basement. The salt cell had been there awhile, and there was bloodstains on the floor, so I know I wasn't its first occupant."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"And you only managed to break out a handful of weeks ago?" Bronson's eyebrows shot up.

"Yep," Ren answered with mocking brightness. "Hence the fact I'm such a cheery person."

"I..." the cop struggled, "I just can't get my head around it. It almost sounds too unbelievable."

"Isn't that why we're out here?" Ren scoffed. "To prove I'm not a liar?"

Bronson pulled the car over, coming to a spot that the kid recognized.

"There," the djinni said. "I remember that gnarled tree."

He pointed to a misshaped willow, which sprouted at a crooked angle, arching up towards the setting sun. Its branches were almost bare and its naked frame swayed gently in the slight gusts of wind. The tree almost seemed to float on a sea of yellow, being surrounded by wheat, which waved as the wind passed through their stalks. On the opposite side of the road, the field was charred and black. A span of burnt foliage, the size of a stadium, stretched away from them.

"This is where we stopped," Ren explained, climbing out of the car. "I remember running with that tree to my back."

"So this is where you turned Tall Paul's ride into gold?" Bronson asked, stepping away from his vehicle and searching around.

"Yep," the kid answered, leaning casually on the warm hood of the car. "We got out here, I shazammed the car, and then I ran that way." He pointed to the farmhouse which was barely visible on the horizon.

Bronson kicked about the dirt track, not sure what it was he was looking for. He explored the area for a good while, and Ren watched, patiently observing. Once or twice, Bronson could have sworn that the kid's eyes trickled over his body, lingering on his form in appreciation. The thought distracted Bronson,

who had struggled to think of anything other than how attractive he found the clean and clipped young man. Ren looked like a completely different person, now that he wasn't buried under weeks of filth. Every exotic detail enticed Bronson, made his pulse quicken, made his face flush. He shook the lustful feeling away and returned to the task at hand. That's when he saw something shining in the soot, on the side of the path through which Ren had escaped. The honeyed glimmer flickered in the final rays of the dying day. He walked excitedly towards it, hoping to find some evidence, which would put his fears over Ren's honesty to rest. Sure enough, scattered across the ground was a cluster of golden bullets.

"Gotcha!" he exclaimed.

"Have you?" Ren quizzed, seeming uninterested.

"Golden bullets." Bronson grinned.

"What about them?" Ren raised an eyebrow. "You've seen me pull that trick off before."

"Yes, but these haven't been fired and they're not in their clip."

"Which means what?"

"Firstly, that the ammo clip was emptied onto the floor in a hurry, probably after the user realized that they were useless. Secondly, that the owner wasn't fried while wearing them. They were most likely in the car when you... erm... shazammed it."

"How does that prove I'm innocent?"

"Because," Bronson said sprinting onward a few yards, "here is a bullet that isn't golden and look!" he held the slug up for Ren to examine. "There is a golden residue on the tip. This bullet passed through something golden. Someone shot at your guys, and they hid behind their golden heap for safety. I doubt very much that you're the shooter, and I dare say Aaron's lackeys tracked you to here. I'm betting there was a shootout," Bronson went on excitedly, "not long after you fled your saviors, and they were forcefully taken back to the Whitmore estate, before meeting a grisly end."

"Congratulations Officer Theo, mystery solved! Now can we go home? I don't like this place," Ren sulked.

"Yeah." Bronson smiled. "Let me just get some pictures on my phone."

He took out his cell and snapped a few shots of the bullets, where they lay on the ground. He looked about for other prints of import and any other evidence but came up empty handed. By the time he was finished, the autumn sun had completely sunk from view, and the sky had turned an inky blue.

"Come on kid, let us get you home."

There was no answer.

Bronson spun to look at his vacant Subaru, parked near the wilting willow tree.

"Ren," he yelled, casting a quick glance about.

"I'll be back in a minute," came a distant reply.

Following the sound of the djinni's voice, Bronson caught a glimpse of the kid stalking through the burnt-out field, heading towards Talston's farm.

"Hey kid, wait up."

He ran to catch up to the young man, who walked confidently through the ashen crops.

"What are you up to?" Bronson asked as they neared the edge of the scorched wheat and tiptoed up to the barn.

"Paying my debt," Ren whispered, eyeing the farm house.

The lights in the large building were out. The farmer and his family were either out or had gone to bed early. Satisfied that they weren't being spied upon, Ren summoned a small jet of flame, allowing it to arch away from his fingers and to glide along the rusted combine harvester that stood a few feet from the wooden shelter. As the flames licked gently at the wheel-less, condemned machine, its metallic compound shifted. Green paint seared away from the scalding body, and the nighttime air wobbled with the heat around the harvester. Exhaling with pleasure, Ren retracted his plume of amber flame. Bronson placed his hand on the djinni's shoulder, half-expecting the kid to shrug it off. But he didn't. The content look on Ren's face brightened into a smile, and they simply stood there for a few moments, basking in the good deed and the smallest of physical contacts.

"Now I'm hungry," the kid whispered.

"Aw, fuck! I forgot about the food! Now I'll have to order Indian!"

Chapter Eight

Several days went by without any sign of Aileen. Not that Ren wanted to complain, he was happy for the first time in a long time. Bronson would go to work in the morning, leaving him to his own devices, which usually involved a lot of trash TV, and then the cop would return in the afternoon. On the second night that Ren stayed with the policeman, he'd tried to cook. He'd seen a recipe on the cooking channel for homemade Beef Wellington. Sadly, the woman on the flat-screen made it appear way easier than it actually was, and the men ended up eating Beef Kebabs, cooked in Ren's fire.

"What were you thinking?" Bronson had laughed. "Have you ever tried to cook before?"

Ren shoved a plate of pita bread across the table to the grinning cop. "Here fill your mouth with that and hopefully words will stop coming out of it."

"Seriously. I'm surprised the smoke alarm wasn't going mental when I got in."

Ren sighed mockingly. "Give it time."

For the next couple of nights the men ordered take-away. They'd sit and chat for hours. Bronson talked about college and life on the force. He opened up about Kacey and his childhood with her. He talked about the death of his mum and dad, about the car accident that claimed them both just after he graduated high school. Ren let Bronson in behind his barriers somewhat too. He described what it was like, growing up in an orphanage, living on the streets and tried to explain about how his powers worked. He enjoyed talking to the cop and found it was easy to do so. But even when they weren't speaking, Ren enjoyed being around Bronson. There was something genuinely kind and warm about the man. Not to mention that he was incredibly attractive. Ren was at the small kitchen table one morning with a bowl of cereal, when Bronson strutted past the door in a towel. He lingered at the frame for a moment, rubbing at his damp hair, the black towel hanging in front of him modestly.

"Turn the coffee pot on would you?" he asked, mopping beads of water away from his moist, muscular chest.

"Turn on what?" Ren asked, forcing himself to meet Bronson's blue eyes and not allow them to wander over his taut flesh.

Bronson grinned. "The coffee, turn it on for me please? I need a brew before I can face the day."

Ren nodded obediently, it was all he could do to stop himself drooling milk all over his clean, gray T-shirt. A couple of nights later the two men were watching a rom-com. Bronson had brought a crate of beer home and was seated, supping happily in his plum sweatpants and a cream tanktop. Ren had to make a conscious effort to keep watching the film and not the policeman, as he absently stroked the back of his head with his large hand. They sat together on the sofa, and he'd spread himself over two of the three cushions, leaving Ren to occupy the third. The film, in which the lead female was a scientist, was far less exciting than the man on the sofa. Unable to find time to date, due to her hectic work schedule, the woman cloned herself and sent out the copy to find a man. Ren found the film frustrating and Bronson had laughed more at his snide remarks, than he did at the film.

"As though she's smart enough to be able to clone herself, but too stupid to see that her cute lab assistant is totally in love with her!"

"Some people are like that," Bronson chuckled. "Academically smart but zero common sense. Besides you're hardly one to comment, not with your total lack of being able to judge people."

The cop poked at Ren's rib with his toe, and the djinni gently batted his foot away. "What can I say? Obviously the characters I've come across are better at acting than she is."

Bronson was making a habit of breaching Ren's personal space. The quick, playful poke here and there, a nudge with his hip. Before the start of the film, Ren had been the first to claim his spot on the sofa. Bronson appeared a half minute later and brushed his hand through the djinni's dark hair, ruffling the short strands roughly under his palm. If it had been anyone else, Ren would have found it intrusive, and it would have angered him. But he just didn't feel that way with Bronson, in fact if anything, he egged it on. He wanted the muscular blond cop to make fun of him and to tease him. He wanted Bronson to poke and prod.

On the last evening in Bronson's apartment, when the cop returned home from work, he looked stressed.

"I need a beer. Do you want a drink?"

"Beer sounds good," Ren replied, pressing his luck.

“Beer sounds like something you drink when you’re twenty-one...”

“Oh, really? So you’ve only been allowed to drink it for a few months then?”

“Three years, I’ll have you know.”

“Fine. I’ll have a soda then please, grandpa,” Ren grumbled, following him into the kitchen.

A few minutes later they were sat in the sitting room, both sipping from their beer bottles. Bronson eyed the teenage boy disapprovingly.

Ren lifted his glass like he was giving a toast. “Look on the bright side. This is probably the least offensive illegal thing you’ve done so far this month.”

Bronson snorted and barely suppressed the smirk that sprang to his lips.

“I’ve got a feeling, it’s going to get worse before it gets better on that front,” he responded, swirling the cool bubbling liquid around in its container.

He seemed suddenly sad, and he sighed lightly.

“Ren...,” he started softly. “I think it’s time we gave up on waiting for Aileen to come to us. It’s time we started to look for her.”

Ren closed his eyes. “I agree.”

“Do you have any idea where to start?”

“No. All she said was that she had to inform some people. Who do you think she works for?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to figure that out too.”

“We could always ask Elson, I bet he’d know. He seems to know about everything. And when we’re done asking him, then we could throttle him.”

“Oh, yeah! Excuse me, Mr. Whitmore, would you mind telling us where the pink-haired lamp lives? Oh and please don’t kill us where we stand!” Bronson mocked.

“Do you think she’s really a lamp? Do you believe there is such a thing?”

“As farfetched as it sounds, all the evidence seems to point towards it being true. But the real question is, do you?”

Ren pursed his lips a little. “I think I do.”

“And do you think you are the lamp of fire?”

“...Yes.”

“Did Whitmore know what you were?”

“He must have, but only because he was a lamp to the elemental Lord of Water, before it transferred into Elson that is.”

“Elson Whitmore?” Bronson frowned. “Do you really believe my sister died at his hand?”

“Yes,” Ren nodded slowly. “And if not by his own hand, then certainly under his command.”

A hush settled in the room as the both of them took a big swig from their drinks. Ren purred involuntarily as the bitter taste trickled down his mouth.

He sighed, finishing off his beer and cracking open another bottle. “Elson Whitmore, the leader of D.O.T. and the lamp of the Lord of Water. It seems almost poetic that he’s become my archnemesis!”

“Fire and ice,” Bronson nodded.

“I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that I’m a lamp. I mean, if I shared my body with someone else, surely I could speak to them, inside my head or something.”

“Have you read that somewhere?”

“No, I just thought that might be the case.”

“Does it bother you?”

“No, not really. Then again, yes,” Ren huffed. “I don’t mind sharing my body with this entity, it’s not like its intruding on my life or anything. But I don’t like that everyone seems to be after a piece of me because of it.”

“Well, at least most people won’t recognize you with your hair short. I can’t believe how much better looking you are now you’re not hiding behind that black mass.” Bronson smiled.

“Are you saying I was ugly before?” Ren frowned jovially.

“No!” protested the cop, waving his arms defensively. “But let’s be honest, that dirty-urchin look really wasn’t doing you any favors. While you’ve been here, you’ve gained a bit of size too, and you look healthier for it. I like it.”

“I think it’s just because I’m happy here.” Ren smirked. “Happy looks good on me.”

“Good, I’m glad I make you happy.”

“What makes you think it’s you making me happy and not the endless supply of takeaway?” Ren jested.

As if to accentuate his point, the doorbell sounded and Bronson got up from the couch.

He grabbed his wallet from the side table. “To be continued,” he threatened and walked out of the sitting room, leaving Ren to crack open his third bottle.

The tantalizing smell of spices wafted in through the open door, and Ren lusted to taste the oriental food.

When Bronson returned with a red plastic bag in his hand, he snorted indignantly. “Slow down there kid, you’re going to drink me dry.”

“Sorry.” Ren grinned. “I just like the taste, and I didn’t think I would.”

“What?” Bronson froze, his face becoming serious.

“This is the first time I’ve ever properly drunk alcohol.”

“So you’re telling me, that through all your time as a vagrant and while rubbing shoulders with hired goons, you’ve never once had a beer?”

“I’ve had a glass of wine every once in a blue moon. You know, during special occasions at the Whitmore mansion and stuff, before my incarceration.”

“A glass?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been drunk before.”

“Okay. Don’t take this the wrong way, but if you’re going to experiment with alcohol, I’d rather you did it in any place other than in my home. God only knows how flammable you are while you’re under the influence.”

Ren chuckled softly as Bronson plated up the takeaway. It wasn’t until after Ren had divulged that this was the first time he’d seriously partaken in drinking, that Bronson noted how flushed the kid’s cheeks were. The hue of his skin was a complete contrast to his emerald-colored eyes. The officer’s stare lingered on his young companion, noting how pleasant the vagabond’s smile was. In fact, since returning to his apartment, he couldn’t help but note how pleasant everything about Ren was, now that he had been cleaned up. The high cheek bones in his impish face, his full pinkish lips, his unblemished porcelain

skin. The slight slant to his eyes, in which his elongated irises shone like emeralds in sunlight. The djinni seemed to exude a radiance that had escaped the older man's attention before.

"You should smile more often," Bronson offered, the words popping out of his mouth before he was even conscious of saying them.

The blush on the young man's face brightened, and he looked shyly away, the smile fading from his lips. "I've gone such a long time without having anything to smile about."

"And now?"

"For now, everything feels fuzzy and distant. I feel like I'm hovering about my life without actually being in it. I sort of feel like I'm having a day off from myself. Is that what beer does to you?"

"No, not always."

"Shame."

Ren pushed himself up off the rug and crossed the small space to the rounded table and sat opposite Bronson. He took a sample of food from each container, no more than a couple of forkfuls and placed them systematically on his plate. He took care not to let the different portions overlap, spacing them out around the ceramic plate.

"You worried about cross contamination?" Bronson asked, examining Ren's selection.

"I just want to taste them all individually, without mixing them up. Everything will taste the same if I do."

"Fair point. I never really thought about it before. I just heap everything into one giant concoction."

"Maybe I'll try that after I've tasted everything in its pure form."

"Pure form?"

"Undiluted."

"Overrated," Bronson scoffed pleasantly. "I like things better when they're diluted."

Ren's lips parted, mirroring Bronson's grin. "Like me?"

The beer was undoubtedly affecting his thought process, and the lack of food throughout the day probably wasn't helping him think straight either.

Against his more cautious nature, the officer nodded. "Like you."

"Why? The first day you saw me, when I was in the back seat of your squad car, you didn't look overly enthusiastic to be sharing my company."

"Maybe not when I first saw you. But now that I've gotten to know you a little better, then sure. Besides, that night was the first time in my whole life I'd ever broken the law. I was actually shitting my pants the entire time."

Ren laughed. "You're such a pussy!"

"Shut up," Bronson jibed, tossing a prawn at the djinni's head.

Ren dodged out of its way and flicked a curried bit of rice at Bronson's face. The grain found its mark and stuck to the older man's cheek.

"Oh, *Oh!*" Bronson said, rising from the table. "This means war."

He dipped his fork into his curry, ensuring there was a generous dollop trapped between the prongs. Ren leapt from his chair and ran into the sitting room, placing the sofa, at its center, between the two of them. Bronson, clearly an expert at tackling opponents to the ground, ignored the obstacle altogether. Instead of going around, as the kid had anticipated, he went over. He forced Ren to the floor, the djinni reduced to a giggling mess as they descended.

"Apologize," Bronson demanded, straddling the young man's chest, pinning him under his ass.

"You started it," Ren blustered, trying to wriggle out from under the policeman.

"Apologize, or this is going in your ear." He waved the fork, which had dripped most of its contents during the chase, like a deadly weapon.

"Better in my ear than in your mouth," the djinni goaded. "I think you've had one Chinese takeaway too many, you heavy bastard."

Bronson wiggled his backside, jiggling his captive about on the floor. Ren's face started to turn an impossible shade of red and his excited expression was suddenly wiped away.

"Bronson, get off," he gasped, pushing more forcefully against his assailant.

Seeing that the humor had drained from Ren's face, Bronson did as instructed.

The djinni boy jumped up and backed away. He trembled, and a spurt of orange flame blossomed on his right shoulder.

“Oh, Lords,” he breathed, patting the flame down.

“What’s wrong?” Bronson asked, rising to his feet.

“I don’t know.” Ren’s green eyes were wide with panic. “My fire, it’s surging out of control. I need to get out of here!”

Pain seemed to rip through Ren, and he clawed at his chest with his bony fingers. He closed his eyes, defending them from the sting of tears that threatened.

“Aileen...” the djinni boy choked. “There was so much fire...”

“Ren what is happening to you?” Bronson hesitated.

“This happened at Blue Brook,” he barked. “This is how the orphanage burned down. This surge of power.”

The black-haired kid sprang into action, thrusting himself out into the hall. Bronson gave chase, following as close as he dared. Angrily turning the knob, Ren yanked the door open and stalked out into the hall. A flicker of ruby flame shot up his thigh, the first warning sign of the inferno to come. He quelled it, gritting his teeth and yanked it back inside his body. He hit the stairs, breaking into a run, his skinny legs jumping the steps two at a time. He headed up, not down. It was late in the afternoon, and the streets would be full of people.

As he emerged on the roof of Bronson’s apartment building, he exhaled, his elemental fury jarring past its fleshy prison. A jet of crimson flame, like that from a flare gun, shot out of his mouth, rising skyward towards the darkening autumn sky. It hastily fizzled into nothing, unable to sustain itself without his physical form as a catalyst. Bronson watched as the glowing sphere faded away from the young man who staggered across the rooftop. Frantically, Ren scanned the space about him, looking for the safest point to stand. A small metallic water tank on the top of the opposite apartment building caught his eye. The djinni broke into an unsteady jog, easily clearing the gap between the buildings as he leapt through the air.

Ren hissed in protest against his injured leg, still tender from the fight earlier that week. Ignoring the pain, the djinni limped across to the short water tower. Bronson was not far behind him, landing on the gravelly roof a few feet away. Ren hobbled to the legs of the silvery frame, which were no taller than he was, and the tank which sat above them was even smaller. He clambered up the

steel structure, his face full of relief that he'd managed to reach somewhere he could burn with minimal concern for the environment around him.

He gasped at the cool air, readying to let his inner fire rage, when a hand grabbed at his foot. He looked down to see Bronson on the base of the water tower, his frown was dark and foreshadowing.

"You idiot," Ren growled.

Bronson ignored the feral tone of the boy's comment. "Look kid, just calm down. Get it under control."

"I'm about to go nuclear," Ren spat, shuffling back down the lid of the tower and helping Bronson up onto the tank.

Sparks of glowing heat crackled around his shoulders.

"What does that mean?" Bronson asked, catching the crazed look in Ren's stare.

"Hold me!" Ren placed his palm on Bronson's cheek and snaked his other arm around the policeman's back.

He untucked the older man's shirt, shoving his hand up his naked spine and digging his spindly fingers into Bronson's flesh. He couldn't contain it anymore; the blinding conflagration that quaked inside his frame came howling out of its cage. They were surrounded in a cocoon of blood-red flames. The rippling, searing waves of ruby stretched outward and upward, away from the men at its core.

Bronson yelled, a guttural death-scream, surely this meant the end of him. He tried to push away from the teenager, but the young djinni's vicelike grip held him in place.

"I said, hold me Theo!" Ren shouted over the crackling and hissing heat. "You're safe as long as you don't break contact with me. Skin to skin."

Bronson nodded, apparently unable to make his tongue move. He clawed at the back of the djinni's neck with his large strong hands, pulling their foreheads together. Ren could feel the man's terrified heart vibrating in his chest, while he gasped raggedly at the warm air. The two of them sat for several minutes, locked in their imposed embrace. Waiting for the blazing storm to pass.

The fire died away around them, passing as though it had never been. Bronson's hands were shaking as the air around him seemed to buzz with electricity.

"You can let go now," the djinni kid mumbled, sounding annoyed.

The officer did as he was instructed, releasing the young man from his grip and sliding back away from the elemental creature, off the golden patch of water tank on which they sat.

"Why am I alive?" he whispered, glancing over the unmarred flesh of his bare arms.

"I don't know how it works," the kid confessed, sighing, "but I don't burn whatever I'm touching while I use my powers. That's why my clothes don't go up in smoke when I go postal. It's almost like my heat-immunity spreads into them."

"How?"

"And again with the, 'I don't know,'" Ren repeated.

"I thought..." Bronson began, but then bit his sentence short.

"I'm sorry too, I didn't mean to scare you." Ren's expression was perplexed. "I thought I'd mastered controlling my power, but it looks like I was mistaken. I've not gone off like that for years."

"What caused it then?"

Ren's cheeks flamed, and he looked bashfully away. "I think... I think you shouldn't mount me like that anymore."

Bronson stared, taking a second to understand what the kid was trying to say. "Oh, I... I didn't mean to... I didn't think..."

"It's fine," the djinni mumbled, embarrassed. "I just... I've not felt this way for probably a decade... And the beer... I just forgot myself."

"How so?" Bronson quizzed, trying to blink the dazzling lights out of his vision.

"I let myself be happy, truly happy," the young man stated. "I've not felt like that since I was a kid, a real kid, at Blue Brook."

"Blue Brook?" Bronson gave the djinni a sympathetic stare.

"I didn't know I was a djinni." Ren's brows arched miserably as he gazed into the distance over the roof tops. "I went to bed a normal ten-year-old child, and when I woke up, I was in agony, and everything was on fire. I tried to save Aileen, but the ceiling of her room had caved in before I reached it. I got myself

downstairs. I don't know how I managed it because the smoke was blindingly thick."

"But your fire doesn't make smoke," Bronson pointed out, recollecting his senses.

"Yeah," Ren huffed, "but when other things are burnt by it, they smoke."

"You were lucky you didn't die from the fumes then."

A third voice joined their conversation. "That wasn't luck, that was me fanning the smoke away from your head."

"Aileen." Ren looked past Bronson, toward the girl who now stood at the edge of the roof. "Is it really you? I mean the real you from Blue Brook?"

"Yes Renren, it really is me," she huffed quietly. "Or did you forget that I was the one to give you your nickname?"

"I didn't kill you?" Ren shuddered.

Aileen's violet eyes narrowed, and she looked away. "No, but the innocent girl you once knew is gone, and I am what remains. A tool, a weapon, an agent of our Lord."

Bronson rubbed at the back of his hands. "Oh good, more secrets and cryptic speeches."

"Come with me now, and all will become clear," Aileen whispered, her hushed voice carried through the air.

"Where?" Ren asked.

"I cannot say." Aileen shook her head, her shoulder-length pink tresses swaying in the setting sun. "But you must come. It isn't safe here, and we're being watched."

"By who?" Bronson cast his gaze about. "Whitmore's men?"

"Yes." Aileen nodded. "They were the ones who put the blood into the food you just ate. It caused Ren's powers to spike. They meant to kill you, Theo."

"That's what made me lose control?" Ren stared at his hands, unsure.

"It is. It's also what forced our powers to emerge when we were children at Blue Brook. That is how Whitmore started the fire."

"So it had nothing to do with my..." Ren stopped, huffing shyly.

“Elson’s blood?” Bronson asked.

“No, not Elson.” Aileen grimaced. “Charlotte Galampier’s blood.”

“Charlotte, as in the Lightning Lady, summoner of The War Weasel?”

“Yes.”

“The same djinniah from World War II? The one who almost destroyed Turin with her giant primal? That Charlotte Galampier?” Bronson shook his head disbelievingly.

“Charlotte is alive and is guiding Elson. She is the driving force behind his master plan.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because Kacey told me so. After Blue Brook, she took me to a haven, where others like Kacey and myself reside.” Aileen looked Bronson straight in the eye. “Her finding the two of us at Blue Brook, eight years ago, was no accident.”

Bronson screwed up his face. “You’re saying she was sent.”

It was all connected; Ren, Aileen, Kacey, Whitmore, Blue Brook Meadow and the lightning primal which wiped out half of Italy during the Second World War. Somehow they’d all woven themselves into a complex web. He had to untangle the past; he had to make his sister’s killer pay.

“Decide on my honesty after you’ve met with the others,” Aileen offered, “but for now, come with me.”

“What do you think?” Ren asked, turning to the older man with his sharp eyes.

“I don’t like it, but we’re not safe here.”

Ren turned to Aileen. “Does Bronson have time to go back to his place and get another gun? Assuming he has more than one of course...”

Bronson felt for the pistol at his waist, confused,, and pulled it out of the holster. It glimmered in the bright sun, the usual steel gleam gone, replaced with a golden tint.

“Motherfucker,” the detective mumbled under his breath.

Chapter Nine

They arrived at the docks, and stood outside of S.S. Shipments. They had taken a long detour, successfully shaking off the djinnayah that was tailing the small party. Aileen kept testing the wind for the scent of the tracker and after an hour of leading her in circles, deemed it safe to continue on to their true destination.

“Why are we here?” Bronson asked, glaring at the leaning construction.

“This is my home,” Aileen replied, moving forward.

They made their way into the wooden shack, and descended the spiral staircase that led to the shipping company’s basement.

“How can you possibly live here? We had men crawling all over this area for weeks.” Bronson scratched at the back of his head irritably.

Aileen didn’t answer; instead she tapped on a copper pipe, which led into the ground and away from the small space. The rusted metal echoed in the empty basement, the djinnayah’s rhythmic tapping sounding suspiciously like Morse code.

Ren looked over his shoulder at the puzzled officer and shrugged, sharing his annoyed expression.

The ground vibrated suddenly, the slight juddering of the earth beneath their feet caused Ren to jump back. He landed close to Bronson, who reflexively placed his hand on the young man’s shoulder, pulling them into a defensive huddle. As Ren relented to Bronson’s pull, the officer slipped his arm around the djinni’s torso, encasing him in a protective hug. Ren’s stomach tingled as his back collided with Bronson’s chest. The slight compressive feeling in his gut was completely alien to him and made him feel giddy. His usual urge to wriggle away from close contact was gone, and he was left with this exhilarating new sense. Aileen glanced over their stance, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

Around the copper pipe, the dusty floor began to move, twisting like sand falling through the upper part of an hour glass. It swirled away, revealing a manhole-sized gap in the floor, under which a rusted ladder leaned against a curved brick wall.

“What is this place?” Ren asked, reluctantly stepping away from Bronson’s strong grip, moving closer to investigate the hole.

“The Judson River flows out to the ocean through a system of caves under the harbor. My boss managed to wall a few of those caves off, creating a space for us to live in secret, untagged.”

“There are untagged djinn down there?” Bronson asked.

“Yes, there are.” Aileen nodded. “But there are also humans down there, if that makes you feel any better?”

“Not really,” Bronson mumbled, as he watched Aileen jump into the cylinder.

“Looks like we’re climbing.” Ren nudged Bronson in the rib with his elbow. “Age before beauty.”

Bronson scoffed, “So the slight gap in our age is only applicable when it suits you, eh?”

Ren smiled and shrugged again, more dramatically this time.

The two men descended the ladder, Ren at the top. When they were a decent way down, the hole above their heads closed. The dirt rolling back into its original setting, seamlessly disguising the minute gap. The shaft down which they climbed, was poorly lit by crudely fitted bulbs, which were exposed from their casing. A bundle of thick cable wiring had been screwed to the wall alongside the ladder, and Ren tried his best to avoid touching the fatal-looking electrical plait as he moved.

Aileen waited patiently at the bottom, and as Bronson helped Ren off the ladder she turned about-face and marched off along the narrow stone cylinder into which they’d descended. The same sloppy wiring hung from the ceiling, and at irregular intervals a bulb was twisted into the cable. Somewhere water dripped into a puddle, the sound reverberating down the tunnel.

“Did Kacey come down here?”

“Yes, she came down here a lot,” Aileen answered. “She was on her way back here from a mission when Elson’s djinn followed her. They knew she worked for us and wanted to know where I was. They made her sit on the desk up there and wait for Elson. When he arrived, she lied to him, told him she’d deliberately led them to a dead end.”

“Why didn’t anyone try to help her?”

“It was in the middle of the night, and no one knew she was there, except for me. I happened across them not long after Whitmore showed up. I couldn’t get in here to call for back up, and I couldn’t take Elson and ten of his men out alone. If they captured me, it would ruin all of our hard work, and so many other people would die. They killed Kacey, while I watched, helplessly.” Aileen’s voice faltered, the young girl’s pain still fresh.

“What do you mean, many other people would die?”

“My boss will explain everything, we’re almost there,” she said, wiping at her face.

“How far?” Bronson whispered, tiring of half-answers, and feeling angered to learn of his sister’s true demise.

“Just around this corner,” Aileen answered.

Sure enough, they turned the upcoming bend and came face to face with a sheet of stone.

A dead end.

Ren brushed his hand against the rough surface of the barrier which prevented them from moving on. “This is another door,” he stated, “like the one upstairs.”

Aileen nodded and thumped her clenched fist against the wall, a new rhythm this time, but definitely some sort of code.

She had barely finished when, again, the ground began to vibrate and the wall seemed to flow away like liquid. The stone rippled away, shifting like a curtain on a stage, revealing the next scene which was to play out.

Beyond the wall was a cavernous dome. The large rounded space was brightly illuminated with electrical light, the density of which caused Ren to squint his eyes. Through his narrowed lashes, he could see clusters of color against the dark rock. Deep crevices, at various heights along the wall, created shadowy pockets, which were brightly decorated with fabric and furniture. Most notably, however, were the faces of the people, those nearest the door, observing the newcomers. Some of them held tools in their hands, having apparently stopped working on their tasks to see who was entering their sanctuary while others loitered, chatting or playing cards, seeming unhurried in the huge dome of stone.

“What is this place?” Ren mused, more to himself than his company.

“A natural cave that was carved out by the Judson River thousands of years ago. Since then, the land above us has been domesticated, and the settlers of New Yarllynn built a man-made watercourse for the river to run along. This place dried out, and our leader fortified the stone to ensure it was safe.”

“Your leader,” Bronson said, “when do we get to meet them? You said all would be explained once we reached your hideout.”

Aileen nodded. “Follow me.”

The men started to move again, guided through the center of the cave. All eyes were on them until they arrived at one of the colorful pockets that adorned the walls.

“How many people live down here?” Ren asked, glancing about.

“Normally, not very many,” the neon-haired djinn explained. “Most live above, in the city, only a few of us choose to live down here. But since Kacey’s murder, we’ve been on lockdown, and all of our agents in the city have been forced to seek shelter here.”

“How many people know of this place?”

“Several djinn and maybe twice as many humans. We’re just shy of thirty members.”

“Members?” Bronson was becoming irritated by Aileen’s continuous string of cryptic responses.

“Yes,” she said, stopping at the shadowy recess and waving her hand like an usher in a cinema.

At her signal both men walked into the niche. Inside the lights were dimmer, and they cast jagged shadows along the craggy wall. On the right side of the high-ceilinged pocket was a flat screen TV. The image on the screen was frozen, and although Ren recognized the paused console game, he couldn’t remember its name. Tapestries of thick, green cloth gently cascaded down the wall on the opposite side. Stitched into the weathered fabric were olive-colored trees stretching towards a cyan sun. The pattern was repeated over all the material and on every tapestry, in varying forms. At the center of the room was a large, egg-shaped boulder, on which moss and soft, tiny purple flowers grew. It sat atop more stone, balancing precariously on the arched slab, which disappeared beneath the earth.

Tired of being kept in the dark, Ren scoffed into the empty room. "Where is your leader?"

"I'm here," came a hushed, yet deep voice from behind the oval rock.

The whispered words reverberated through the tall recess, despite the low volume in which they were spoken. There was something not natural about them, something artificial, like wind being blown through pond reeds. They made Ren tense, the muscles in his leg readying to respond should they have need. The voice was distinctly not human.

"Why are you hiding behind that rock?" Bronson asked, his irritated tone matching that of Ren.

"I'm not hiding, one of flesh," the voice responded. "I sit in plain view."

At that, the boulder in the middle of the room trembled slightly on its perch, tilting slowly to one side. The monumental rock rotated slowly, and unease trickled through Ren as he realized what it was he gazed upon.

The craggy shape was in fact alive, its oval curves perfectly proportioned to create a giant human head. The thick, willowy vines, that clung to the top of the stone was a mane of leafy hair. As the boulder continued to spin, an eye came into view. The glistening marble sclera shifted in its socket, and an iris, the color of sand, searched the space behind it, coming to rest on Ren.

"Greetings, little lamp," the great being welcomed him over its shoulder. "And greetings to you as well, brother of Kacey Bronson."

"What the fuck are you?" Bronson asked, taking an alarmed step back.

"Aileen, would you be so kind as to turn up the lights?" the creature requested. "Let us allow our guests a better look at me."

Aileen did as instructed, flicking a switch near the entrance to the cave. Lights above their heads flickered into life, buzzing in disgruntled protest at being woken from their slumber. The twisting shadows were expelled from the cave, and the stony being at its center blinked at its guests.

"Forgive the darkness," it offered. "The glow from the bulbs reflects off the monitor, and it makes it difficult to see what is happening in my game."

It shrugged its craggy shoulders, and the ground beneath their feet rumbled. The thing was buried in the floor up to its armpits, leaving its arms, shoulders,

and face visible to the newcomers. Judging by the size of what could be seen above the cave's sandy base, the creature would have struggled to fit inside its home, had it fully emerged from the floor. Its head alone was as high as Bronson, and if it stretched out its arms, the appendages would have easily cleared the length of the alcove in which they stood. The face of the creature appeared remarkably human, except for the fact it only had one eye in the center of its forehead.

"You're a primal," Bronson stated, now able to clearly see the elemental entity.

"Not just any primal." Its gritty, gray face shifted in expression, showing a row of pristine porcelain teeth as it smiled.

"Golem," the kid whispered at his side. "You're the Lord of Earth. A genie out of the lamp."

Golem nodded once in concurrence. "That I am, Ren Lampard. And in you sleeps my sibling, Salamander."

"So I've recently been led to believe," Ren huffed, rocking casually on his feet.

"It is fact," Golem assured. "As with Aileen, within whom sleeps Sylphid, Lord of the Wind."

Aileen flexed an eyebrow at Bronson, who turned around to stare at the small woman.

"What does all of this have to do with Kacey?" the officer asked. "What is all of this?"

"All of this is what keeps the world balanced," Golem answered, gesturing to the roof with his slate fingers. "We are a contingent, tied to an organization that has gone by many names throughout the centuries. Its most modern incarnation is D.O.T."

"Terrorists?" Bronson gasped, unable to mask the disgust in his voice.

He looked to Ren who seemed unaffected by the news, the djinni shifting his weight nonchalantly from one foot to the other. The eyes within his frowning face, kept wandering along the size of the stone giant before them.

"Why did you allow me to think that Elson's troop were D.O.T.?" the policeman grouched to Aileen.

“Would you have trusted me had I been honest?”

Bronson scoffed, “So you omit truth in order to be trusted? Are you the ones responsible for burning down the Galleries of Justice? And murdered the judge?”

“Baxter worked for Elson. He was one of the Whitmore’s djinn plants. He got wind of Elson’s master plan and contacted us. He couldn’t go to the authorities. Only Elson knows who he has in his pocket.”

“So what happened?”

Golem sighed slowly. “What was described as an execution, was in fact an extraction turned sour. We needed information about Elson Whitmore’s plans to destroy your city, and Hugo Baxter was our only certain link. He fought alongside our agents, as they tried to get him to safety, and died on the steps of your Galleries of Justice. If in our attempt to help the judge, we have been labeled terrorists by human society, then so be it. That is our cross to bear for working towards the greater good.”

“I fail to see any good in what happened at the Galleries! Do you know how many people died in that fire?”

Aileen grunted behind him. “We didn’t start the fire. That was Elson’s handy work. He was trying to cover his own ass, burning any evidence that might link him to Baxter. In fact, if anything we risked our own lives trying to save as many from the burning building as we could. We lost two of our own! We tore walls down so people could escape, floated employees to safety out of windows...”

“As is our duty!” Golem stated proudly.

“The fire is on Whitmore then? Not the D.O.T.?” Bronson clenched his fists. “How can you expect us to believe you?”

“Perhaps if you knew our original title, it may hold some weight within your thoughts and allow you to perceive us from a different vantage point.”

“The Paragons of Five Points,” Ren declared.

“Charged by God, to keep the peace between the djinn and the humans,” affirmed the elemental Lord.

“A task we’re failing miserably at,” Aileen chipped in sulkily.

“As in the knights from the Holy Bahriel?” Bronson tried to shake the incredulous look from his features.

“More or less,” Aileen answered, “except we don’t wear shiny armor anymore or carry broadswords.”

“You’ve been alive since the creation of the world?”

Golem twisted softly. “No, Theodore Bronson, I have not. Nothing is eternal, not even we elemental Lords. Though it is true our lives can span over thousands of years, eventually we die.”

“But the Bahriel says that God made you immortal...” Ren wondered aloud.

“The holy scripture of the people in your world has altered form many times, since its origination. Much of what is written within its pages transpired a countless age before the first Bahriel was created. Not even I know what is fact and what is fiction within its pages. I can’t even say with certainty that there is a God,” the colossal creature sounded sad.

“If the last five Lords are not immortal then, how come you’re all still around now?” Ren quizzed.

“When we die, the ancient energy in our bodies escapes. It searches for a fitting conduit which allows the power to bleed into an elemental source, and a new primal is born.” Golem pointed to the tapestries on the wall, “The first Golem, tasked with keeping the balance, took the form of an oak tree, infusing the power of the elemental Lord with wood.”

“So the Salamander in me,” Ren mused darkly, “isn’t the raging Lord of Fire that had to be subdued in the story in the Bahriel?”

“No young lamp. That primal died eons ago. Your Salamander drew in the burning light from a star, and its fire is that of the night sky.”

Bronson cut in, “As fascinating as this history lesson is, I’m still not sure what this has to do with Kacey’s death. Or how she managed to get herself mixed up in all this.”

Golem stared at Bronson, narrowing his sagely eye. “As your companion so astutely pointed out earlier, I am currently untethered to a human host. A genie out of its lamp. I have been in such a state since the Second World War after the Italian scientists, running project Sguinzagliare, tore us from our human habitats.”

“Saggy-liar, what?” Ren bewildered.

“Project Sguinzagliare,” Golem corrected. “A project headed by the Italians, who sought to extract the power of the elemental Lords and harness it. With

such power, they would have been able to create weapons of destruction, the likes of which have yet to be invented.”

“They cocked it up of course,” Aileen grunted. “Science and the supernatural shouldn’t be mixed.”

“That is not entirely true,” Golem countered. “They failed to extract our power, but they managed to extract two of us from our human counterparts.”

“You and the War Weasel?” Bronson squinted, unsure.

“Yes. Me and Raiju. During the war, Raiju’s lamp was a woman named Carlote, and her family had carried the Lord over many a generation. The Italians sniffed out the lamps and rounded them up, along with their next of kin. We elemental Lords seem to gravitate towards each other, our paths through life overlapping constantly. Most of our lamps were living in Italy or a neighboring country at the time. They experimented on our hosts, forcing them to swap blood. It didn’t take them long to figure out that our blood empowered other djinn, and that it caused short, yet massive spikes in power, when our lamps were forced to swap blood with each other. After a few months, all of Carlote’s family was dead, lost to cruel experimentation. Our lamps decided to take their revenge on the scientists, and when the opportunity presented itself, they all tried to swap blood. Carlote was the first to consume the blood. My lamp, Amadeo, went next. Before the remaining lamps had a chance to exchange their vital fluids, Carlote went into a seizure. Moments later, Raiju emerged from her body, and he was furious. I barely managed to escape his rage with my lamp and the other hosts. We fled Europe and settled here in America. Deliberately spacing ourselves out along the land mass, for all the good it has done. Several decades later, our ancestors have still managed to accumulate in one city.”

“What happened to your lamp?” Bronson asked, the color in his face paling.

“He had several children, mostly sons, and I never remerged our bodies. He did not want his children to grow up in a world where they wouldn’t be accepted for having additional gifts. I honored his wishes—it is difficult not to do so. You must understand, that everything our lamps see and feel, filters through to us. It is hard not to love a person completely, when you know them completely. I loved my lamp so deeply that I chose to sacrifice my own longevity for his happiness.”

Ren folded his arms and frowned. “Your longevity?”

"That is what I said, little lamp. You see, primals share a similar life span to humans and djinn, when not embedded in a host's body. I am old now, and my life force is dwindling. I fear, I am not long for this world."

"Why not reattach yourself to another human then? Create another lamp?"

"Not all humans are hospitable. Some will reject my presence, and I risk killing them if that is the case. I do not wish to have innocent blood on my hands this near to death. I know we primals are thought to be soulless creatures, but if that is not the case, when I die, I want my soul to be welcomed in Heaven."

"That's... that's why I'm here, isn't it?" Bronson breathed, his round eyes glazing over. "That is why Kacey got mixed up in all of this. Amadeo... Your last lamp was named Amadeo."

"That is correct, fleshling."

"I'm... My..." Bronson wobbled on the sand. "Amadeo was my grandfather's name... and... I remember... my granddad saying that we have Italian roots... Amadeo... my ancestor... was... he was your lamp, wasn't he?"

Golem's granite head nodded slowly.

"Kacey was the firstborn child of my father, who was the firstborn child of his parents."

"As was your grandfather," Golem stated.

"So now that she is dead... I'm next in line? I'm your lamp?"

"You are the purest descendent in the line of my lamps and therefore the most compatible human to house my entity," Golem explained. "Your blood is the most undiluted."

"Undiluted," Bronson whispered, his voice sounding haunted.

"During Raiju's rampage through Italy, he depleted his power reserves, and I assumed he died not long after. Instead he returned to his lamp, and Carlote escaped Europe. Raiju has slept inside his lamp, storing his power, waiting to unleash his wrath upon the humans. He and Carlote press for djinn superiority. They want to enslave mankind; they want to upset the balance."

"Then why not go to stop them in your current form? Surely, you're more powerful in that form?" Ren stated.

"I can kill Carlote and Elson too, but their deaths won't quell Raiju's lust for vengeance. He will simply carry it into the next befitting lamp. It is time for a new Raiju. The current Lord of Lightning and his vengeful nature must die. In order to kill him, he must once again be forced from Carlote's body."

"She must consume the blood of the other four lamps, like she did in Italy?" Bronson's heart started to race. "And you're made of stone."

"I do not bleed, fleshling. Not as you humans do."

"So you need my blood. You need me to become your lamp, to become a djinni."

"This is bullshit," Ren snapped. "Come on, Theo, we're leaving."

The kid wrapped his fingers around the officer's hand and started to lead him away from the primal Lord.

"I'm afraid we can't let you do that." Aileen pushed herself away from the wall, adopting an aggressive stance. "Bronson will become Golem's lamp, one way or the other."

"We're not out in the open here, you breezy bitch. Not enough space to get the wind beneath your wings," Ren snarled.

"Not a lot of oxygen to feed your fire either," she retorted, her tone matching his. "Let's tussle and see who runs out of air first."

Not waiting to be told twice, Ren conjured up a ball of flame into the palm of his hand.

"Stop!" Bronson called, squeezing Ren's fingers. He turned back to the primal. "You said something about Elson wanting to destroy the city. What did you mean by that?"

"Hugo Baxter didn't give us a lot of information before his untimely demise. But what he did say was that Carlote has figured out a way to unleash Raiju without having to consume the blood of the other lamps. She is planning to unleash him in the city and from there, move across the country, taking control of the human-run nation. She plans to start a race war."

"When?"

"That she hasn't already has surprised me."

"What are you planning to do about it? What would happen to me if I were to become your lamp?"

“We thought it best to go on the offensive. Attack her at the Whitmore mansion and force her to drink the blood of all the lamps before she unleashes her primal in the city. Once Raiju is out of her body, he can be killed. Carlote knows this, and that is why she has been trying to track, trap, or kill the lamps that are not under her sway.”

Ren turned with his angry eyes towards Bronson. “You can’t seriously be thinking about letting this happen!”

“I am... and it should.”

“But you’ll be a djinn, a dilute!” Ren shot back. “You don’t understand what that’s going to be like for you! And who’s to say they’re even telling us the truth?”

“Because it all fits perfectly into place. And Kacey... She wouldn’t have trusted these people if they were anything other than... good. Besides, being a djinni won’t be any different for me than it is for you, and I don’t see anything wrong with you. In fact, I admire you, and I trust you.” Bronson smiled sadly. “If there is anyone who can teach me how to be a djinni, then it’s you, and there isn’t anyone else I want for the job.”

“But Bronson, it’ll be the end of your life. You can’t be a cop and a djinni! You can’t!”

“And I can’t protect you or avenge my sister as a human. Let me do this without a fight, Ren. Let me choose my own destiny.” The resolve in Bronson’s voice was final.

Ren hissed out a breath and his usual expression of irritation melted away into a vision of protective concern. His emerald eyes held the officer’s for a moment, and Bronson felt like they were back in his apartment. That energy that connected them, flaring into life, drawing them together. Ren nodded, slowly, unwillingly. The djinni wouldn’t wish his life onto another, but he wouldn’t deny his companion the right to choose his own existence either.

Bronson turned back to Golem. “Do it.”

Chapter Ten

The stone giant reached out to the policeman and scooped him up off the floor. Bronson wobbled in his palm, as Golem brought his other hand in close, pointing his slate fingers at the officer's head. Transparent, glittering, green vines snaked away from the tips of Golem's fingers and crept towards the tiny man in his hand.

"This is going to hurt, fleshling, but it won't take long." His tan-colored eye flicked quickly over to Aileen, who looked consumed with grief, and whispered a final time. "When I rebond I will fall back into my primal sleep. Before I go, know that I thank you, Aileen Lamb, for all you have done."

With that he unleashed his power along the wiggling vines, and they tore forward, assailing Bronson's face. Ren stood aghast as thorns sprouted from the stems and clawed at the cop's face, burrowing into his flesh. Bronson wailed, a throaty howl of pain that echoed out of the alcove and into the cavernous space beyond. People appeared at the entrance to Golem's home, alarmed by the screams emanating from within. The shining vines coiled around Bronson and, despite their transparency, the policeman disappeared under their density.

"He's killing him!" Ren yelled above Bronson's cries. "Make it stop!"

Aileen shook her head, unable to pull her eyes away from the spinning mass of mossy color. Golem's body began to freeze, the slight movements which hinted at life evaporating, deserting his frame. The spark of power that had filled the giant with energy was gone, leaving a statue in its wake.

Bronson's song of agony intensified, the rising pitch of his voice breaking into heaving gasps. He levitated away from the palm of Golem's body, lifted by the jade whirlwind of sparkling light. And then abruptly, everything went quiet, and the twinkling energy was gone. Gently, Bronson descended down onto the sandy floor, a few feet away from Ren. His eyes were closed, his torn flesh was mended. His limp body crumpled into a heap as it lowered down from the air. Ren leapt forth, pouncing protectively on the body of his companion.

"Bronson!" the djinni said, shaking the cop's shoulder firmly. "Bronson, come on!"

The man in his grasp, who was panting raggedly, didn't respond.

"Theodore!" Ren snapped, his tone urgent.

Bronson's eyes shot open, and he grabbed hold of Ren. "I thought I was going to die..." he stated through gasps of air.

Ren folded into the cop, and relief washed over him like a wave of fresh cold water. It made him shake, and he choked out a laugh in spite of himself.

Bronson pulled himself up to meet the kneeling djinni. He pressed his warm strong hands against the back of Ren's head, bringing their foreheads together. He held them there, face to face, eyes closed.

"I thought I was going to die," he repeated.

"Well you didn't, you're fine..." Ren purred, stroking his hand through Bronson's ashen, curly hair. "Stop being a pussy..."

"I wasn't scared of dying." Bronson pulled away slightly, cupping Ren's cheek with his warm palm. "I was scared that I wouldn't... That I'd never... Never get the opportunity to do this."

He leaned forward, pressing his lips onto Ren's mouth. Ren froze, his limbs going rigid. How could this be happening? How could this beautiful, kindhearted man want to kiss him? He sank into Bronson's frame, falling against the officer. He kissed back, fiercely, prying the older man's mouth open with his tongue. He wrapped his lanky arms around Bronson's broad shoulders, pulling them tighter together. Ren was hungry for this kiss, for this closeness. He felt his embers stir in his gut and felt the heat spreading through his body.

Let it come.

Bronson pulled away and opened his eyes. They were changed; his pupils were stretched along the diameter of his irises which were no longer a brilliant blue. The sapphire sky had been replaced by a rich purple hue, the same color as the dahlias that grew on Golem's head.

"Don't stop," Ren urged as flames engulfed them.

Bronson smiled, his heart thumping in his chest. Ren wanted to be showered in his kisses, he wanted Bronson's lips on his skin. The world beyond the fire, which danced around them in blinding amber ripples, fell away. It left the two of them together, the sole entities in their burning bubble. Bronson kissed Ren again, and then again and again. They held each other, entangled, flesh to flesh.

After a time that was too short and yet seemed to span an age, Ren's fire died away. As the flames tittered to nothing, the cave came back into view, as did the faces of the crowd, who had come to witness the birth of a new lamp.

Aileen stepped forth from amongst them, her expression barely masking the turbulent emotions that gripped at her soul.

"Can you feel him in you?" she quavered.

Bronson stood up, brushing the grit away from his legs. He stood still and closed his eyes, not really sure what he was doing. Listening to the rhythm of his body, Bronson searched for notable changes. At first he couldn't feel anything, but then he heard it. The thrum of a second heartbeat, the power of the sleeping giant in his body. Every pulse forced energy through him, filling his limbs with strength, making him feel indestructible.

"I can feel him," Bronson grinned.

"Good," Aileen whispered in a strangled voice. "Now—not that I want to get between you pair of lusty lads, but time is of the essence. Let's test your abilities and see what you're capable of. I want to be on the offensive by first light, before Carlotte unleashes her wrath, and the city becomes a battle field."

Bronson strode cautiously away from Ren. "How does this work then?"

"It's different for all of us," Ren explained. "It just depends on how your djinn powers have manifested."

"They usually kick in subconsciously when you're under threat," Aileen offered, scooping a stone up off the floor.

She tossed it towards Bronson, aiding the projectile by pushing it with a twisting breeze.

Bronson yelped and flung his arms up around his head. As he did so, his muscles tensed, and he felt a shift in his physical form. The stone bounced off his forearms, harmlessly falling to the floor. It didn't hurt, didn't even tickle.

"That was awesome," Ren laughed.

"Yeah... truly..." Bronson grumbled, not sounding quite as confident. "What happened?"

Aileen smiled softly, tears shining in her silvery stare. "Oh he has given you a gift to be truly proud of."

Chapter Eleven

The sun rose lazily over the upmarket, Peak District, shedding its dim light over the Whitmore estate. Ren glared at the massive mansion, a shadowy silhouette blotting out the rays of the new day. The unremarkable, rectangular building was four stories high and as long as a soccer field. Around the perimeter of the red brick manor, neatly pruned bushes grew. Their leaves and cream flowers were still in full bloom, despite the fact it was late autumn. Along the front wall were large, white arched windows that were arranged in symmetrical intervals. A huge granite fountain, with a statue of Neptune at its center, sloshed away in the courtyard. The merman rode a wave, proudly brandishing a trident with golden prongs.

Ren scowled at the weapon, and the golden glint that reflected the sun. The trident had been stainless steel until he'd worked his magic on the damned thing.

He stood with the other members of D.O.T., hidden inside the thick forest that grew close to the massive construction, waiting for Aileen's signal. He shuddered and tried to quiet the tiny voice in his head that told him to flee. This place was a place of nightmares, and it would haunt his dreams until the day he died. But he wouldn't let it haunt his waking moments too, he had to end this here and not live in fear of being tracked down by Elson's goons.

Bronson, who was standing behind him, placed his hand on Ren's shoulder. "You alright?"

Ren brushed his cheek along the policeman's fingers. "Ask me again when we both live through this," he purred.

The large weather vane on the roof, which was shaped like an old galleon ship, started to spin rapidly.

Aileen had secured an entrance: it was time.

The small force of twenty-three men and women crept quickly forward, trying to stay hidden behind trees and the other monuments that adorned the vast yard. At the side of the building was the entrance that led into the CCTV room.

Aileen had been monitoring the estate, with Kacey, for months and had memorized the shift patterns of the men who manned it. When Ren and

Bronson made it to the wall of the mansion, Bronson wrinkled his face with distaste at the two corpses on the floor. Fresh blood seeped from their slit throats, and he had to look away.

“Did you have to kill them?” he grumbled quietly in Aileen’s ear.

Aileen sighed. “That one—” She pointed to a bald middle-aged man. “—set fire to a car while three men were trapped inside. I saw him do it with my own eyes, and he enjoyed it. That one... well... that one kicked a cat.”

“A cat?”

“I like cats...”

“I don’t like to kill unnecessarily,” Bronson grimaced.

“I don’t relish in the killing either.” she shot him an angered look. “But here everyone knows what Elson is up to. They’re planning to level the city and then move onto the next. Do you think they care about your life, or the lives of those countless innocents in New Yarlenn? What did you think we came here to do?”

Ren tugged at Bronson’s shoulder. “She’s right. Don’t get yourself killed trying to spare the lives of these monsters. A lot of people are going to die here today, don’t be one of them.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I just... I don’t like it.”

“Let’s find Elson and Carlote. If we cut the head off the snake, the body will be easier to subdue,” Aileen offered. “Maybe that way, some of these actual terrorists will live to see another day, hopefully under lock and key.”

She looked over her shoulder, addressing the party of people who crowded into the little room. “Jon, Morgs, Pete, you three ready?”

The three paragons nodded, their faces determined.

“Don’t let anyone in,” Aileen ordered.

“Good luck,” Morgan saluted jovially, as she left the small room with the two men, returning to the outside. That morning, the mousey-haired djinn had swallowed a hefty draught of Bronson’s blood, as had all the other djinn who were kin to the element of earth. Each member of the troop had also been armed with a small capsule of blood, mixed from the three lamps.

“Let’s go,” Aileen sighed. “Remember stay alive, kill—or disarm—as many as you can. And if you see Carlote, get that capsule of blood in her body! Take Elson’s blood if the opportunity presents itself.”

They left the room, silently creeping through the corridor that led to the kitchens. Meanwhile outside, Morgan was working her mojo on the plants around the estate. Her power to manipulate the growth and animation of vegetation had increased a thousandfold after drinking Bronson's life essence. The elder woman dug her hands into the fertile soil, her eyes rolling up into the back of her head. The bushes around the mansion twitched, coming to life. With a flurry of movement they stretched upward, their thick branches encompassing the mansion. They crawled along the wall, digging into the stone, covering the windows. Within a matter of minutes the entire building was cocooned in a layer of solid greenery.

Inside, the small group of paragons had made it to the main hall without incident. However, when they arrived at the lavishly decorated space, they became entangled with several of Whitmore's djinn. Gunfire broke out, the humans with D.O.T. and those djinn with melee-only fighting skills firing their weapons.

"This is where we branch off!" Aileen shouted over the noise.

The gunfire was simply a diversion, a tactic used to draw the majority of the mansion staff into the fighting. Ren had sketched a map of the inside of the mansion from memory for the paragons to study. The spot they had chosen for the fight was the easiest to defend and the best place to retreat from if things were looking really bad.

The lamps however had another mission: to kill Raiju and to bring Elson to justice.

"Where do we go from here?" the wind djinnayah asked.

"To Elson's room or what used to be Aaron's room. I'm guessing he'll have moved into the master bedroom after his father died." Ren spoke rapidly, leading them away from the fighting towards another staircase at the back of the mansion.

They met several djinn while en route. The men dispatched one; Ren burning away the fog that snaked away from his navel allowing Bronson to find the man's face, which he swiftly punched. He felt his opponent's nose break from the force, the fragile cartilage shattering from the blow. The djinni toppled to the floor, broken but still alive. A few rooms later they came across a pair of scantily clad twins. The women grinned wickedly; the only difference in their appearance was the style of their blond hair. The one with pigtails shimmered

out of existence suddenly, blinking back into reality behind Aileen. She jabbed at the small lamp, narrowly missing a kidney as Aileen twirled from the attack. The second girl, who wore two thick plaits on one side of her head, clapped her hands, and a blinding light emanated from her palms. The flash stunned Ren, who tried vainly to blink away the stars that danced in his vision. Pigtales popped into the open space next to him, holding her blade high. Bronson caught her by the wrist, preventing her from driving the dagger into Ren's head. He squeezed as hard as possible, feeling the bones in her wrist crumple. She squealed in agony and lashed out with her free appendages. Running to her sister's defense, Plaits' skin flickered with explosive bursts of brightness. Aileen snatched the girl from the air, wrapping her legs around her throat. She constricted her thighs, starving the flaxen djinn of oxygen. When she passed out, Aileen pushed her away, as did Bronson with his captive, who was also out cold. Finally, in the corridor outside the master bedroom, djinn guards were waiting to greet the intruders. There were five of them, and they all stood cockily awaiting their rivals.

"We don't have time to tread lightly here," Aileen said, shooting Bronson a stony glance.

The officer's nod was barely perceptible, but it was all Aileen needed. She breathed in deeply, and then unleashed a scream that was so piercing, it caused the walls to tremble. Glass shattered as pictures fell from their fixtures. Furniture was thrown through the air, the wood shattering as it bounced along the corridor. The djinn caught in the whirlwind that spun fatally down the corridor, were uprooted and thrown around like rag dolls. They collided with the far wall, the heaviest breaking through the plasterboard and into the room beyond. Ren wondered if any of them could have survived such a blow, but didn't have time to dwell on the thought as Aileen rushed forward. He also wondered what he was capable of, now that he had the blood of three lamps coursing through his veins. Thinking about the loss of control at Bronson's apartment, he quivered. Carlote's potent blood had been stronger than the three of them combined and had caused his fire to lash out beyond his influence. How strong was the Lightning Lady?

The pink-haired djinn kicked the double doors, which scarcely held to their hinges. They fell inwards, revealing the room beyond. Inside two figures sat on the four-poster bed that was in the middle of the spacious room. Ren instantly recognized the disinterested face of Elson Whitmore but the woman... he would have remembered her face had he ever seen it before.

Her ginger hair was pulled up into a tight bun above her ancient, wrinkled forehead. Her eyes were golden, and almost invisible beneath the lids that sagged around her sockets. Her nose was hooked, and her chin bled into her chest, the liver-spotted skin hanging from her skull. Whoever nicknamed Barbara Lebue "The Witch" had clearly never seen the woman hidden away at the Whitmore estate.

She stood, rising from the bed in one strong movement that belied her age. She inhaled deeply, every movement displaying the immeasurable amount of vitality she possessed.

"Judging by the cage you've created around our home, and the incredibly rude racket you've made since arriving, I'd wager you three indulged in a little blood-swapping this morning," the crone spoke, her voice a pleasant chirp.

"Apparently, it's all the rage," Ren replied smugly. "You should know, Carlotte."

"Oh we do, small fire!" the elderly woman hummed. "In fact, we and our protégé here partook just a moment ago. We gave him some of our blood, and we even had some of your blood stored for just such an occasion." She shrugged sweetly, her girlish movements seeming monstrous on the wizened creature. "Now all he needs is some blood from the Sylphid and the Golem! We, on the other hand, have no need of blood-swapping. You see we have been free of each other for years."

"Like Baxter said," Aileen snapped.

"That's right, once out of the lamp, always out of a lamp," Carlotte laughed.

"But Raiju's been dormant for years." Aileen shook her head incredulously.

"Or so you were led to believe," the haggard woman beamed. "If Golem thought we could have been separated without the need to drink more lamp blood, he would have marched over here and killed us both. That would have ruined our plans! Spoiled our years of planning! You see, we need Golem's blood. We needed him inside a body, rebound to a lamp. And if he'd killed Carlotte before our plans had come to fruition, Raiju would have been trapped inside the next lamp. He would have had to start again. Influencing a new host can be difficult and time consuming. It would have taken too long."

"You tricked us," Bronson spat. "You knew Golem would bond with one of us in an attempt to force Raiju from your body. You knew Golem would do anything to prevent another genocide."

“We did! *And now he sleeps within your frame, new lamp! I can see his power coursing through your veins!* All we had to do was wait and keep hidden. Long enough for him to think us trapped together. Long enough for him to come to the conclusion, that the only way to separate us was with more of his lamp’s blood. Then we had silly, stupid Hugo leak the paragon’s half-truths.”

“Why?” Ren snapped, feeling his fury rushing through his veins.

“You see, Undine was old, the oldest amongst us, and I knew the Lord’s time was coming to an end. When Elson was born, so too was a new Undine, the last one dying as the primal power escaped Aaron’s body. Since then we’ve been schooling Elson and his elemental Lord in how awful the world is, and how it desperately needs to be... redecorated. We wanted to teach you too, little Ren, but your Salamander would never have allowed it and would have made its presence known in your mind.”

“You plan to unleash the new Undine and get it on your side? You orchestrated everything, you knew we’d come for you. We walked right into your trap.” Aileen was aghast.

“Exactly!” Carlotte clapped her hands gleefully like a child. “And now all five lamps are together again, it’s time you all donated your blood to our Elson!”

“Not necessarily all of you,” Elson corrected. “We have Salamander blood to spare. Daz is supposed to be rotting in the ground somewhere. An error I’ll rectify momentarily.”

Ren glowed dangerously, his fire seeping through his skin. “You know I hate that fucking name. It’s Ren now!”

“You can’t stop us,” Carlotte interrupted, giggled maniacally. “We have penetrated human leadership at all levels, and while we and the Undine rage through the country, our agents will sow seeds of confusion amongst the country’s hierarchy. By the time they’ve been weeded out and some semblance of coherent thought can be made, we’ll have amassed an army of djinn and torn down their major defenses. We’ll have left humans devastated while bolstering our own strength, and then we will take our rightful place as the superior race!”

Ren yawned dramatically, “I’m bored,” and then he flared into life.

The moment Ren's aura of flame fully encased him, Carlotte shot forth. Her skin crackled with sparks of electricity, and streaks of lightning darted away from her wrinkled skin. She collided with Aileen, carrying the small djinnayah out into the corridor, through the brick wall, past the barrier of branches and out into the yard. The bushes shivered, hurriedly growing back around the hole that the women had made, clotting like a thick green scab.

Elson attacked first, using the distraction to his advantage. He rolled off the bed, backing away towards the ensuite bathroom. With his arm outstretched, he pelted the men with a barrage of sharp little icicles. Ren met his attack with a sheet of fire, which encompassed him and Bronson. The tiny jagged stars melted as they passed through the flame, hissing away to nothingness. While Ren busied himself with the projectiles, Elson punched his hand through the thin wall which separated the two rooms. He clasped hold of the pipe beyond the plaster and yanked at the copper tube. Water gushed from the hole, rushing out onto the floor, spraying over the bed. Elson plucked the water from the air, creating a large, twinkling sphere the size of a wrecking ball, and sent it careening towards the men. The ball was only meant to divert the men's attention as he manipulated the flow of the water, forcing the forming puddle around the room, avoiding Ren's wall of flame. The globe of ice crossed through Ren's blazing barrier and batted the young djinn in the chest, knocking the wind from his lungs. Ren spat fire from his mouth as he coughed, the smokeless jet striking the bed. It blossomed into a brilliant burning wheel, searing the wall and snatching at the drapes by the window. Seeking to end the fight swiftly, Elson crafted the water behind them into a row of deadly spikes and sent them outward, towards his adversaries. Bronson caught the rippling motion of the water just in time and threw himself in front of Ren, wrapping his arms around the thin flaming entity. His skin burned for a brief second, and he hissed through his teeth at the pain, but then he forced his body to change. Making it shift form, altering the compound of his flesh, like he had while practicing through the night, time and time again.

The perilous points of ice shattered as they collided with Bronson's new body, falling harmlessly to the floor.

"What the fuck is this?" Elson demanded, glaring at Bronson.

The cop could only imagine what the millionaire was thinking as he gazed upon the two of them. One man entombed in fire, waves of amber and crimson wobbling away from his frame. The other, a human-shaped diamond, translucently reflecting the light of the ruby red inferno. His hide was

impenetrable, immune to the effects of heat and cold. The perfect ability to safeguard his skin when caught between the feuding lamps. Golem's presence in his body had awakened his dormant djinn powers; he was a fortress of unreachable magnitude.

Perfect.

"This is a little thing I like to call payback," Bronson growled, releasing his hold on his companion and charging toward his enemy.

Elson flung his hands towards the ceiling, and the water coiled up around the jeweled man's ankles. It solidified, pinning Bronson to the spot. Grunting at the futility of Elson's effort, Bronson brought his powerful fist down, slamming it into the ice around his feet. The floorboards shattered, the wood splintering beneath his blow, the ice bursting into a spray of glimmering dust. He fell forward as the floor gave way, blindly grasping with his arms to find a hold. He caught the leg of the burning bed, his strong hands clamping like a vice into the dark oak. Dangling between two floors, he cursed himself for not testing the full extent of his newfound strength before now. Below his swinging feet, the fighting in the entrance hall was still in full swing. The three-floor drop made Bronson's stomach twist, and he forced his eyes away from the battle beneath.

Elson laughed darkly, whipping the water into a jagged, jumble of frost. He hovered the mass over Bronson's struggling form, as the trapped man slowly tried to hoist himself out of the hole. It dripped on his head, struggling to maintain its shape in the heat from the fire that had now claimed half the room.

Like a comet, Ren sprang through the air, tackling the spinning block like a football player, skewering his shoulder on a frozen point.

"You'll never best me on your own, either of you," Elson raged. "Cowards!"

"I spent three years of my life on my own, thanks to you," Ren replied through gritted teeth. "I don't ever want to be on my own again! I'd rather die a coward, in the company of those I care about, than by myself, like you're about to!"

Deep-rooted fury boiled over the cusp of the kid's emotions, and his fire flourished like never before. The force of the heat expelled from his flesh caused him to levitate off the ground. He hovered over Bronson, at the center of a blinding blue flame, the rippling fire fanning out in all directions, laying waste to all that it touched. Ren cried out, his voice an overlapping mix of anguish and ecstasy.

Not to be outdone Elson's seething howl rose to join that of his adversary, a barrage of glassy shards flying in all directions. The water around his feet swirled up around his body protectively, like an arctic whirlpool, defending its master from Ren's horrific heat.

The two of them were at a stalemate, neither one seeming to hold the upper hand. Bronson had to get out of his hole; he had to be the deciding factor in this fight. He pulled at the bed leg, and it snapped off its frame, causing him to slide down further. He dug his diamond fingers into the floorboards, piercing the wood, holding him in position. That's when he saw it. An electrical cable running the length of the room between their floor and the one below. He yanked at the yellow cord, snapping it as it came away from the fittings. Sparks of electricity jarred from the exposed copper, bouncing off his shining flesh harmlessly. He slammed it down into the water that trickled away from its master, unable to retain its icy position against Ren's blistering heat. It crackled, and the end of the cable detonated with astonishing velocity.

Elson jolted in his turbine-like torrent, coughing out choked ragged air that escaped his lips in bloodied bubbles. He fell to the floor, no longer protected by his watery shield, and a tsunami of flame swept over him. The millionaire vanished beneath the blanket of sapphire and ruby.

"Ren!" Bronson called, struggling to keep his hold.

The young djinni was oblivious, lost in the release of his primal power. His eyes were glassy, filled with boiling tears, and his smile was one of pure bliss.

"Ren! I'm slipping!" the older man tried again. "...Darren!"

The black-haired boy shook his head. "Beautiful," he gasped.

"Come on, Ren, sort yourself out! I don't know if I'll survive a fall like this!"

A tear of molten fire trickled down the kid's face. "It's so beautiful... Theodore. It's so... peaceful."

"Ren, please! I'm shitting myself here! I don't want to die yet!"

"Bron... son..." Ren's emerald irises seemed to refocus, and he slowly scanned the room. When his gaze fell upon Bronson he blinked, screwing his face into a ball. His hands hastened up to his face, and he rubbed at his eyes, forcing whatever vision had taken him away, out of his mind. As he slowly lowered himself to the floor, he reined in his fire then strode urgently over to

his comrade. The room was a smoking, burning remnant of its former self. Everything was bathed in an orange illumination, and the smoke was thick and deadly. Ren kneeled before the hole, coughing, and hugged his arms around Bronson's neck, the embrace as much in affection as it was an attempt to pull the crystal entity from the floor.

"Get me out, get me out!" Bronson pressed, kicking his feet into the air.

Ren pulled with all his might, and Bronson clawed at the floor, dragging himself in small steps from the gap in the wood.

When he was out up to his waist, he started to tremble, adrenaline pulsing through his body. He felt disorientated and had to scan the room to find the double doors through which they needed to escape. He saw the charred remains of what had once been Elson Whitmore, lying on his back, under the exposed piping in the wall. The flow of liquid had ceased, and the water around his unmoving body had gone, evaporated into nothingness.

Bronson scrambled the rest of the way out, helped by Ren, who tried vainly to find a decent grasp of his smooth flesh. His shirt had been burned clean away, and what remained of his charred, tattered pants barely covered his legs. One of his boots had come loose and had fallen into the melee in the hall, the other a smoldering wreck.

"We need to find Aileen!" Ren yelled over the popping and hissing of the flames.

Bronson nodded, promptly pulling himself to his feet and letting Ren guide him out of the room. They made it to the door, where they were able to suck in a breath of cleaner air. Before they could make their escape however, something struck Bronson on the back, deflecting off his bare glassy skin.

He turned to see Elson, sprawled out along his belly. The madman had rolled onto his front, biting into his charred skin and used the only moisture left in his room for one final attempt to kill the other lamps. His blood. Unable to suppress his fury with the man who had imprisoned and abused Ren, planned to start a war that would kill thousands, and murdered his sister, Bronson turned and stalked across the room. Elson was spent, unable to move, unable to defend himself. Bronson placed a large, opaque foot on the monster's head.

"This is for Kacey," he growled, pressing down with all his weight.

Elson's skull shattered under the pressure of his foot. Gore spilled out across the wood and matted between Bronson's toes. One day, this image might

come back to haunt him, but right in that moment he felt a great pressure lift from his shoulders. His sister was avenged, and Ren was free to live his life without constantly looking over his shoulder.

“Bronson,” Ren urged delicately, his voice almost lost amongst the roar of the fire.

Bronson backed away from the dead man and went to meet his companion at the door. They fled down the corridor, retracing their steps from earlier. Ren seemed hampered and grimaced.

“Are you hurt?” Bronson asked, giving the kid a quick once-over.

“That fucking idiot stabbed me in the back with his own blood,” Ren chuckled, humorlessly.

“Let me see,” Bronson said, coming to a stop by the stairs.

“No need.” Ren smiled. “It’s already healing. Lamp blood helps us heal quicker, remember? Elson just refueled me, his own blood repairing the damage of his attack. I’ve the blood of four lamps in my system now.”

Bronson sighed with relief.

“What happened to taking prisoners?” Ren met his gaze, concerned. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Some bugs just need to be squashed.” Bronson frowned. “If he had lived, he’d have found a way to avenge himself. Too many lives were at stake.”

Ren nodded, pressing his bloodied palm to Bronson’s cheek.

Bronson gently pushed his hand away. “We need to be outside, now. Raiju can’t be allowed to escape.”

Without further hesitation, both men fled from the upper floor and down into the battle below them.

The fight was not over yet.

Chapter Twelve

Morgan was a quivering mess when they found her outside the CCTV room. Pete was dead, tendrils of gray smoke curling away from his broken body. The human's gun was a few feet away from where he lay in Morgan's arms. Jon was nowhere to be seen. Morgan knelt, rocking the lifeless corpse of her fellow paragon, tears streaking down her face.

"Please..." she sobbed as the men appeared at the exit. "Tell me we're winning."

Bronson bobbed his head, his crystalline face full of empathy. "It looks like we've had a couple of casualties inside. We've lost a few. But we're kicking their asses. I don't think they banked on us topping our djinn up with lamp blood."

The news didn't seem to effect the mousey-haired woman's mood, but she thanked them regardless.

"What happened here?" Bronson asked.

"Some staff showed up not long after we entered the building, but they didn't enter through the gate of the estate. They saw the bushes and fled," Morgan explained, trying to compose herself. "The police showed up about three minutes ago, and they've been dealing with that woman ever since. Is that Charlotte?"

"Red hair, looks like she's about two hundred years old?" Ren asked.

Morgan nodded.

"Yeah, that's her. She shoved through a wall, taking Aileen was with her. Have you seen Aileen?"

"I felt them tear through the blockade, near the top. Aileen was out front, near the fountain. Pete tried to help. He shot at that witch but she... she..." Morgan broke out into another sob.

Bronson tugged on Ren's arm, leading them away. "Get yourself to safety," he said to the weeping woman. "There's no point in holding the mansion anymore."

They made their way to the front of the building. The sun had fully emerged, and the early morning sky had turned pale blue. In the light of day,

the men could clearly see the scene unfolding before them. Carlotte was levitating several meters above the ground, just in front of the merman fountain. A ring of electrical energy pulsated around her, arching out in waves of silver jagged energy. Armed police had made a barrier with their cars, one of which had been flipped on its side, and were shooting at the floating crone. Behind that, farther down the road, were a fire truck and an ambulance.

Shaw's voice carried over the megaphone, "Get me those salt-grenades! I mean now!"

Bronson cursed, "Shit, Carlotte's going to kill them all."

"Not if we can stop her," Ren stated. "We need to fight. If Raiju thinks Carlotte is in danger, he'll come out. He won't risk losing his lamp. I'll distract grandma. You go convince that pack of morons to back up."

"No!" Bronson lunged to grab the other djinni, but he was too slow.

Ren ran from the wall, his fiery aura combusting about him. Bronson ran after him. As they passed the towering bushes a hand shot out and grabbed Bronson, tripping him midrun. Ren didn't notice, he was too focused on the task before him.

As he neared the back of the hovering woman, she pressed her fingers to her lips and puckered them. She giggled like an infant as she blew a kiss to the attacking police unit. Thick forks of lightning streaked away from her fingers, ricocheting off the ground. It tore the grass from its roots where it traveled, leaving deep gorges in the earth. The bolts raced along the yard, cracking like a giant's whip at the cops when it reached the estate's wrought iron gates. The metal sang as the streaks of pearlescent energy passed through their conductive bars. The tendrils of jittery light struck a car, knocking it into an ambulance at the back of the procession. Men leapt from the vehicle's path, some landing safely, others caught in the spray of volts that danced away from their ride.

"Oi, coffin-dodger!" he yelled above the shooting, sending a flaming vine up to assault the old woman.

She evaded it, gliding backward from the strand of fire, spinning in the air.

She looked down, her grinning face twitched with confusion. "Where is our Elson?"

"Mostly up there." Ren pointed to the blazing roof of the Whitmore building.

Carlotte trembled, and her nostrils flared, her features shifting into one of outrage.

“Mostly?” she demanded, sounding like a child on the verge of a tantrum.

“Well, there might be some of his brain left on Bronson’s sole, but I’m not really sure.”

The electrical discharge around her body increased, and she moaned like a mad beast. The deep, throaty noise rose in pitch. She tore at her hair and shook her head violently. Ren sent a spiral of incinerating heat skyward, encompassing the crone.

She wailed like a banshee, lost from view. “Not my family! Not my family!”

She chanted the words over and over, oblivious to the gunfire, unaffected by Ren’s flames.

Snap!

The sound blotted out all other noise. It seemed to bend the very air itself. A terrifying wave of power exploded outwards from within Ren’s revolving inferno. It snuffed out the fire, knocking Ren backwards onto the ground. The invisible wave washed over the gathering of police men, sending them flying in a similar manner, silencing their guns. Carlotte fell to the floor, a convulsing bulk of nerves. Her mouth gaped open, and from it a gray cloud poured out into the yard. It quickly gathered in volume, taking on an enormous form. It started to solidify, and bolts of silver electricity skittered along the length of its flesh. Glaucous fur sprouted from the pale skin, covering the creature from head to paw. It stood on two legs, and from its rear sprouted a bushy tail that curled into the air. Its forearms were more like a monkey’s, and its hands were furless and distinctly human in appearance. Lips pulled back into a snarl, revealing the creature’s sharp teeth, hidden in its rodent-like face.

Raiju. The War Weasel.

“Why do you rise against us, paragon people? Why do you not want what we want?” the primal demanded.

Ren didn’t answer, he was too terrified. The elemental Lord was half the size of the mansion. Had Golem been this big? He struck at the primal with his fire, backing quickly away towards the smoldering structure. Raiju hissed as Ren’s flames singed his fur. The beast swiped at the djinni with his clawed

hand, swatting him away like he was a fly. The blow hit Ren full force, knocking him along the grass. He grimaced as he scraped along the soil, gripping at the dirt to slow his recoil. Before he had the chance to find his feet, Raiju was on him, snatching him up from the floor. The giant weasel grasped him clumsily, crushing him between its fingers. The creature's skin blistered against his fire, but it didn't drop him, didn't even hint that it was in pain.

"Why do you kill the ones we love?" it raged.

"Death begets death," Ren choked from between its fingers.

"We was not the one to cast the first stone though, was we?" Raiju's grip tightened.

"You blame the sins of a generation long past on this modern world! The humans made peace with each other, they prosper!"

"The humans, yes, but what about djinn? How do your kind fare in this new world?"

"And whose fault is that? Who was the one who gave them a reason to fear us?"

"They should fear us!"

"No," a third, welcomed, voice broke into the conversation. "You should fear us!" Aileen called out.

A searing pain flared through Ren's shoulder. He looked back to see the hilt of a dagger protruding from his flesh. He moaned, as the pain seeped into his body, causing his nerves to spasm and jar against each other.

This must be what burning feels like he mused darkly, descending into blackness as the pain overrode his mind.

A soothing, calm voice from somewhere within his conscience echoed out in answer, "*Do not worry, my radiant Ren, I will aid you from here on.*"

"*Salamander?*"

"*Yes, my radiance.*"

A rib popped as Raiju squeezed harder.

"*Let me out. Let me help you,*" the voice was sweet, feminine, and made Ren want to cry.

"*Yes, cry. Scream. Roar. Let me out.*"

Ren did as instructed, parting his lips. He took a deep breath, ignoring the pain that went stabbing along his lungs. Pushing with all the force he could muster, he let loose a bellow of feral rage.

Bronson found Aileen hiding in the bushes. As he and Ren had run past, she grabbed at his leg and toppled the large man. He helped her out from under the foliage, noting that she was bleeding profusely from a gash along her arm.

"The arm I can cope with." She grimaced, as he hoisted her up over his shoulder. "The leg... not so much."

In her hand was a bloodied dagger, the short blade no longer than her littlest finger. She hooked her arm around his neck, taking care not to drop the knife that she held in her hand.

Bronson looked down, screwing up his face at the sight of the bone that jutted out of the young girl's flesh.

"My blood..." Bronson started.

"Is still in my system," Aileen reminded him. "It won't help me anymore than it already is."

"Then we need to get you to that ambulance..." Before he had time to finish talking, one of the police cars took flight, sailing through the air and went crashing into the paramedics' vehicle. "Or not..."

"Bronson, I'll live," Aileen snapped, biting back the pain. "At least I will if she dies and doesn't kill us all." She flashed the dagger at him. "I jabbed her with it before she bested me. I smeared her blood on my wound, it wasn't much but it's already healing."

"Good," Bronson nodded. "Then you wait here, and I'll go help Ren."

He started to lower her to the floor when a fantastic explosion of imperceptible energy crashed into them. Bronson fell backwards, twisting Aileen's body so she landed on him with her back and not her damaged limbs.

"What the fuck?" he demanded, scrambling out from under the djinnyah and rising to his feet.

Aileen rolled up onto her good arm. "Raiju and Carlote's tether just broke! The genie is out of its lamp!"

True to her words, an azure, stoat-like creature manifested from a cloud of smoke in front of them. Its pearl-like eyes fixed Ren with a venomous stare and it swiped at the kid with enough force to knock a bus across twenty lanes of traffic.

“Reeeeennnn!” Bronson roared, rushing forward to protect the fiery kid.

“Wait!” Aileen called. “I can help!”

“Quickly!” Bronson urged, stopping midrun.

“All I need is some of Elson’s blood, and Sylphid will be set free.”

Bronson glanced down at his bare, translucent foot. The gore was gone, lost while trampling through the mansion and out into the yard.

“Tell me you had enough sense to take some blood from him while he was still alive?” Aileen’s eyes widened with disbelief.

“Ren... sort of fried him,” Bronson speedily explained. “But he’s got Elson’s blood in his system.”

Aileen sighed with relief. “And I’ve got some of Carlote’s blood left on the penknife.”

Bronson glanced worriedly over to Ren, who was now in Raiju’s grip, his fire diminished.

“I’ll throw it, you direct it,” Bronson said, picking her up off the floor and taking the knife from her hand.

“You’re going to have to be fairly accurate,” Aileen warned.

“And you’re going to have to nudge his fire out of the way. Only other djinn abilities seem to be able to penetrate his flames. If a bullet can’t do it, then a thrown dagger has got no chance.”

“No pressure,” she grumbled, holding her good arm out in front of her, readily.

Bronson drew back his arm then flung it forth, releasing his hold on the blade as his arm reached the full velocity of its movement. The small knife twisted toward the little man in the primal’s hand, guided by Aileen’s wind. As it approached its target, Aileen opened out her fingers, and a gap in Ren’s flame expanded around the djinni, exposing its fleshy core.

The dagger embedded itself in Ren’s shoulder blade, and he cast an infuriated look behind.

“Come on,” Aileen willed. “Work!”

Bronson's lungs thrashed against his ribcage as he stared at Ren in the monster's clutches. At that exact moment he knew, without doubt, that if Ren were to die, he'd be broken beyond repair. He knew that the kid he'd found at the harbor no more than two weeks prior, had stolen a part of him.

He was falling in love with Ren Lampard, if he hadn't already.

Snap!

A second burst of energy sent shock waves across the yard. It caused the primal to drop the djinni boy in its hands. As Bronson toppled backward, he heard Ren scream, the sound unnatural and deep. From his mouth, a jet of gilded, sparkling smoke shot out into the air. It twisted inward, back towards itself, gathering its parts together.

“Salamander,” Aileen breathed excitedly.

As the smoke's density increased, Bronson could see molten flesh taking form. As with the primal before, fur, the color of gold, pressed its way into existence. It covered the elemental Lord, which stood on four legs, its feathery tail swishing in a feline manner. Salamander's head, now fully formed, resembled that of a lynx, with two large, ruby tufts of hair sticking up from its pointed ears. Across its forelegs was a long, crimson and amber plumage, which created two large wings out of the elemental Lord's front appendages. The feathers travelled along the primal's slender back and fanned out along its tail.

It glowered at the other giant being before it, narrowing its jade, cat-like eyes.

“You dare harm my radiance?” it hissed, standing over Ren protectively.

“We dare harm that lamp!” Raiju bared its teeth. “We dare kill it!”

Salamander lunged forward, claws out in front, ripping into Raiju's shoulder. Silvery clouds sprayed from the wound, drifting away into the morning sky. The rodent-like primal yelped in protest, then sank its teeth into its rival's leg. It buzzed with energy as bolts of lightning danced away from its form, causing its fur to stand on end. Salamander growled and pushed the two of them into a roll, away from the mansion and towards what little of the police force hadn't fled from their post.

Seizing the opportunity, Bronson sprinted towards Ren who was slowly crawling backwards, away from the wrestling titans.

“Ren, oh God, Ren!” Bronson chastised as he sank down beside the kid. “What the fuck were you thinking, running off alone?”

Ren glowered at the older man. “You stabbed me with a knife! I think that merits forgiveness for anything I did prior to that! In fact I think...”

The rest of his sentence was lost to Bronson’s kiss. The officer placed his rough, trembling lips on Ren’s face. The fiery djinni kissed back, before reluctantly pushing away.

“We have to get clear of here, it’s not safe.” Ren winced, shrugging his shoulder uncomfortably.

“We can’t,” Aileen interjected, hobbling toward the men. The bone in her leg had reassumed its rightful position, but the gash along her flesh was still open. “We need to ensure that Raiju dies, and if we can’t kill him then we have to kill Carlote.”

“Where is she?” Bronson asked, casting his amethyst eyes about.

A squeal of pain emanated from the two primals as Raiju kicked viciously at Salamander’s underbelly. The golden lynx had the weasel pinned to the ground, a clawed paw digging into the rodent’s neck. Raiju wrapped its ape-like fingers around the feline’s throat and clamped on, again lashing out with its hind legs. Salamander relinquished its pin and tried to reposition itself above its prey, away from its scraping feet. Raiju didn’t give it the opportunity. The moment the giant feathered cat shifted its weight, the twisting rodent pounced up off the ground. It rammed its forehead into Salamander’s muzzle, ethereal smoke splattering from the wound. The feline yowled and shook its head, backing rapidly away. Raiju stood, hunching its shoulders, readying an attack. Something about the weasel’s feet exploded, and a thick black smoke rose from the ground. Raiju hissed at the rising cloud. Then it happened again and again. The primal spied the line of police cars, noting that they were throwing grenades at him, laced with finely powdered salt.

“Do you insects never learn new tricks?” it spat across the yard.

Raiju turned from Salamander and the wall of smoke that separated them, scanning the yard for his lamp. Carlote was slouched beneath the merman fountain, her back to the stone circle, ragged gasps of air animating her form. The lightning elemental darted towards its fallen ally, crushing trees underfoot

as it ran. Salamander followed, its furious eyes full of wickedness. Reaching the fountain, the rodent bent to claim its prize, retreat clearly its intent. A monstrous gust of sandy wind assaulted the primal, forcing it to squint and clasp its humanoid fingers about its face. Aileen crouched below the wall, on the opposite side of the fountain. From her outstretched arms, a gale of spinning air bolstered forward with the speed of a hurricane. The whirlwind ripped pieces from the masonry of the fountain, hurling chunks of brick at the War Weasel. Bronson, who had climbed up behind the massive merman, gripped at the sodden statue for fear of being yanked from its frame. Salamander pounced, digging its claws into the forearms of its victim, leaving Raiju wide open. Bronson seized the moment, pulling his clenched fist back, testing his newfound power to its limit. He punched the golden trident in Neptune's hand, and it took off like a rocket. The force of the blow echoed out across the yard, filtering into the forest at its edge. The trident flew forward, slamming into Raiju's face, piercing the Lord of Lightning's eye.

The weasel didn't scream, it didn't call out, it didn't make a sound. It convulsed twice in Salamander's strong grip and then burst into a cloud of shimmering silver. The twinkling mist spread out, dissolving in the cool rays of sun. Shimmering energy from the deceased primal congealed, hovering in the air before darting off to search for a new conduit, which would birth a new Lord of Lightning. The golden trident fell to the floor, clattering as it landed. The hilt of the weapon pointed towards the haggard woman, who sat unmoving against the shattered wall. Water sprayed thinly from the broken brick, casting a rainbow of colors about her body. Aileen limped around to the front of the fountain and nudged the crone's leg with her boot.

Dead.

"Is it over?" Ren asked from his position under the merman's tail.

"Yes," Aileen sighed deeply, relief lightening her face.

"It will be when we're away from here," Bronson said, crawling down what remained of the wet sculpture. "Look." He nodded his head towards the police who were peeping from behind the three remaining squad cars.

A familiar voice sounded out over a megaphone. "Djinn, the national guard will be arriving shortly! Call off your primal; we do not want further bloodshed!"

"Shaw," Bronson chuckled. "Ballsy little boss."

Aileen cupped her hands to her mouth, projecting her voice with her djinnnyah powers. "Nor do we! But those we fought would have had your streets running in rivers of it. We came to put them to rest. We are not your enemy!"

"Then will you prove it, and allow us to take you into custody?"

Aileen snorted. "Not very likely," she said quietly to the djinn at her side.

Salamander crouched, its muzzle close to Ren. "I will hold them at their place, my radiance. When you are safely away, I will return to you."

"Don't hurt them," Ren said, stroking the fur around its nose.

"As you wish."

"Come on," Bronson urged. "Your primal won't put Shaw off for long. I imagine she'd take it one-on-one in a fight."

"I have a name, lamp of earth," Salamander stated, swishing its tail.

"Sorry," Bronson grinned. "Salamander. Just don't frighten them too much. Some of them are my friends."

"I do as my radiant one commands," the Lord of Fire purred, sitting down.

With that the three djinn ran for the forest and to the waterway through which they entered during the shadow of early morning.

Epilogue

Snow littered the ground, the winter's first dusting, sheeting all in glimmering white. Ren stood in his black T-shirt, which was getting a little too tight for him to wear, watching the sea gulls bob on the ocean. If Bronson kept feeding him the way he was, he'd be as big as Salamander before Christmas arrived. As if summoned by the mere thought, the ex-police officer emerged from the door of S.S. Shipments.

"You ready?" Ren asked, eager to return to Bronson's apartment.

"Yeah," the older man replied, dithering in his thick duffle coat.

"You know if you just gem up, the cold wouldn't bother you..."

"I know, but I don't like the weird looks we get off the neighbors when I do that. You know how tetchy they've been since Raiju and Salamander ended up all over the news. They're more afraid of us now than ever."

"They are not to be blamed," the primal spoke in his mind, *"I did look magnificently ferocious, did I not?"*

"You are magnificent." Ren smiled, then spoke to his partner. "That is why you joined the paragons. You and Aileen... between the two of you, you will move mountains."

Bronson sniggered. "You know, I bet I physically could move a mountain."

"I've no doubt," the kid chuckled, walking off into the snow.

"What's the hurry anyway?"

Ren stopped and looked over his shoulder. "You just bet me you could make the earth move. And I've decided, today is my birthday, so you've got to do that thing you promised to do!"

"At what point in time did you decide today was your birthday? Not that I'm arguing of course."

"The day they found me in St. Darren's was the day of the first winter snow. Since no one can say for sure when exactly I was born, I've decided that my birthday is going to be on the day it snows for the first time each winter."

"Erm.. What happens if it doesn't snow?"

"Then my birthday will be on New Year's Eve... why do you always overthink everything?"

"Force of habit," he chirped, swiftly catching up to his lover. "So no more terrible teens? Although, I do feel bad for not getting you a present."

"Theo," Ren purred, as the tall man wrapped his bulky arm around his shoulder, "you've given me all I've ever wanted and more."

"Except for that thing..."

"Except for that thing," Ren grinned.

"Are you sure you want to try it at the apartment? I'll be surprised if you manage to not go nuclear, and we can't afford to buy another bed."

"Yes, it's such a shame we don't have the necessary components to make our own gold. Imagine how much easier life would be..."

"You know how I feel about that," Bronson growled playfully into Ren's ear.

"Argh!" Ren slouched mockingly. "You suck the fun out of everything!"

"Well if you don't want me to suck..."

"No! Forget I said anything," he said, picking up the pace.

They walked briskly out of the harbor, huddled together.

A singular, contented entity.

Tied together by bonds of blood.

An unguarded, undeniable, and most unlikely love.

The End

Author Bio

When I write, I aspire to create a light-hearted, yet immersive experience for my readers. I try to incorporate a lot of what I like into my stories, in the hope that you, the reader, will enjoy it too.

I'm an eager writer from Nottinghamshire, or at least I'd like to be (I'm still working on it). I'm the oldest of four, rather eccentric siblings, whom I love dearly. Throughout my childhood, our bedtime ritual usually ended with our dad or mum reading us a story from our Ladybird Book Collection. Our favorites were the Puddle Lane series and from them stemmed our obsession with all things magical and supernatural.

From a very young age, I've read fantasy and horror stories, marveling at the words artfully adorning the pages. My first love affair was with a book written by L. J. Smith. Her Night World series blew my turbulent teenage mind away and I couldn't read enough of her work. Following on from that, I've fallen in love with many other authors including, Anne Rice, James Clemens and Trudi Canavan. I find their writing to be both inspiring and enthralling.

I'm also a massive geek and will happily spend hours playing on RPG console games. Some of the most content moments in my life have involved me being tucked away in my bedroom, with a bar of Dairy Milk Chocolate in one hand and my Playstation pad in the other. I've lost hours without end to the likes of Final Fantasy, Suikoden, Zelda, The Secret of Mana and Breath of Fire. These story-driven RPGs have had such a profound effect on my creative psyche that I'd rate the creators of these influential computer games on par with some of the world's current leading authors.

I've always wanted to publish my own stories but I've been too chicken to try. Eventually a great friend told me, 'Don't be a maybe-er, the maybe-er's only aspiration is to grow up and become a what-if. Get your story out there, grow a pair.'

On my thirty-second birthday (in January 2014) I took her advice and decided to self-publish.

I truly hope you enjoy my work and that, if only to a small degree, I can inspire you in the same way my favorite authors inspired me.

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UNTIL DEATH DO US PART

By Janel White

Photo Description

Two men are in a hallway with small doors all around, one open. The first man is sitting with hands behind his back like he is cuffed, and staring straight ahead with a blank expression on his face. The second man is standing over the first. He is wearing a police uniform that is formfitting. The police officer is looking down at the first man and holding him in the chair with his hand.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He's got the wrong guy. I'm the victim and someone is trying to kill me. That body was left as a message, and I was only there because of the note. He knows me. He knows my body and my heart. I thought he was falling for me. How can he think I am capable of murder?

Please no BDSM or anyone younger than mid-twenties (preferably without a large age gap), and please give these men an HEA. Violence, scares, near-death experiences, hospital scenes, graphic brutality, and past abuse are all pluses as long as they're not consensual or considered a good thing.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Kelly

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: law enforcement, fetish/toys, abduction/stalking, tearjerker, revenge, suspense, mystery

Content Warnings: graphic violence, prison violence

Word Count: 11,068

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UNTIL DEATH DO US PART

By Janel White

Prologue

He drew back into the shadows as the police officer stepped into the house. His gaze followed the man as he walked deeper inside the dark, empty residence. The cop's uniform was snug, hugging his body in all the right places, showing off his firm ass and muscular chest. The shirt sleeves ended right before the cop's large biceps. It would feel so good to run his fingers over them... No, he had other things he wanted to do.

The officer's handsome face was filled with excitement. "Babe, you here?" he called out, then quickly paused.

"Hum... Police! Come out with your hands up!" The police officer waited for a while, his excitement slowly turning into disappointment as it was clear the person he was waiting for was not going to come out.

The man in the shadows watched as the cop turned to walk out, and quietly snuck up behind him. When the officer stopped and turned, the man swung the heavy mallet in his hands toward the officer's face.

Chapter 1

Jake trembled as the corrections officer pushed him into a small room with no windows.

“Take off all your clothes and place them in the bag,” said the officer gruffly. He shut the door, and leaned against the wall, staring at him. Jake started to slowly remove the blood-stained clothes, trying not to smear more blood on himself.

“Can I keep my underwear?” he asked softly.

“No.”

Jake sighed and took the remaining garments off, shivering in the cold. When his state-issued clothes were thrown at him, Jake quickly put them on.

As Jake and the officer made their way into the housing unit, shouts and sexual grunts came from the cell doors.

“Fresh meat!”

“CO, CO, let him bunk with me. I’ll show him how it works in here!”

Jake started to shake even more, wondering who he was going to end up bunking with.

The officer leered at him. “You might want to find a friend in here, if you know what I mean. You’re going to need one.” He pushed Jake inside an empty cell.

“Oh, and do not count on us for any help in here, cop killer!” the officer sneered, as he shut and locked the door.

Slowly making his way to the short metal bunk, Jake stared at the very thin mattress.

“How did this happen to me?” he sighed. He looked around the small cell. There was a metal toilet and sink combo bolted to the wall, a tiny window that let in a little light and a small desk and stool that was bolted to the ground. Jake curled up on the bunk in a ball and thought about the day that had started out so well and ended up with him being thrown in this hellhole, with no hope of ever getting out.

Jake jumped out of bed and made his way to the bathroom, to get ready for work. Looking in the mirror, his bright, green eyes sparkled, as he saw cum that had dried on his toned chest from the night before. While Jake was in good shape, he did not have the massive muscles that Paul had. Those strong, large arms that Jake enjoyed holding onto, while Paul pounded into him, the ridges of Paul's stomach that felt so good as he licked across them, the soft dark hair tickling his tongue... After two months of heated dating, this was the first time Jake and Paul had been able to spend the whole night together. The only bad part was that Paul had to wake up earlier than Jake to go to work. Both were worn out from the energetic lovemaking, so when Paul said goodbye and laid a soft kiss on his lips, Jake was still half-asleep and could only mumble and pull the covers closer around him.

Walking into the kitchen, Jake was happy to see coffee already made and still hot. As he poured a cup, he looked at his phone to see if any new messages or emails had arrived while he was asleep. One email caught his eye.

To: jake234@mmc.com

From: paulnjake4ever@mmc.com

Subject: surprise today at 2pm

Jake,

Please meet me at: 739 E howler rd. @2pm!

Love Paul

This email address was new, but Jake did not think too hard about it until later. He just hoped it was a statement of how Paul felt about him. It was the first time that "love" had been used in any conversation. Butterflies flew circles in his stomach, as he thought of all the things that Paul could surprise him with.

Jake had just transferred six months ago, to Sacramento, California, but his job as a photo journalist helped him learn the streets of the city pretty quickly. Paul was an unexpected bonus to moving across the state. While he had enjoyed working in the state capital, Jake had been very lonely and friendless, until fate gave him such a wonderful man. Paul had finally made detective a month ago, after being a street cop for over ten years. While Jake was very proud of him, the hours at work were worse than when Paul was on the streets. The two men had not been able to really celebrate the promotion until last night, and Jake could not help but hope that this afternoon was a continuation of the private part of the celebration.

At two p.m., Jake walked through the door of the house that was at the emailed address.

“Paul? You here?”

He moved further into the house. The lights were off and there was an unearthly feel to the room, with small spots of light from the holes in the curtain at the window hitting the floor. Jake looked down and felt his heart stop, as he saw the large body covered in blood, on the floor. As his vision wavered, and heart pounded like it might burst out of his chest, Jake slowly knelt on the floor, eyes frozen to the uniform on the body. In the low light it looked like it could be Paul...

Chapter 2

Crawling slowly towards the body, Jake held his breath. As he got close, it was plain that while this guy looked a lot like Paul, it was not him. But the small differences, like the fact that the breadth of his shoulders was not as wide, his butt not as round, were details that only a lover would know. The uniform was another difference. Paul had not put his on for a month now, since his promotion allowed him to stay in plain-clothes. The dead man was face down, so Jake could not tell who he was or see a name tag. He shuddered as the blood seeped through his clothes and reached to turn the body.

“Stop! Hands where I can see them!”

Crap, I know that voice! Jake put his hands in the air and felt his arm wrenched back as he was put into handcuffs. A hand gripped him hard and he was pulled to his feet and turned around to look into the cold blue eyes of his police lover. “Paul! I thought...”

“Quiet. You have the right to remain silent.” Paul pushed him down on a stool and read Jake his rights.

Jake stopped listening, his worst nightmare coming true. He didn't understand why Paul would even think that he could hurt a fly, let alone a person! *I thought he was falling in love with me! Why is Paul treating me like this? He should trust me and help me figure this out!* Jake kept his head down and let himself be pulled up and led outside to be put in the back of the police car.

Paul walked back into the police station, threw his paperwork on his desk, sat down and laid his head in his hands. *How did this happen?* Paul thought that he had finally found a great guy. Had he picked the wrong one again?

But something felt off; the look of relief, when Jake looked up from the body and saw him, which quickly turned to confusion, then fear. Paul still felt shaken, from seeing the dead body of someone that closely resembled himself, and seeing his lover covered in blood. The police at the scene still did not know who the victim was. While he was wearing a uniform, his face was unrecognizable, having been bashed in by some type of weapon. Officers were searching the whole house for any type of object that could have made that much damage, but still had not found anything.

Walking to the coffee pot in the back of the station, Paul was glad that most people knew his moods and stayed out of the way. But there was always one guy that could never just leave him alone when he was upset.

“Hey, Paul wait up.” Matt ran up and started walking along with Paul, ignoring the sneer on Paul’s face. Both Matt and Paul had made detective at the same time, and had been partners for five years, while on patrol.

“Dude, I just heard what happened! You know that Jake would never do anything like that! And besides, you really think he’s strong enough to bash a face in like that?”

“I don’t know, okay? I mean, why was he there? Why did that guy look like me?”

The room became quiet, as officers stopped what they were doing and watched. It had seemed like the news of Paul arresting his lover had already made the rounds, and everyone wanted to see how Paul was handling the pressure.

“We just need to find out who the hell did this!” Paul stormed off and Matt was smart enough not to follow him. *Matt’s right. God! I need to find a way to get Jake out of there. I’m sure he thinks I abandoned him and is scared right now.* Paul walked back to his desk, coffee forgotten. He was determined to find something, anything, that would help him get his lover back in his arms.

As Paul stared at a picture of Jake that he had on his cluttered desk, he remembered the first time he met Jake. It had been a routine traffic stop, but quickly turned into the best traffic stop in his career. As he walked up to the window, Paul saw in the driver seat a cute but scared man with bright, beautiful, green eyes. He was manly, but had a softness that spoke right to Paul’s loins.

“License and registration, please.” Paul’s voice sounded harsh to his ears.

The man handed over his papers, and swallowed hard.

“Officer, I know that I deserve a ticket and I will pay the fine, but is there any way for me not to lose any points? I drive a lot for work and can’t afford to lose any points. I’ll do anything you need me to.”

You could put those nice plump lips around my cock! Paul adjusted himself, and thought of a legal way to help this beautiful man, and maybe see him again.

“I have a driver’s safety course next Wednesday night. If you show up and complete it, I’ll talk to the judge about dropping the points.”

Jake, as his license said, gave Paul a huge smile, which made him look impossibly gorgeous.

Paul felt himself grow even harder and he quickly returned to his car to write the ticket. Matt had teased him the whole time he was trying to write the ticket, and he knew he would hear more about this later. Luckily, the license check did not reveal anything sinister about Jake; he had just moved here from southern California about four months ago. *Maybe he might need a tour guide!*

Paul returned to give Jake his ticket and tell him how to get to the class on Wednesday.

After class, Paul and Jake had ended up getting coffee and talking for hours.

After Jake’s court date, they had their first date and first slow kiss.

“Hey, Paul I think we need to talk.”

Paul blinked his memories away and focused his eyes on John, one of the detectives on the murder case.

“I was looking at the case, and it reminded me of another case I’m working on. Now that I see that picture in your hand, it’s reminding me even more.”

“What do you mean, John?” Paul put down the picture and grasped the file John was holding out.

John sat on the corner of the desk. “Do you know of anyone that would have a grudge against you or your boy?”

“Why would you...” Paul trailed off as he stared at the crime scene pictures. The body and what was left of the victim’s face looked just like Jake; Paul felt his whole body go numb. “I need to see him! I need to see him, now!”

John patted Paul’s shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Please, quickly!” Paul implored.

John nodded, knowing that Paul never asked for anything. While Paul was open with his close friends, he never showed his feelings at work.

Chapter 3

Jake lay in a fetal position. Fists and feet continued to pound on him. The water from the showerhead rained down on him, making it hard to breathe. What started as a quick shower had turned into hell, as an inmate tried to get him to give sexual favors for protection. When Jake refused, the inmate punched him, and others were happy to join in. The pain became too much and he started to fade out, only vaguely aware of officers yelling to break it up and the sound of feet as the other inmate ran away. Then everything went black.

The next thing Jake knew, he was staring up at lights and lying in a hospital bed. He looked down and saw that he had an IV in his right arm and a bandage on his left leg.

“Baby, you’re awake.”

Jake’s eyes widened and tears filled them, as he saw Paul rising from the bedside chair. Jake’s tears fell as Paul brushed his hair back and kissed his forehead.

“I didn’t do it, Paul.”

“Shh, I know. We were coming to get you out when the officer found you in the showers. Can you ever forgive me for doubting you and putting you in danger like that?”

Jake looked at Paul for a minute in silence, and then slowly started talking. “I can forgive you, but it might take some time for me to be able to trust you like I did before. I told you things that I never told anyone. I thought that you knew me. I thought we were falling in love.” Jake turned his head away.

“Baby... Jake, please look at me!”

Jake shook his head, and closed his eyes in pain.

“I know I should have trusted you, and I will make it up to you, as long as you let me stay in your life. I didn’t know what to think, I can only say I was in shock. So I just did my job, but once I was able to think, I knew there was no way you could have done that to anyone.” Paul’s voice became pleading. “Please believe me, baby! We weren’t *falling* in love, because I am already deeply in love with you.”

Pain sheared through Jake’s head as he quickly turned to look at Paul.

“Yes, I just said I love you, and we will talk about us later, and about what happened. But right now I need you to rest, because once they release you, we’re headed to a safe house.” Paul kissed Jake softly on his lips. “I’m not leaving you. Close your eyes.”

The safe house was located off Highway 99, in a rundown farmhouse, in the town of Lodi. The huge yard was overgrown and brown paint peeled off the building’s external walls. It was not a very large house from the outside, but at least it looked like no one lived there. After plain-clothes police checked out the area, Paul helped Jake out of the car. Jake leaned on him as they walked up to the door. Once inside, the officer showed them the room they would be staying in. Jake was surprised to find that the house was much bigger inside and it looked nice and cozy. The bedroom had a large king-size bed, two dressers and an en-suite bathroom. If things were different, a tub for two would have been a dream come true.

“We have an officer that will be staying in the other room. Please stay away from the windows, and don’t answer the door.” The officer left both men alone in the room and shut the door.

Jake walked to the bed and climbed in. “Rest with me for a bit?” He held out his hand to Paul.

“You sure?” Paul took his hand.

Instead of answering, Jake pulled Paul onto the bed. “Please make the dreams go away. I just need you to hold me close right now.” Turning to be the little spoon, Jake wrapped Paul’s arm around him. “We still have a lot to talk about, and we will, but I need to be held and forget the last few days for a few hours.”

Jake felt a small kiss on the top of his head. “Whatever you need, baby. I’m just happy you’re letting me this close.”

Hours later, Jake awoke to dim light. Looking at the clock, he saw that it was six p.m., and his stomach started complaining. He moved to slowly get out of bed.

“Where you going?” Paul tightened his arms around Jake, and kissed his neck.

“I’m hungry, and I have to pee, so let me go!” Jake smiled softly as he turned and gave Paul a quick kiss and limped to the bathroom. After seeing to

his needs, Jake returned to the bedroom to find Paul gone, and wandered out to the living room. Paul was sitting on the couch, with Matt and another guy who also looked like a detective. They were busy talking, and Jake took the opportunity to admire the three handsome alpha men. Of course, he thought Paul was the most handsome, with his dark brown hair and deep blue eyes. At six foot three, Paul was four inches taller than his lover.

Jake had met Matt before, as he had been Paul's partner, and they still worked a lot of cases together, even now. The first time Jake saw Matt, he could not help but be a little jealous of the bond Paul and Matt had, and the long hours that they spent together. It got worse when he found out Matt was also gay. Matt was a tall, muscular African American, with light brown eyes, and Paul assured Jake that he loved Matt as a brother. Once Jake had gotten to know him, he found that the strong man had a gentleness about him, and Matt quickly became the big brother Jake never had.

The new guy was also a big guy, but a little shorter than the other two. He was blond and blue-eyed, with a scar along his right cheek that gave him a dangerous, rugged look. Jake swallowed down his drool and cleared his throat.

"Hey, guys. What's going on?"

Matt quickly came up to Jake and gave him a huge, but gentle, hug.

"Whoa, get your paws off my man!" Paul came over and gave Jake a quick kiss. "Sit down, babe. I know you're hurting. By the way, this is John. He's helping us with the case and watching our back, while we're here, along with Matt."

"Watching us? So, what's going on? Are we in danger?" Jake sat down heavily and cuddled up to Paul as he sat next to him. Paul and Matt looked to John to explain to Jake about the two murders and notes that were found by the bodies.

"While the killer never wrote yours or Paul's names, the fact the bodies looked like both of you, combined with the email that you got to put you at the right place at the wrong time, clearly indicates this is someone that knows you or Paul."

"How did you know to go to the house when I was there?" Jake asked Paul.

John answered on Paul's behalf, "That's why it took a little longer to put it together. The call came to Matt, not Paul, about a break-in." He sat back in his chair, taking a sip of his drink before continuing. "So we're going to stay here

for the next few days—maybe even weeks—depending on how long it takes to get this perp.”

“Weeks?”

Jake didn't want Paul or himself in danger, but he couldn't help but feel excited. A glance at Paul told him his lover felt the same way. Having time together, without Paul's crazy hours getting between them?

While John was talking, Matt had left. He returned with pizza and beer, which he set down on the table.

“Let's eat!”

Chapter 4

After dinner was done, Jake and Paul returned to their room. Paul walked into the bathroom and saw the huge, claw-foot tub. He smiled widely as he saw that two people could fit nicely. Walking back in the room, Paul went over to Jake and kissed him lightly.

“I know we need to talk. Do you want to do it here or in the large tub?”

“I... can we... um I think out here would be best, then maybe the tub, so we enjoy ourselves?”

Paul sat back on the bed next to Jake and put his hand on Jake's leg. “That's fine. I guess I hoped because we slept in the same bed last night, everything could be good again, but I know that you might be insecure about us,” Paul sighed. “And believe me, I get that... I know I'm not good at talking about anything, but even more so when it comes to feelings. All I can say is that I was in shock, and I went on automatic.”

“I get that, Paul, I really do... I know you were doing your job. I just don't understand how you thought for a minute I could kill anyone!”

“I know, I just... I've seen too much, I have watched people that I thought were good people turn evil. I never really talked about my family because they turned their backs on me when they found out I was gay.”

Running his hand over his hair, Paul continued, his voice gruff. “Not that it excuses what I did, but it's one of the reasons I have a hard time trusting people—when the people that loved you change from being loving to hateful. And that one second, when I believed that it was possible for that to happen to you, I can never take back. All I can do is hope that I did not lose you in that one moment.”

“You haven't lost me, Paul, I'm still here. But it will take me a while to forget you slapping those cuffs on me and reading me my rights, like I was a common criminal.”

Paul scooted closer to Jake and put his arms around him. Jake knew that Paul wasn't the biggest cuddler, but knowing that's what Jake needed, Paul still did it and felt him relax.

“As long as you give me a chance to regain your trust, I'll be happy. Hell, I'll even let you handcuff me to the bed all night long, if that helps.” Paul wiggled his eyebrow, and was overjoyed when Jake started laughing.

“You just want sex.”

“Yup.”

“Well, let’s go have that bath first.” Jake stood up and started taking off his shirt. Paul just watched as he saw pale skin revealed. While Jake couldn’t be considered a twink, he was smaller than Paul. There was a dusting of light brown hair on Jake’s pecs, that narrowed down to a treasure trail. His stomach didn’t have a six pack, but was flat, and his waist small. Paul held back a gasp as he saw the bruises all over Jake’s body, still amazed at how beautiful his lover was. He walked slowly to Jake and put his large hands around his waist, moving them down to cup Jake’s round ass. Jake stepped back and lifted Paul’s hands away with a small smile.

“Let me finish getting undressed. You might want to follow suit, if you’re going to take a bath with me.”

“Sorry, got distracted.” Paul quickly removed his shirt and started taking off his pants, groaning as the fabric brushed against his growing cock—Jake had turned around and taken off his pants, showing off his tight, pale ass.

“Um, you might want to hurry and get in the bath, or we’re not going to make it,” Paul growled.

Jake turned his head, smiled, and quickly walked to the bathroom. Paul finished taking off his pants, tripping on the discarded clothes as he rushed to follow. Getting into the bathtub behind Jake, Paul took the washcloth and slowly washed his lover, making sure that he was being gentle. Jake then took the washcloth and cleaned Paul slowly, like he was memorizing every part of his body. By the time they were done and drying off, both men were hard, their cockheads deep red and leaking.

“Let’s go to the bedroom.” Jake’s voice was deep with need.

Jake was very nervous as he walked back into the bedroom. Making love to Paul was still very new, and this would be the first time since Paul had told him that he was in love with him. Jake felt that he was also in love with Paul, but with everything that had happened in the last few days, he wanted time before saying it back. *Should I even be thinking of sex right now?* He wanted Paul, though, and even if he still felt betrayed, he knew that the sex would drive all his tormented thoughts away for a while. Maybe it wasn’t fair to Paul, but sex might help both of them to get back to where they had been.

“Baby, if you don’t want to do anything, I understand. We can just lie down for a bit, or go back to the living room with Matt and John.”

Jake looked up to see Paul watching him with concern. He looked down again, at his straining cock, and smiled. “I think we both know what I want to do. I just don’t want you to think that everything is perfect. I still need time to forgive. But I also want to make love to you right now.”

“I get it. Whatever you want, I’m yours.”

Jake walked over to Paul’s bags and found the handcuffs, staring at them as he remembered how they felt on his wrists. Part of letting go and forgiving Paul was to make better memories by erasing the bad. Maybe using the handcuffs with sex could be a great way to start. Jake grabbed the cuffs and lifted them up for Paul to see.

Paul just smiled and shrugged. “I said I would let you, if you wanted to.”

Jake pushed Paul onto the large king-size bed, which, luckily, had a dark iron frame. Once Paul was lying flat, Jake straddled his hips, moving his hands along Paul’s sides and up his arms. He grabbed Paul’s hands and raised them up to the bed frame.

Paul’s breath hitched in his throat, as Jake carefully handcuffed him to the bed and started slowly kissing him, down his arms, to his neck and his chest. He loved the taste of Paul’s skin. He used the tip of his tongue to lick a pebbled nipple, sucking softly for a second, before moving on to the other one. He also loved the fact that Paul’s chest hair was thicker than his, enjoying the soft dark fur, as his hands roamed all over Paul’s muscled chest.

“Please, Jake,” Paul groaned, raising his head.

Capturing Paul’s mouth with his own, Jake sucked on Paul’s bottom lip and started grinding his hips against Paul’s weeping cock. He moved away and gave him a sly smile. His lover moaned.

“No, don’t.”

“Shh, just a minute.” Jake leaned over the bedside table. He grabbed a bottle of lube and a condom, placing the latter on Paul’s chest. Taking the lube, Jake opened it and placed some on his fingers. Jake watched Paul’s eye widen, as he reached behind and placed his fingers in his hole, opening himself up. Jake continued, his eyes closing, as he moved his fingers in and out. He heard Paul’s moans, matching his own.

“So, sexy—I could come just watching you do that.”

Jake opened his eyes and grinned at the lust and trust he saw on Paul's face. Grabbing the condom, Jake opened the foil and unrolled it on Paul's cock, his hand moving up and down as he spread lube along it.

“Oh, god!”

Lifting himself up, Jake aligned his hole with Paul's cock, and slowly slid down onto it. As he surrounded the hard cock, Jake breathed hard, giving his body a moment to get used to the intrusion, before he started moving up and down. He moved his hips around, going faster as Paul's moans got louder. Jake's hands trailed over Paul's chest, pinching his nipples.

“So good, Jake. Don't stop.” Paul thrust his hips up as Jake pushed down, sweat pouring from both of their bodies. Moving faster, Jake kissed Paul hard, swallowing each other's moans. As Paul hit his prostate over and over, Jake could feel himself get closer to the edge.

“Come for me, Jake!”

Jake threw his head back and yelled as his cum shot out, across Paul's chest hair. Paul's hips rose quickly, as he followed Jake, and filled the condom. Jake collapsed across Paul's body, trying to slow his breathing.

“Handcuffs,” said Paul, his voice hoarse.

“Oops, sorry!” Jake quickly removed the handcuffs, and was immediately grabbed and pulled down under Paul, who kissed him deeply, gazing into his eyes. “That was unbelievable. Hopefully one day, you can trust me enough to return the favor.”

“Maybe. It was fun.” Jake leaned in to kiss Paul. He winced, as the action reminded him that he wasn't as healed as he thought. “But now, I'm worn out and starting to hurt again.” Jake got off the bed to take some pain pills and cleaned himself off. He returned with a warm washcloth, wiped Paul down and collapsed beside him, in the bed. Within minutes, both men were sound asleep.

Chapter 5

Paul awoke to the sound of arguing in the living room. Moving quickly, so as not to wake Jake, Paul dressed and quietly walked out the door. Matt and John were yelling at each other, about who was going to go get food for breakfast. While this was not a big deal, Paul had noticed that lately there was tension between the pair, and more than once Matt had complained about John.

“What’s going on here, guys?”

The men jumped apart, red-faced, and Paul wondered if he’d walked in on them doing something other than fighting.

“We were... We were deciding who should go to the store,” Matt explained. “I did it the last few times—just thought it should be John’s turn.”

“You didn’t ask, you told! I don’t take orders from you. You got that?”

Paul stepped between the other two men. “Whoa! Okay, guys, it’s not that big of a deal. I would go but since I’m stuck here, I can’t. Can you go, John, please? If Matt goes, we’ll only get pizza or doughnuts.”

John nodded and walked off.

When Paul turned to look at Matt, he was surprised to see him looking after John with sadness, not anger. “You want to tell me what’s going on with you two?”

Matt started and looked at Paul. “Nah, man, it’s nothing... Well, maybe not nothing but we should be worrying about who wants to kill you. We can worry about John and me later.”

“I thought you didn’t like him...” Paul paused. “He’s gay?”

Matt raised his hands. “Hey, I never said I didn’t like him! He just knows how to get to me... Anyway, later, please?”

Matt looked uncomfortable, so Paul let it go but promised himself that once the case was over, he would get to the bottom of whatever was going on. Matt was his best friend and always a joy to be around. Paul didn’t like to see him looking so down.

“Okay, just try to get along with each other. We might be here for a while and I don’t think Jake needs the tension.”

“What tension?” Jake yawned, looking sleepy and cute as he rubbed his eyes.

“Nothing, baby, just Matt and John getting a little stir-crazy.”

Matt gave Paul a grateful smile and moved to the couch, pausing to rub Jake's already mussed hair on the way past. Matt turned on the news. Paul grabbed Jake's hand and led him over to the couch, too, sitting down and pulling Jake on his lap.

“Paul!” Jake slid off his lap, but stayed close, sitting close up next to him. Matt glanced over at the two men cuddling. He smiled, but it seemed sad.

“So, John and I looked over the case notes last night, trying to drown out suspicious noises coming out of the bedroom.”

Paul smiled as he saw a blush move up Jake's neck, to his face. “Did you find anything?” Paul asked.

“Well, we also looked at the email that was sent to Jake, and we're trying to track the sender using the ISP. We're also trying to get information from the domain owner, but you know how hard that can be. Were you guys able to think about anyone that might hold a grudge against either of you? I would be looking at past lovers, seeing as they're killing people who look like you guys, and setting Jake up to be arrested by you... It might be your past, Paul.”

Before Paul could answer, John walked back in the house, looking a little uneasy. He carried two large bags of food, which he put on the coffee table. “I got bagels and different types of cream cheese. There's also orange juice for anyone that doesn't want any more coffee.”

“Thanks, John.” Jake pulled a bagel from the bag. Matt went to grab some knives and plates from the kitchen. He handed the first set to John with a shy smile.

“Thanks for getting the food. It looks great.”

John went a little red. “You're welcome. Did you tell them about last night... um, I mean, the things we found about the case?”

Paul looked at both men and shook his head, hoping he didn't have to wait too long to find out what had happened between them.

“He told us that the murderer might be someone from my past. But I really don't remember anyone this mad. Jake is the first major relationship I've had.

Most were hookups that knew I wasn't looking for anything. They all seemed to feel the same way at the time."

"Was there anyone that you didn't hook up with, but they wanted to?"

"Well, John, I think everyone has those people in their lives. I mean, I can't help it if someone wants me but never said anything. But have we looked at my cases? Maybe I put their lover away, or something?"

Both John and Matt glanced at each other, then quickly away.

"Okay, maybe it could be that."

"Don't know why we didn't think of that."

It was quiet for a while, as everyone ate. Matt got up to clear the breakfast mess and John headed to the bathroom.

"So what is really going on with those two?" Jake whispered after both were gone.

"Don't know, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it after this is all over." Paul pulled Jake up next to him, just enjoying the closeness.

Matt walked in and sat down. "I can go and get some case files, so we can see if anything matches."

"That's a good idea. I want to get this over with," Paul said. "As much as I like being stuck in a house with Jake, we both have jobs, and I am sure we will get stir-crazy after a while."

The kitchen table was covered in files, mugs of lukewarm coffee, and notepads covered in writing. The three officers worked quietly, going through each file with a fine-tooth comb. Jake was getting bored, but he was doing his best to keep the men going, with fresh coffee and back rubs. Okay, only Paul got the back rubs; Jake tried to be nice and give Matt one too, but a glare from John stopped that pretty quickly.

Matt and John weren't talking to each other, except to share small details about the case, but it seemed like every time one left the table for any reason, on their return they sat a little closer to the other. While Jake didn't understand what was going on with the cases, he was happy to watch what he thought to be a love story in the making.

When he wasn't watching Matt and John, Jake turned his attention on Paul, who was going over Jake's file, already kicking himself for the arrest. Knowing it could be one of the cases he worked on must've been making Paul feel even worse, and Jake was starting to get an idea of the pressure cops go through every day, relying on their instincts. It made Jake feel better, and brought him a step closer to forgiving Paul.

Looking at the clock, Jake noticed that it was already after one. He was sure that the cops must be hungry by now, but were so involved in the case and wouldn't stop until they found a clue. He went to the refrigerator, pleased to find it stocked with sandwich fixings, and started making big sandwiches, for the big men hard at work. Setting them down in front of the men earned him smiles all round, and a quick kiss from Paul.

"You guys need to take a break. I know this is important but if you don't eat, you won't be able to think clearly." Jake cleared a small space for his own food and sat next to Paul. John was the first one to put down his notepad and start eating.

"He's right, guys," John said, swallowing a large bite of sandwich. "I know we want this over with, but I am starving."

Matt and Paul moved their files away and followed his example.

"So anything look promising?" Jake asked. "And is there something I can do to help? No offense, but I'm getting a bit bored watching. So, unless you guys want to start looking at these files butt-ass naked, I'm gonna need something to do."

John's eyes widened and he started coughing. "W... W... What? Naked?"

Everyone else started laughing.

Jake got up and slapped John on the back. "Sorry, was just trying to lighten things up. I don't think Paul would want me seeing you guys naked anyway."

"You got that, right!" Paul said, still laughing. "But you are doing a lot, by feeding us, and making sure we have coffee. I think there are books and movies in the living room, if you want. Give us a few more hours, and we'll take a movie break with you, okay?"

"Sounds good, thanks." Jake took the empty plates away and washed them. Checking to make sure the officers didn't need anything first, he walked into the living room and started watching a movie.

Paul stretched, and popped his neck. All this paperwork was getting on his last nerve. He felt bad that Jake had to go through this, and that he couldn't spend as much time with him as he wanted. He just wanted to make love to his man, and hoped that Jake would return his words back to him.

Will he ever say that he loves me? Or is this just the beginning of the end?

Paul had never had someone stay in his life this long before. When his parents found out that he was gay, they kicked him out, and in ten years, he had not heard from them once. Matt was the only family that he had now, and he hoped that Jake would become a real part of his life. Paul refocused and tried to get back to the case file he was reading. It was then that the notes caught his eye.

"I think I might have found something. Matt, you remember the guy named Ronnie that was beating his lover?"

"I'm not sure," Matt said.

"It happened about five years ago, when we'd just been partnered up. The lover, Chris Holden, didn't want to press charges, but with all the witnesses, and the fact that Ronnie Williams also came after me, he was sent away for ten years. There's a note in this file that says about three weeks ago, he was beaten to death with a bat out in the yard by homophobic inmates."

"Yeah. I remember that one. When we talked to the couple, you talked to Williams... and I interviewed Holden, the lover." Matt thought for a moment. "But you'd think Holden would be mad at me, not you."

John took the file from Paul and looked it over. "You were most likely doing the good cop thing," he said to Matt. "And Paul was arresting his man." John pulled out his phone. "Let me call this in and see if we can find out where this guy is."

John made the call and talked on the phone for ten minutes, before hanging up.

"They're sending some guys to check out Holden's house. Before you say anything, they're just staking it out. They'll let Matt and me know more soon, and we'll go get him. I know you want to get him, Paul, but for charges to stick, you have to sit this one out."

Paul understood, but still didn't like it. He wanted to make sure that if Holden was responsible, he paid for the lives lost and what he'd done to Jake, and to their relationship. Paul slammed his hand on the table "I got it, John!"

“Hey!” Matt said. “Don’t take it out on John. He’s just looking after you and this case!”

“You don’t have to defend me, Matt. I know why Paul’s upset. I can handle it... I’m a big boy.”

Matt and John glared at each other. Paul backed off.

“Okay, okay, guys. I’m sorry if it sounded like I was mad at John, I’m just tired of this shit. But we need to get along. Please save your issues until after this case is closed.”

“We have no issues,” both men said at the same time, and then blushed, quickly looking back at their papers.

“Okay, good. Let’s take a break and watch a movie with Jake, like I promised. All we can do is wait for more information, anyway.”

Chapter 6

Paul was tired of being stuck inside. It had been seven days since this all started—three of those days spent in the house. He didn't know how much longer he could deal with the stress. The only light spot was being able to spend time with Jake. When not working on the case, Paul and Jake used the time to talk about their issues, their hopes and what they both wanted out of the relationship.

Paul still hadn't heard the three words he most wanted, but he believed that it was coming, and that trust was being repaired. While working out every evening with Matt, they discussed the impact his family's rejection had on Paul. Matt raised great points on how this most likely was the reason that he had problems trusting people, which had led to Paul arresting Jake.

Paul stared out the back window, thinking of how lost he was until he met Jake. He enjoyed being a cop, the excitement of closing a case, and fulfillment when the case went to court and the criminal was put away. The job was his salvation, when he had no family, and nowhere to go. But now the job that he loved so much was putting the man he loved even more in danger. He didn't know if he could continue being a police officer after this was all done.

Paul felt arms circle around him. "What are you thinking about?"

"I just don't know if I should leave the job. I mean, look at what happened to you... And it's all because of me!"

Paul felt Jake's arm tighten and a kiss on his neck. "You can't give up the job that you love, Paul. You do a lot of good for people. Right now, everything is crazy, so I'm just going to suggest you wait until things calm down, before making a huge life-changing decision. Think about Matt, too. What would happen if you weren't there to watch his back? He's your brother in every way. I, for one, feel better knowing that you watch and take care of each other at work, when I am not around."

Matt ran into the room grabbing his service weapon and jacket. "Hey, guys. We got a great lead! The officer watching Chris's house said he finally returned. He's there right now! John and I are going to pick him up and question him."

John walked in with his gear, ready to go. "Please remember to stay here, until we know for sure this is our guy."

Paul broke away from Jake. "Good luck, guys. Call when you know something." Paul gave both cops a one-armed man hug and locked the door after them. He looked back at Jake and shrugged.

"All we can do is wait. Let's watch the game, and hopefully we will hear something soon."

They went and sat on the couch, cuddling up together to watch the game, and after a while both men fell asleep.

Matt drove to the house; tension in the car was thick. "John, are we good? You won't talk to me, unless it's about the case."

"We're good," John said. "I just think that we should stay friends. I can't begin to imagine what Paul is going through, with Jake in so much danger. We work great together, and I want to continue to work great together. Things just got out of hand that first night. It was fun but it can't happen again."

John stared out the window the whole time he was talking. Matt thought that there was more to what he was saying, but now was not the time to dig.

"Okay, if that's what you want. Just thought I'd clear the air before we go in. We need to have each other's back."

"Always." The conviction in John's voice cheered Matt. He changed the subject to the case.

"Where do you think Chris was the last week?"

"I don't know, but they're still looking into it. He might have another house that he used. Hopefully, we can find it and get a better idea of what his plans were."

Matt pulled up next to the police car, and John jumped out to talk to the officers for a minute, then climbed back in the car.

"They said that Chris came home about an hour ago, and he hasn't left. They're going to watch the back, so he doesn't run. We're going in the front. You ready?"

"Ready!" Matt parked and they got out of the car. They walked up to the house and knocked loudly, listening for any noise inside.

"Chris, we know you're in there. We just have a few questions," Matt yelled through the door.

John shook his head. "Don't think he's going to answer. I was also told that the IP address of the email Jake received was traced back here, so we have cause to go in."

"Okay, let's get this done."

Matt and John rammed the door open and walked inside the house, guns drawn. Matt went towards the bedrooms. John checked the living room and kitchen.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

Matt went through to the kitchen to join John. "I don't think he's here. How did he get out?"

"I don't... You hear that hissing?"

Matt's eye widened as he saw the gas line cut and the pilot light on. "It's the gas from the stove. Get out!"

Matt pushed John ahead of him as they ran out the door. A loud boom ripped through the air, and Matt felt himself being thrown forward, heat at his back, landing in the yard.

"Matt! Oh, god, Matt!"

As his vision faded, Matt saw John running toward him with a look of horror on his face.

Paul woke up with a start. It felt like someone had stabbed him with a needle in the neck. He started panicking when he realized he couldn't move his arms. That panic turned to deep fear, as he opened his eyes and saw a man standing over Jake with ropes and a gag. Paul tried to move but felt himself losing consciousness.

Hours—or was it days?—later, Paul awoke and found that he was tied down to a chair, and gagged. He quickly looked around and saw Jake unconscious, also gagged and tied to a chair. The room was large, with no window and one dim light hanging in the middle. The walls were brick, and the floor concrete. The one door was made of a thick metal.

Paul tried to move his hands to get out of the rope, but after trying for many minutes he could feel blood starting to run down his hands and drip onto the

floor. Jake started moving a little and a muffled moaning came from the gag. Jake opened his eyes and looked around, finally meeting Paul's gaze. Jake's eyes were wild with fear, his face pale. Paul swallowed down his own fear and tried to convey strength as they stared at each other in silence.

"Well, well. Look at the happy couple now! Are you guys comfortable? No? Good. Let's get started!"

Jake watched in horror and started to shake, as the man walked into the room. The man was holding a small bag, and had a sinister smile on his face. He was tall and skinny, and wore dirty coveralls. He looked like he hadn't showered in days, his greasy, dirty-blond hair hanging lank around a cap that bore the name of the local electric company. Grabbing a chair, the man moved in front of Paul, blocking Jake's view of his lover. Paul stared fearlessly into the man's eyes. *Chris.*

"So, Paul. How did it feel to arrest your lover, to think that he was a killer?" Chris's laugh was wicked. He turned and gave Jake a huge smile. "Did you enjoy jail, Jake? Too bad it wasn't for longer. I'm sure you could have found a better lover than this pig right here!"

Paul tried to jump up out of his chair towards Chris, making him laugh even harder.

"You think you can scare me? You're tied up. You can't even talk!" Chris delved inside his bag and took out a small knife.

"You're going to pay for Ronnie's death. It's your fault he died. We were happy!" Chris waved the knife in Paul's face. "I'm going to make Jake watch you die. It's your fault your partner and the other officer are dead. I blew up my house with them in it."

Jake felt his tears flowing as he saw Paul's breath hitch and the pain in his eyes. *Not Matt and John. All this death, because a man couldn't live without his abusive partner!* Trying to be strong for Paul, Jake tried to communicate his love through his eyes. He couldn't let Paul die, not without knowing that he really did love him. Jake wished he'd said those words to Paul, cursing his fear of being hurt again.

Chris took his knife and ran the blade down Paul's chest, cutting both the shirt and skin underneath. Jake watched as blood started running down Paul's chest and soaked his pants.

“NO! Please stop!” Jake yelled through his gag, but Chris just laughed. He put down his knife and started hitting Paul’s face, hard.

“You can’t stop me! Paul will feel my pain and die, knowing that you will be in my mercy.”

Jake could only watch as Chris beat Paul until he passed out. Jake didn’t know if it was from the pain, or if he was even still alive. How deep was the knife wound? How much blood was lost?

Chris walked over and punched Jake in the side of the head.

Jake welcomed the darkness, hoping that if Paul was dead, he would soon be following after, to find him in the afterlife.

The paramedic was finished with him, and John jumped up and put his torn jacket back on. He looked at the ambulance that was carrying Matt. John wished he was inside with him, but he knew that when Matt awoke, the first thing he would do would be to ask about Paul and Jake.

This ends now! John hurried to his car, and called for information from the officers that were sent over to the safe house. When it became clear that no one was there, John called the station and had every man available out looking for Paul and Jake, or any information on where Chris could be holding up. When the dispatcher came back with the address that Chris had last lived at with Ronnie, John had a feeling that this was where he would have taken the two men.

Speeding through the town with his lights on and sirens streaming, John’s heart pounded as he thought of all the things that he could come across in the next twenty minutes. His mind kept thinking of how still Matt was when he was carried away. *Focus, John! He was breathing when you left! He’s going to be okay. You need to finish this for him!* John shook his head and forced himself to think only of what lay ahead.

Pulling up to the old house, John jumped out of the car. Other police arrived soon after and came over to join him.

“Listen up, this guy is a killer, and he has one of us! I want every inch of this house covered, and the street blocked off. No one comes or goes until I give the all-clear. Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then let’s go!”

The first team rammed the door down and cops poured into the house. John heard shouts, calling out at every corner, as he made his way to the basement. A metal door blocked his entrance. John opened it and stared dumbly at the horror that was inside.

Paul was unconscious, bound to a chair and gagged, his shirt cut down the middle. Blood covered the shirt and the top part of his pants. Jake was also unconscious, blood dripping from his temple, and Chris was standing behind him with a bloody knife at Jake’s throat.

“Stop moving!” Chris shouted. “Put down your gun, or this one is dead! Paul will soon be dead anyway!”

Staring at the scene, John quickly considered all his options. He knew that one wrong move could cost both bound men their lives.

Just then, a loud shout sounded above them. When Chris looked up, John shot.

Chapter 7

A beeping noise awoke Jake. He tried to go back to sleep but it sounded like it was getting louder. Opening one eye, he tried to see what was going on, but everything was blurry and it took him a minute to focus.

“Good, you’re awake!” Jake attempted to look in the direction of the voice and saw a man he didn’t know, sitting in a chair next to the bed. Jake tried to get up.

“Whoa! Hold on, don’t get up. You’re okay. You’re in the hospital, and have a concussion, so you need to move slowly.”

“Who are you?” Jake rasped, his throat dry.

The man handed him a cup with a little water.

“I’m Captain Winders. John asked me to stay with you. You’ve been here for about a day.”

“What happened? Why did he ask you to stay? Are Paul and Matt okay?”

“Shh, calm down... Paul and Matt are up in ICU. John’s watching them. They’re both going to be okay, but Paul lost a lot of blood and both are unconscious. I’ll go relieve John up there and send him to tell you more.”

Jake felt tears in his eyes, as he thought about those strong men, lying helplessly in bed.

“Do you need anything before I get the nurse and John?”

Jake shook his head, wincing at the pain. He watched the captain walk out the door.

The next day, Jake was cleared to go up to Paul and Matt’s room. Fortunately, the hospital staff knew that it would be much easier with all the police coming and going to keep both men in the same room.

Jake was told he had to stay in a wheelchair if he wanted to see his lover, and John wheeled him into the room. A gasp left his mouth as he saw the two men lying in their beds. Paul was pale, with bandages on his chest and head. Wires hooked him up to monitors, and there was an IV in his hand. Matt also had a bandage around his head and both of his arms, and was hooked up to an

IV and monitor. Both of them looked like they were just sleeping, but Jake had never seen them this still.

"I'll let you have some time alone with them," John said. "I'm going to try and eat, but call me if anything changes, please."

"Go ahead, John. I know you've been back and forth between me and them. You need a break, but you're the first person I'll call if there's any change, after the nurse, of course."

Jake waited until John walked out of the room. He got out of the wheelchair but he didn't go to Paul first. He went to Matt and whispered in his ear.

"Matt, you need to wake up. John won't leave the hospital until he knows you're okay. I don't think he'll admit that he needs you, but he does. It'll break him if you don't wake up, and it will also hurt me and Paul. Wake up, Matt!" Jake watched Matt's face for a minute, placed a small kiss on his forehead, and turned to his sleeping lover.

"Oh, god, Paul, I need to you wake up. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you that I loved you before. I was just so hurt, but if you don't wake up, I'll never forgive myself. I love you, Paul. I love you!" Jake kissed Paul's lips, and sat in the chair beside the bed, holding Paul's hand with both of his own, as he watched for any sign of life.

"J... John."

Jake turned and looked over at Matt. His eyes were open slightly and he looked like he was in a great deal of pain.

"Matt! You're awake! Hold on, I'll call John." Jake pushed the nurse-call button as he quickly used the bedside phone to call John, looking at Matt as he waited for John to answer. "Of course you decide to wake up the first time we convince him to leave your side!" Matt managed a brief smile. John picked up.

"Matt's awake!" Jake said and hung up. He turned back to Matt. "He's on his way. How are you feeling?"

"I hurt. Where's Paul?" Matt tried to sit up, but the nurse came in and put her hand on his chest, so he couldn't move. She started checking his vitals. A minute later, John came in the room, out of breath, as if he'd run the whole way.

"How is he? Is he still awake?"

“Why don’t you ask me, John? I am right here,” Matt said sarcastically, but with a huge smile at the sight of John looking so disheveled.

Jake smiled and went back over to Paul. He listened to John update Matt on what had happened after the house turned into a fire ball. He was so happy to see the two men holding hands, daring to believe that things would get better for them.

Looking at Paul, Jake’s smile faded away again. He sat on the chair next to the bed, and rested his head next to Paul’s. He closed his eyes, letting Matt’s and John’s voices wash over him.

Paul felt the searing pain in his chest like it had been split wide open. He tried to stay awake for as long as he could, but his vision wavered. As he felt a fist hitting him in the head, he could hear Jake yelling, “No, Stop!” Paul tried to answer but then the scene changed.

Paul was tied to a chair. Jake was standing over him with a knife.

“You ruined my life, you bastard! You lied! You never loved me!” Jake slashed Paul’s chest. The pain sheared through him.

“No! Please, Jake I love you! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Matt and John appeared in the room, both also holding knives and advancing on him.

“You killed us! We could have been happy! How many lives must you destroy?”

“Noooooo!”

“Paul, please come back to me.”

Oh, god. It was just a dream! Where am I?

“I love you, Paul! Open your eyes.”

Jake? He’s safe!

Paul moaned, as he tried to open his eyes.

“Did you hear that? I think he might be waking up.”

“Jake, I know you want him to be awake. We all do, but he’s been making noises for the last two days.”

Matt is alive!

“Matt, let Jake have his hope. Paul does seem to be moving a lot more.”

John! Everyone's okay!

Paul strained to open his eyes. There was pain as he took in the bright lights, and his vision was blurry. He could make out the three men next to his bed. His head pounded as he moved, trying to see more clearly. He wondered how long it was going to take someone to notice he was awake.

Jake loves me!

“Hey.” Paul's voice didn't sound like him, but it got them to shut up and turn quickly towards him.

“Oh, thank god! Someone call the nurse!” Jake buried his head in Paul's shoulder, shaking and whispering over and over. “I love you, I love you!”

“Shh, I know,” Paul tried to reassure Jake, but his voice cracked.

Matt handed Paul a cup of water, which he sipped clumsily and tried to talk again.

“Jake, shh, it'll be okay, I love you too!”

The next few hours were filled with doctors and nurses examining Paul, tests and blood being taken. John had left a while ago, and Matt was asleep, but Jake refused to leave Paul's side. Finally, when they were alone in the room, Paul patted the side of the bed, and Jake carefully lay next to him, holding his hand.

“I was so scared that I would lose you,” Paul whispered in Jake's ear. “I could never forgive myself if something had happened to you.” He kissed Jake's temple. “I want to be with you forever. I know that we have things to work out still, and it's only been three months. But I can't live without you.”

Jake smiled. “Until death do us part?”

“And long after that!” Paul kissed Jake until there was no more room for other thoughts left in his head but them and their future.

The End

Author Bio

Janel White has been reading all her life; raised with no television, it was her only outlet. After years of dreaming up her own storylines, she decided that this event would be the perfect way to dip her toes in the water. When she is not dreaming, she is a working single mom, with two boys that light up her life. Janel knows that real life many times has no happy endings, so she looks for them in her books.

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UNTIL NEXT TIME

By Xara X. Xanakas

Photo Description

A nude man has been bound with dark red ropes and hung, inverted, from the ceiling.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Fuck, this was supposed to be such a simple assignment. Get in, get the information and get the hell out. It should have been a piece a cake but I just couldn't resist getting a closer look at the guy. There's just something about him that sets me on edge. He was prey that I enjoyed stalking. Whether to kill or fuck I wasn't sure. How the hell did he get the upper hand? Instead of being the predator I'm suddenly the prey. I may be bound, but I'm never helpless. It seems I may have finally met my match, and I'm going to enjoy teaching him a lesson he'll never forget.

Sincerely,

Jen4607

PS. I'm hoping for some rough angry sex with confusing and unexpected tenderness. It doesn't need to be a HEA but a HFN would be nice. :)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bondage, private detective, criminal, abduction/stalking, two alpha-males, aftercare, excessive use of codenames, cat-and-mouse games

Word count: 5,248

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UNTIL NEXT TIME

By Xara X. Xanakas

“Let me get this straight: you want us to fly to New York just to go to a party where Spider may or may not be planning to steal something?” Hydra shook her head as she squeezed the apple-shaped stress ball she carried everywhere.

“Look, Boss, I know you have a hard-on for this guy, but this is a bit of a stretch,” Lucky said. Yeti snorted from his spot to Hawk’s left, and Gremlin turned a questioning glance. Hawk shook his head.

“He’s going to be there,” Hawk said.

Gremlin picked up the Tiffany-blue invitation Hawk had laid on the table before he launched into his proposal. He plucked at the white ribbon attached to it while he looked around the table. “How do you know? I mean, we’ve gotten lucky and crossed his path, nearly even caught him a few times over the last few years.”

“You’ve been chasing him for what, four years now?” Hydra asked.

“And that’s three and a half years longer than any relationship you’ve had with something that didn’t require batteries.” Gremlin ducked as Hydra threw the ball at his head.

“Fuck off. Remember that glory hole in Budapest? At least I don’t have to worry about splinters, asshole.”

Yeti and Lucky shuddered. Hawk was tempted to as well, as he remembered Gremlin screaming in pain when a doctor pulled the tiny shards of wood out one by one. He’d been so close to bringing Spider in that time, but he had to let him go to take care of Gremlin. He retrieved the ball from the floor and tossed it back to Hydra.

“Can we get back on track? We’ve got three days to pull everything together. Possible?” he asked to avoid all talk about how long he’d been chasing Spider around the world. It was closer to five years, but who was counting? Spider would mess up at some point, and Hawk intended to be there when it happened.

"You've already scored an invite, so we're in. Lucky and I will join the catering staff," Gremlin said. "As long as Hydra can get into their systems, the only real problem you'll have is finding a suit big enough to fit Yeti so he can be your plus one."

"What? None of you are volunteering to go with me?"

"Nope. Not after last time," Lucky said.

"I still have nightmares," Gremlin added.

"About splinters?" Hydra smiled at Gremlin before turning to shake her head at Hawk. "Sorry, boss-man, I'm more valuable keeping an eye on all the cameras."

"You just don't want to have to wear a dress."

"That too," Hydra said with a grin. She stood up and shut down her laptop and tablet. "I'll go get started on the access we'll need."

"Keep me posted on your status. I'll need a final go/no-go in the morning."

"Anyone got eyes on our target?" Hawk asked quietly. A well-dressed woman looked at him as she walked by. He smiled at her and gave her a little wave. Their communication system was cutting-edge technology. Small, unobtrusive bone-induction mics were fitted into temporary bridges they wore on their back teeth, transmitting to tiny receivers fitted to each team member's ear. Which was all well and good, except you looked like an idiot talking to yourself at a black-tie event.

"Not yet, Boss," Hydra answered. She was set up on the roof. She'd already tapped into the building's surveillance system to watch their cameras on one laptop. Another was connected to the city's traffic cameras. She had at least three touch-screen tablets in her stash of tools.

"Ain't seen him," Yeti's deep voice rumbled through their receivers, tickling the hair in Hawk's ear. Yeti towered over everyone at the party, giving him a good vantage point to check out the crowd as he pretended to be interested in a socialite's purse puppy.

"How can you be so sure he's even going to show?" Gremlin asked. He was moving around the party with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. "I mean, it's a Bat Mitzvah for some diplomat's mistress's poodle or something like that."

“And that’s exactly why he’ll show. It’s a Bat Mitzvah. For a dog. It’s just the kind of show-off event that would appeal to him. Besides, did you get a look at that mutt’s collar? Trust me. He’ll show,” Hawk said.

“Got him,” Lucky whispered as he refilled champagne glasses at the bar in the back corner. “Near the door, greeting our hostess. White fedora.”

Hawk looked over at the happy couple, and their little dog. They were laughing along with the thief.

“That’s not a fedora. It’s a trilby. You can tell by the brim,” Yeti said.

“Technically, a trilby is a type of fedora,” Hydra added.

Hawk shook his head. “Thank you, fashion police. Obviously your talents are underutilized here.”

“But that scarf. It’s apricot,” Gremlin said.

“He’s so vain. I bet he thinks this op is about him,” Hydra said.

Gremlin started humming, off-key of course, over their comm system.

“That’s going to be stuck in my head all night now. Thanks for the earworm, nerdette,” Gremlin muttered.

“Enough. Can we move on with the task at hand?” Hawk asked. “Did anyone else catch him switching out the dog collar?”

“Yes, Boss. Even got it on film,” Hydra said. Hawk could almost hear her rolling her eyes.

“And where is he headed now?”

“West exit, last I saw,” Yeti said.

“Came through the kitchen to the service elevator,” Gremlin said.

“And now he’s smiling at the security camera, tipping that hat.” Hydra sounded annoyed.

“So we’re made.” It wasn’t really a question, and Hawk started for the back stairwell. He raced down the first four flights. “Where’s he stopping, Hydra?”

“Looks like sublevel two. Parking garage.”

Hawk pushed through the fire door on the ground level. “Which way?”

“Left. There’s a glass door leading to a valet station. The elevator stopped on two, but he’s still on it. Smiling at the damn camera. He really does know this op is about him.”

“Got it.” Hawk slowed down and casually walked out of the hotel and into the garage. The valet on duty approached him, but Hawk waved him off. “I think I’ll stretch my legs a bit.”

“Stairs are to your right, sir, just past the elevators,” the valet said.

Hawk nodded his thanks and tipped him.

Once he hit the stairs, he rushed down two floors. “You still got him?”

“Yep. The elevator is about to stop. You should have a visual in five, four. What the hell?” Hydra said.

“Hydra?”

“Hold the fuck on. Cameras just went dead.” Hawk could hear her cursing and the clacking of her keyboard as she tried to get the feeds back. “Gotcha. I think—” she started, but the rest of her words were cut off by a high-pitched squeal.

“Yeti? Anyone copy?” Hawk asked, as the doors opened in front of him. Spider was leaning against the back wall with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He grinned as he moved forward to close the space between them. He stopped a few steps away from Hawk and took something out of his pocket.

“I don’t think they can hear you,” he said, showing off a little black device.

Something moved in Hawk’s peripheral vision, and he turned in time to see a black van pull up behind him. The side door slid open, and a pair of arms grabbed him from behind.

“Easy now, Hawk. Don’t fight it,” Spider whispered, just before Hawk felt a pinprick in his neck.

“You bast—” he managed to get out before the world went black.

Hawk woke up slowly. His head pounded, and the world spun around him. He blinked a few times to adjust his vision for the low light in the room. He faced a dark wall, but the tall vase that stood in one corner didn’t look right. Hawk shook his head and looked around the room in confusion before he

realized everything was upside-down. Soft tiles covered the floor, which floated above his head instead of under his feet. Looking down his body to see the ceiling disoriented him as he pulled on the dark red ropes that bound him.

About two feet of rope separated his wrists, but he still couldn't move them. A six-foot-long rod had been threaded between his elbows, bending his left arm awkwardly behind his back. The ropes crisscrossed around his hips and threaded back through bindings to create a harness that attached to a complicated pulley system secured to the exposed beams overhead. His legs were spread apart and bent at the knees, his calves tied to his thighs.

And he was naked.

"Fuck," he mumbled, as he struggled against the restraints, causing him to spin around and swing back and forth a couple of times. He had to close his eyes to fight against a wave of nausea. "Big mistake."

He took a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth to center himself before he opened his eyes again. No one was in the area with him, but he could see an outline through the thin paper room dividers as he spun around again. He heard footsteps behind him, and someone trailed a hand along his leg and down his back.

"You're a lot bigger than the flies I usually catch in my web, Hawk."

"Untie me, and I'll show you just how big I am."

Spider laughed. "Now where would the fun be in that?"

"I don't know. I'm sure I'll have a lot of fun once I'm down from here."

"I'm sure you'll have more fun just where you are." Spider moved to stand in front of Hawk, dragging his hand around his hips and back up to the bindings on his thighs. "You like it this way, don't you? Giving up control?"

Hawk tugged against the bonds again. "I really don't."

Spider brought one hand down hard on Hawk's bare ass. Hawk grunted and swung helplessly. Spider took the chance to give him another smack. "Don't lie."

"What do you want?" Hawk's muscles twitched as Spider rubbed the spot he had hit.

"What do *you* want is the question. You followed me from the party, remember?"

"You're the one who brought me back here and tied me up." He took a good look at Spider as he spun back around. He'd lost the jacket and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, but he was still fully dressed. "Nice shoes. Not planning on staying around a while?"

"Just as long as you hang around."

"Funny."

"I do try." Spider grinned as he pressed a hand flat on Hawk's chest, making him sway a little. His head swam with the motion.

"Why don't you skip to the chase and tell me what you're planning on doing to me?" Hawk asked. He squirmed in the ropes again. "Since you went through all the trouble to get me here and everything."

"I don't know, Hawk. What do *you* think I should do with you now that I have you at my mercy?"

"I think you should suck my cock," Hawk said, glaring up at him.

Spider narrowed his eyes and moved one hand to wrap his fingers tightly around the base of Hawk's dick.

"All right," he said with a shrug. He braced his other hand on Hawk's hip to keep him steady while he sucked the head into his mouth. Hawk's body jerked as Spider took him deeper, engulfing him in tight, wet heat.

"Jesus," Hawk whispered. Spider hummed, and Hawk's body jerked with the sensation. His head felt lighter as blood rushed to fill his cock. He panted as he tried to buck his hips, even though he couldn't get any traction. Spider held him steady as he worked his cock to full hardness. Spider glanced down at him, smirking around Hawk's cock. He hummed again, and Hawk groaned.

"I'm—" he started to say, but his head was fuzzy. He couldn't figure out what he wanted to say. Black spots started to appear on the edges of his vision, and he couldn't get enough air. Everything turned gray, and the last thing he was aware of was Spider pulling away from his cock and saying his name.

Hawk woke up facedown on a bed. The rod had been taken away to give the rope some slack between his wrists, but his legs were still bent, his calves still tied to his thighs, spreading him wide open. He stretched his arms above his head with a groan, before dropping his hands to rest on the back of his head.

Spider knelt behind him, massaging his shoulders. He put a wet cloth on the back of Hawk's neck. "How are you feeling?" he asked quietly.

Hawk tried to say something, but his throat was too dry, so he shook his head.

"It's okay," Spider said, pressing a bottle of water and a couple of tablets into Hawk's hands. "Here. Take these."

Hawk took a minute to stare at the bendy straw sticking out of the bottle before he shook his head. "It's not going to knock me out again, is it?"

"No, they're just aspirin," Spider chuckled. He kept up the massage, digging into the sore muscles in Hawk's back. Every so often, he'd move down to Hawk's thighs and test the knots holding him in place. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been knocked out. Twice."

Spider winced. "Sorry about that. It took you longer to wake up than I thought it would. I was about to take you down when you came to."

"Maybe I would have woken up quicker if you started sucking my dick sooner," Hawk grouched. He took another sip of the water and relaxed into Spider's touch. "Do you plan to let me go any time soon?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?" Hawk watched Spider as he got up from the bed and moved across the room. He was keenly aware that Spider was still dressed, hadn't even loosened his tie while Hawk was unconscious. He groaned when Spider pulled that damn scarf—*apricot*, his mind helpfully supplied, along with those damn lyrics—out of his pocket.

"Why were you following me?"

"Why do you think? I knew you'd show up there to steal something."

"You have such a low opinion of me?"

"No, I just know you too well." Hawk arched his back to stretch his muscles and lift his ass higher. He smirked as Spider's gaze followed the motion.

Spider smiled as he approached the head of the bed. Hawk stared at him until he covered Hawk's eyes with the scarf. Then he crawled onto the bed to cover Hawk's body with his own. He pulled the scarf tight and knotted it behind Hawk's head. Then he took Hawk's wrists to stretch his arms out and

hook the rope between them on something in front of him. Hawk didn't look closely enough before he was blindfolded to know if it was on the wall or the headboard. He didn't really care by that point.

"So, now what do you plan to do with me? Or to me?" he asked as Spider settled down on top of him.

"Whatever I want," he whispered, his breath fanning over Hawk's ear, making him shiver. "Got any suggestions?"

"Kiss my ass?"

"As you wish."

Hawk hissed as the cool metal of Spider's belt buckle dragged down his spine, making him even more aware of his own nudity. His exposed skin pebbled as Spider slid down his body to settle between Hawk's legs. He pictured him kneeling there, fully clothed, in contrast to Hawk's bound, naked body.

"Like this?" Spider asked, as he placed a gentle kiss to his cheek. "Or more like this?" He leaned over to bite down on the other one. Hawk groaned and pushed his ass higher. Spider chuckled and smacked Hawk's ass before grabbing both cheeks to spread them apart. He rubbed his thumbs along the inside of Hawk's crack.

"No, this is what you wanted," he said, before licking a long stripe from the base of Hawk's balls straight up to the base of his spine. He moved back down to run his tongue flat against Hawk's hole. Hawk moaned and pushed back as best he could. Spider took the hint, buried his face deeper in Hawk's ass, licking at his opening, and nibbling the tender skin around it before working his tongue just inside the tight ring. He kneaded Hawk's cheeks as he licked him, moving his thumbs closer together until he could slide one in to spread him open further.

"Fuck me," Hawk moaned, as he yanked on the restraints and tried to work his legs under himself. Spider chuckled and sat back on his heels.

"You are one bossy bottom," he said, moving one hand away from Hawk's ass. Hawk heard a soft click a second before something cold and slick dribbled along his crack. Spider worked the lube in, pushing two fingers in all the way to the knuckles. Hawk gritted his teeth and grunted at the feeling as Spider pulled them almost all the way out before shoving them back in, again and again.

“Just do it already if you’re going to.” The ropes chafed along his balls, but his cock was hard. Spider twisted his hand as he pumped his fingers in and out. Hawk moaned constantly as Spider finger-fucked him, curling his long, thick fingers every so often to deliberately tease him, just grazing over his prostate, then pressing against it. “Please,” he whispered, on one particularly hard push.

Spider’s hands pulled away, and Hawk whimpered at the loss of contact.

“Okay. I’ve got you. You’re all right,” he said quietly, as he brought one hand up to rub gentle circles on Hawk’s back. His clothes rustled and brushed against Hawk’s thighs. He tried not to whine when the bed rose as Spider stood up. “Hey, I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be right here next to you, okay?”

“Okay.” Hawk nodded, embarrassed at how much he missed Spider’s body holding him down.

“I’ve just got to,” he started saying before he stopped. The slide of his zipper was loud in the quiet room. Hawk groaned and lifted his hips. “Do you want to watch this, Hawk?”

“Oh yeah,” he sighed. “I wanna see.”

“Okay.” He felt Spider move to his side, and the scarf was pulled off. He blinked a couple of times as the light blinded him. Spider rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it lightly. “Easy there. Keep your eyes closed for a few seconds.”

“I’m good,” he said, as he looked up. Spider opened the third button on his shirt to tuck his tie into it before refastening it. He smiled down at Hawk as he reached into his open fly to pull out his cock. It wasn’t quite as long as Hawk’s, but he was thicker, and uncut. The head was flushed a deep red and slick with precum. Hawk licked his lips and shot a glance back up to Spider’s face.

“See something you like?” he asked, as he threaded his fingers in Hawk’s hair and pulled him forward a little. He grabbed the base of his cock with his other hand and rubbed the head over Hawk’s lips. Hawk flicked his tongue out and tried to suck it into his mouth, but Spider held him back. “No teeth.”

“Just—” Hawk said, but whatever he was going to say was cut off when Spider pushed his cock into his mouth. He hollowed out his cheeks and sucked in as Spider pulled back out.

“Christ, your mouth,” he groaned, as he pumped into the suction of Hawk’s mouth a few times before pulling out completely. “So fucking good.” He

caressed Hawk's cheek and ran a thumb over his bottom lip. Hawk wanted to whine, but Spider shook his head. He turned to pick up a condom off the table.

Hawk kept his gaze on Spider's hands as they ripped open the package. One hand moved to stroke his cock a few times before he fitted the condom over the head and rolled it down his length.

"Still want this?" he asked, looking down at Hawk.

"Fuck yeah," Hawk said, staring at Spider. He always looked so put together, but now the crease on his pants had flattened over his thighs, and his shirt was wrinkled. He inhaled deeply, but he still couldn't catch his breath, and his eyes were dark with lust. The image he presented now, with his hard cock standing out from his pants, his balls pulled forward through the opening, made Hawk moan. He'd done that. *He'd* turned Spider into a rumpled mess. That thought made him want it even more. He nodded enthusiastically, lifting his ass in the air. "Fuck me. Now."

"Pushy," Spider chuckled, as he moved back around the bed. He tested the ropes securing Hawk's legs. "How are you feeling?"

"I'd be better if you'd get on with it."

Spider brought a hand down hard on Hawk's ass before running a finger under the rope where it went between Hawk's thighs. Hawk felt his breath as he bent over to look at the rope burn. "Is this bothering you?"

"No, it's fine."

"Would you tell me if it wasn't?"

Hawk chuckled. "Probably?"

"That's not reassuring me." Spider took a step away from the bed.

"It's fine. I'll let you know if it gets to be too much, all right?"

Spider stepped closer and knelt between Hawk's legs. "It'll have to do, I guess."

"Good. Now get the fuck on with it," Hawk said, earning another smack to his ass. He grinned over his shoulder at Spider and wiggled his ass. Spider rubbed his cock against Hawk's hole but waited until Hawk met his gaze. He didn't move until Hawk gave him a slight nod. Then he slammed his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt with one movement. "Fuck!" Hawk hissed.

Spider set a relentless pace, pulling back and shoving in, fucking Hawk hard and fast. Hawk yanked hard on his restraints, trying to brace himself against Spider's thrusts, but he didn't have enough give to get any leverage. He growled and rocked back against Spider, forcing him deeper.

"Fuck, Hawk," Spider groaned and leaned over Hawk's body. "So fucking good for me. Can you come like this? Just from being fucked hard and fast?"

Hawk's breath was punched out of him as Spider lifted his hips and fucked him harder. The change in angle hit Hawk's prostate, and Hawk's body convulsed under Spider as he came with a shout. Spider dug his fingers into Hawk's hips as he fucked Hawk through his orgasm.

"Fuck. You are so fucking tight. You're just sucking my cock in, squeezing the fuck out of it. Fuck!" he shouted. His hips stuttered as he came. He collapsed onto Hawk's back to catch his breath. "Jesus, that's fucking hot," Spider whispered.

Hawk smiled into the pillow, silently agreeing with him.

Spider wrapped a hand around the base of his cock to hold the condom in place as he eased it out of Hawk. Then he moved to sit on the edge of the bed and pull the condom off to drop it into the trash can next to the nightstand. He opened the drawer to take out a couple of towels and a bottle of massage oil. Light flashed off a knife, and Hawk flinched slightly. Spider squeezed his arm to reassure him before he wiped his hands with a towel. Then he tucked himself back in and zipped his pants back up.

"I'm going to start untying you now. Just let me take care of everything, okay?" He unhooked Hawk's hands and passed him another bottle of water. Hawk took a big sip and closed his eyes. Spider didn't bother with the knots; he carefully cut the ropes binding one of Hawk's legs, holding it in place as he kneaded the muscles.

"Let me know if you get any cramps." He carefully massaged Hawk's muscles with the oil. By the time he was finished, Hawk was nearly asleep. "You still with me?" he asked, as he ran his fingers through Hawk's hair.

"Sort of?" Hawk grinned. Spider laughed and pulled the sheet up to cover Hawk before he crawled onto the bed behind him. He wrapped his arms around Hawk's waist and pulled him close. Hawk patted his hand and yawned. "Head still hurts a little."

“Sorry about that,” Spider said as he leaned in to kiss Hawk’s temple. “We won’t invert you next time.”

“Next time, you’re the one getting tied up.”

“Like you did in Barbados? You’ll have to catch me first. This makes three times in a row I’ve caught you. I’m beginning to think you like it this way.”

“I’d have caught you tonight, but you cheated.”

“Not cheating. All’s fair,” Spider mumbled, as he snuggled into the pillow. “You know what this weekend is?”

Hawk smiled and nodded, surprised Spider was bringing it up. “Five years.”

“Yeah.”

“One of these days, one of us is going to have to quit our job. We can’t keep doing this,” Hawk said with a sigh.

“Maybe. We’ll BASE jump off that cliff when the time comes. Now shut up and rest for a bit.”

“You shut up.” Hawk grumbled, but he closed his eyes and drifted off.

Hawk woke up to an empty bed, as he expected. His clothes were hanging on a hook on the back of the door. A note on the pillow next to him told him the room was paid for, and he could take as much time as he needed. He stretched, feeling the burn in his muscles, and it took him a couple of tries to stand.

“Whoa,” he muttered, as he shuffled to the bathroom. A long, hot shower helped soothe his muscles and went a long way to making him feel human again. Then he dressed and went outside to catch a cab. He had missed his flight home with the rest of his team, but he found a one-way first-class ticket back to Chicago in his jacket pocket.

He beat everyone into the office Monday morning. He found an envelope waiting on his desk when he got there. It had “*Until next time...*” written in Spider’s elegant scrawl on the front, along with a small drawing of the Golden Gate Bridge in one corner.

After he made a pot of coffee, he settled at his desk to watch the window washers on the high-rise across the street. His own building was an old

brownstone, with clear windows set into brick arches along the front, not one of the shimmering reflective beasts that filled the downtown area. He absently ripped the envelope open to find the dog collar gleaming inside. Hawk grinned as he pulled it out to look at it in the light.

The door to his offices opened, and he heard his staff filing in for the day.

"We have to go back and look for him," Hydra was saying.

"He could be anywhere," Gremlin said. "We need to follow protocol. He'll surface."

"But what if he doesn't?" Lucky asked.

"Protocol is there for a reason," Yeti said. "He'll surface when he finishes whatever took him off the grid."

Hawk smiled and let the sounds of his team bickering wash over him for a few minutes before he called out to them.

"Get your asses in here," he yelled, and the team rushed in, all shouting questions about his weekend.

"What happened to you?" Lucky asked.

"Where the hell were you?" Hydra demanded to know.

"Following a lead." He tossed the collar to Yeti. "Here. Return this, and get the reward. Give my share to a no-kill shelter."

"You got it, Boss," he said with a smirk. Yeti knew he had something going with Spider, but he had the discretion to not say anything to the rest of the team. As long as no one got hurt, and their games didn't interrupt his cash flow, he'd keep covering for Hawk's interludes.

"Must have been some lead," Gremlin said, shaking his head.

"It was," Hawk agreed, ignoring Yeti's grin. "Now, we've got some work to do. Get me a list of possible targets in San Francisco."

"Why San Francisco?" Hydra asked.

"Let me guess: you've got a hunch?" Lucky asked.

Hydra already had a browser window open on the tablet she carried. "Looking for anything specific?"

"You know the pattern: something semipublic, opulent, and temporary."

“So flashy, trashy, and dashy. We’re on it.”

The team took off to start pulling their next case together, and Hawk looked back across the street to find one of the window washers looking in his direction.

“Until next time, Spider,” he whispered.

The washer nodded and raised one hand in a half salute, half wave before he hopped over the side of the scaffold and slid down the rope to the street. Once both feet were down, he stripped off his coveralls and blended into the mass of people on the sidewalk. Hawk shook his head and smiled.

“Until next time,” he repeated.

The End

Author Bio

Xara X. Xanakas decided years ago to embrace her weirdness. A friend first described her that way to the man who's been her husband for over twenty years. That formula fits her, and she figures if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Being Texan, her crush on cowboys comes natural, but the techie in her loves to show nerds a good time. She relishes all things different, and brings saucy style to her writing. Whether wrangling a wayward ranch hand or adding another critter to her were-menagerie, Xara strives to make the outlandish appealing. She'll make you quirk a brow and snort with laughter, and that's all right by her. Xara believes that unique is best and happily ever after is the icing on the cookies.

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UNTIL THE BITTER END

By L.L. Bucknor

Photo Descriptions

Three pictures of two friends, one black, one white. A cross-generational photo set of the friends from boyhood to their golden years.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We met the day I rescued him from the elementary school bully. We became inseparable until a family move put thousands of miles between us. After years of email, phone calls and a handful of visits, we both ended up back in our hometown. Reconnecting led to love and now here we are in our golden years.

We've been together for a lifetime and have had plenty of ups and downs. Won't you tell our story?

I want a sweet, contemporary love story. Other than no BDSM, I don't have a lot of other requirements.

Sincerely,

Lynette

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: some angst, sweet/no sex, best friends to lovers, interracial, letter writing, slow burn/UST, late 20th century

Content Warnings: Brief mention of drug use, minor and secondary character deaths

Word Count: 19,070

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For Lori. The best cheerleader a girl could ever have.

Anonymous donor – you know what you did, this is dedicated to you as well.

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UNTIL THE BITTER END

By L.L. Bucknor

55 years ago – September 1976

Charles Jackson's first day of school was not going according to plan. He was in a new school in a new state due to his mother getting "sick" again. He knew she was back on drugs. His grandmother tried to make it easier for him by saying, "Your mommy's sick," but he knew what she did. And Grandma knew that he knew too, but she wouldn't discuss it with him.

He'd witnessed Adrienne, his mother, high many times before. Even saw what she did for money with her "friends" in the bathroom of their studio apartment back in New Jersey. Sometimes she forgot to close the door. Or the moans were too loud from "talking to her friends."

He had a feeling this time the move would be permanent. Living in New York wasn't bad; he loved his grandmother and Uncle Lamont very much. And it was easier to be able to sleep at night without worrying if his mother would be passed out on the couch or worse... an unresponsive zombie with a needle stuck in her arm. Quite the education for a ten-year-old.

His grandmother enrolled him at the Long Island elementary school, ironed his clothes for the day and sent him to school with lunch in a brown paper bag. Sadly, at the age of ten, he was unused to the attention or care.

Being one of the few black students at the elementary school was weird. He went from a predominantly black neighborhood to a neighborhood with a handful of diverse families. He felt like a fish out of water all day. Other than a few stares from some students and a lonely lunch period, no one paid him any attention save his teachers. He didn't make any friends. He was so used to being on his own, he didn't notice the difference. A short, skinny black kid with a love for comic books and mathematics did not scream Mr. Popular. He doodled in his notebook to help pass the time in class.

His Uncle Lamont had shown him the route to walk home. Charles grabbed his books the moment the final school bell rang and walked toward the exit. He kept his head down, meandering through the cliques and chatter. He rounded the corner with no problems, thinking about having chocolate milk once he got

home—and maybe sneaking in a peanut butter sandwich—when he felt something hit his shoulder. *What now?* He stopped to look behind him, and watched a pebble fall to the ground. A taller, scowling blond boy walked steadily toward Charles. He hoped whatever this kid's problem was, it was not meant for him.

“Hey you!” The heavyset kid came closer to Charles, standing directly in his face. The hostility *was* meant for him. Being bullied after school was not part of his plan.

Charles tried to put some distance between them, but the other boy would not let this happen. Charles stared back without answering.

“Don't you know you're supposed to pay a tax to go to my school?”

“What?”

“What?” the kid mimicked tauntingly, and backed Charles off the sidewalk and into an abandoned yard. “Can't you hear? New kids pay taxes at my school.”

Charles leaned away as much as possible. “And who am I supposed to pay?”

“Me, if you want to live to see another day.” Charles watched him smack his meaty fist into an open palm for a menacing effect.

It worked. But he was trying not to show how intimidated he was. “I'm not paying you nothing.”

“Guess you don't like your face looking the way it does. It's fucking ugly anyway. I guess I'll have to make it uglier.”

“I don't want any trouble.” Charles held his hands out, not touching the angry giant. He didn't think he'd survive if he made contact with any part of his body.

“Too late.” The bully pushed Charles's shoulders with both hands with enough force to make him bounce on the chain link fence behind him. He dropped his books in the grass.

“You're nothing but a dirty n—”

“Don't even say that word, Harold!” a voice boomed from behind the two.

Charles's bully looked to the newcomer but did not move his intimidating body, sadly. “Buzz off, Victor! This has nothing to do with you.”

Charles was glad the brown-haired kid got the blond's attention off of him. Harold still had a couple pounds on the newcomer, but two against one was better odds. "I'm not afraid of you, Harold. And you know why. Drop the routine and leave him alone," said Victor.

Charles watched in disbelief as the two stared each other down for the longest minute in his life. The blond muttered something inaudible under his breath and backed away from Charles. Miraculously, the blond giant left with a "next time," which Victor smirked off.

"He's an ass," Charles's savior declared after watching Harold leave. "I'm Victor, by the way."

"I figured that out already." Charles moved from leaning against the fence and picked up his books from the ground. He nodded at the taller, brown-haired white kid. "I'm Charles." He was unsure if he should be wary of someone who could make that behemoth scam or not. He wanted to know what Victor had on Harold but chose to not risk it. "Thank you. I guess I'll see you around." He held on tightly to his books.

"You're new, Charles. That's why Harold tried to get ya." Victor fell into step beside Charles. "I live three blocks away on Friedman Avenue."

"I don't know where that is."

Victor laughed. "Of course you don't. What street do you live on, and then I can see if we live close by."

"On Clemens. There's a big church at the end of the block."

"You live two streets away from me. You wanna walk to school together? We're in the same class, in case you didn't notice."

Charles had never met someone as friendly as Victor. And in his life, he knew something too good to be true, usually was. "You want to be friends with me? Why?"

"Why not?" Victor shrugged. "You're new. Harold needs to get it through his thick skull that he can't bully anyone he'd like. I'm not afraid of him. You shouldn't be either."

"Besides, I'm going to school anyway so why not have company? My other friend, Phillip, lives in the other direction. And you're going to need me to walk with you for a while."

He feared Harold wouldn't take Victor's save lying down either. "How did you get Harold to leave me alone? Did you beat him up or something?" Victor started to walk in the direction of home and Charles followed.

"Nah. His mom and my mom are friends, really good friends. If I ever told his parents what he tried to say to you, his entire family would beat him in front of the whole class. They've done it before, in third grade. Best. Day. Ever. He cried like the wuss he is."

"Really?"

"Really." Victor smiled. "You wanna come to my house later and play?"

Charles had never been asked to play at a classmate's house before. He tried to play it cool. "I have to ask my uncle first. I think he's home today."

"Why not ask your mom?"

Because she's probably high right now is why not. "I live with my grandma and uncle."

"Only them?"

"Only them."

"Oh? How come?"

Charles preferred giving the brief explanation when telling other kids. "I never met my father. And my mother is sick." He waited for judgment. Other kids usually wanted to know why he didn't know who his father was; everyone knew who their father was. He hated when his peers did that.

"Oh. Well, that's cool. Where are you from?"

Charles almost didn't answer from surprise. "New Jersey. But I think I'll be living here in New York for a while."

The boys continued walking to Charles's house. Charles ran inside to drop off his books and let his uncle know about his new plans. His uncle went to the door to see the new friend. "Make sure you're back before the streetlights are on," Lamont called out as Charles zipped down the porch.

"See ya later, Uncle Lamont!" he called out, and started to walk with Victor. "Do you like comic books?"

"They're all right. My brother has tons."

"You have a brother? That's cool. I'm an only child."

“My brother Kevin’s in college. He likes comics more than me. Has stacks of them in his bedroom. We can check them out, if you want?”

“Sure.” Charles followed Victor into a big yard where a lady with a frown stared at him. Charles stopped walking behind Victor and stood still. It seemed the prejudice he witnessed in some of his fellow students’ eyes today was also in Victor’s mother’s.

“Hi, Mom.” Victor tugged Charles forward into his yard.

“Victor.” She walked down the stairs and stopped in front of the pair. “Who is this?”

“My friend, Charles. He’s new. Charles, this is my mom, Mary—”

“You may call me Mrs. McQuade,” she cut in. “What happened to your friends Phillip and Joseph, darling?” She didn’t stop staring at Charles.

“They’re at their houses, I guess.” He shrugged. Mrs. McQuade ran her hand through her son’s hair, which Victor wiggled out from.

“I should go, Victor.” He knew where he was not wanted and did not want to cause any trouble for his friend.

Victor turned to look at Charles. “What do you mean? You just got here.” Victor turned to look back at his mother. “We were going to look at Kevin’s comics.”

His mother raised her voice. “Where exactly? In his room?” She frowned.

“Yeah, we were—”

“Absolutely not. You can play outside with your little friend, in the front yard where I can see you. But not for long, we’re going out for supper tonight.” She took Victor’s school books from his hands and walked back inside the house. She called out from the front door before going inside, “I’ll call Phillip’s mother and see if she can bring him over for you to play with, Victor. For the next time.”

“I’m not like her, you know,” Victor told him after his mother went into the house.

“Is that why you invited me over? To show me off to your mom?” Charles folded his arms together, thinking the worst of Victor already. He was grateful for Victor saving him from a face-pounding, but he did not want to be treated like a show prize.

“No. I want to be your friend. You look like you need one.”

“How would you know?” He was just fine on his own without friends. He always was.

“I just do.” Victor smiled a big gap-toothed smile and tapped Charles on the shoulder before running away. “Tag, you’re it!”

Charles reluctantly smiled. *Maybe. Just maybe...*

The two played for the rest of the afternoon, cementing the first day of their friendship.

50 years ago – June 1981

“Did you see Monica in homeroom, Victor? She was eyeing you up and down, man. I bet she’d go out with you if you asked her. She was my study partner last semester. She puts out. And you don’t even have to work for it.”

“You had sex with her?” Charles looked at the bespectacled Phillip and smirked. Phillip Castiano looked sweet and innocent, but looks could be deceiving. He was the first of their friends to lose his virginity. “Some friend you are. Are you trying to give Victor your sloppy seconds, man?”

Phillip started to make a lame excuse and didn’t notice Victor mouth a silent “thanks” to his now taller best friend for taking the attention off him. The two friends were pretty well versed in each other’s quirks by now, five years after their fateful meeting.

Charles winked and pretended to listen to Phillip discuss the rest of the easy pickings in their grade. At their age, the topics of choice discussed were girls, sex and Michael Jackson. If Phillip paid closer attention to anything other than the fairer sex, he might have noticed that Victor never joined in the talks about girls.

Today was the last day of school, which signified the friends no longer being high school freshmen. The three teens lingered in the front of their building to continue their conversation. Phillip had to go pick up his little sisters from the elementary school soon. He rarely had a chance to hang out with the pair, so whenever they could, the other two tried to accommodate him.

“You know Sandy was checking you out, Charles? She’s also good friends with Monica, man. Just saying. Tag team, man.”

"You think so?" He wasn't as interested, but maybe he should be, to keep up appearances. It was what he thought boys his age should do.

"You could have any girl you wanted in our grade. I haven't seen you try, unless you're holding out on us, Charlie. But hey, if you don't want Monica, you think she'll go out with me? I might be a skinny white kid, but I got moves." He started to not-so-subtly air hump in front of them.

"Isn't it time for you to pick up your sisters?" Victor asked. He looked longer than usual at Charles, then away. Something was up. Charles could only wonder what was going on. He didn't think there could be any more bombshells like the last one Victor dropped on him a couple of months ago.

"Shit, you're right, Vic. Thanks, man. I'll check you two later when I am not on sister duty." Charles and Victor both clapped the bespectacled teen good-bye and turned in the direction of home, or in their case, Charles's house.

Victor was fighting with his mother more than usual. Charles usually knew whenever Victor asked to spend the weekends at his house. And he'd been at his house three weekends in a row with nary a word about what was going on at home. Maybe today would be the day Victor would spill?

In the years they'd been friends, the boys had gotten closer, despite family differences, namely, Victor's mother. She never missed a chance to let Charles know how she disliked him, thought he would try to steal from her house or let him know she was better than him in her cold, backhanded manner.

Her hatred for anything different only made the two friends bind closer. The more Victor's mother acted snidely when Charles was present, the wider Victor opened his arms to Charles. Unfortunately, the homemaker was home more often than not, so the two usually went to Charles's house, which became a second home of sorts for Victor, a place where he could escape and be himself with no judgment. Charles's family accepted Victor with no hesitation.

Charles looked over and down at Victor, who stared into space. He brushed his shoulder against his friend to interrupt the reverie. He turned his head and made a gesture to start walking.

The boys walked in silence, Charles picking up on the tension in Victor's rigid stance. Both were quiet as they walked the few minutes to Charles's house. The two had the house to themselves as it was Uncle Lamont's late day at the hospital and Charles's grandmother, Diane, was at work as well.

Both dropped their bookbags on the kitchen counter and made their way to the fridge. They silently made themselves something to eat, in sync within the tight space, working in a rhythm they were used to. They sat down at the kitchen table with their plates of peanut butter sandwiches in hand. Charles was halfway through his food when he looked up and watched a range of emotion cross Victor's face.

He swallowed quickly and swallowed a gulp of milk. "Vic, it's just us, and I know something's bothering you. What's up?"

"Charles," he said morosely and put his uneaten sandwich down. "The house finally sold. Mom convinced Dad to accept a job offer." Victor's parents had had a "For Sale" sign on their lawn for over a year, so the McQuades' plan to move wasn't a complete shock. Mrs. McQuade always referenced how their town felt unsafe any time she laid eyes on Charles during visits. Victor's father was open to moving if he could find a better-paying job. It seemed he'd found it.

Charles listened intently, life as he knew it crashing before his eyes. Victor was moving. Who was Victor going to talk to about being gay? Victor had told Charles he was homosexual earlier in the year. Charles didn't judge. How could he when his own Uncle Lamont was in the closet? He and his grandmother knew all about the permanent bachelor and his biweekly weekend overnight visits to his fellow bachelor friend's home. Lamont left every other Friday night with his duffle bag and returned Sunday evening like clockwork. Charles knew Victor couldn't tell his family, especially his mother who barely tolerated her son befriending someone of color. Victor had voiced his fears to him about being disowned or worse should he come out to his family.

"We're moving to Jacksonville, Florida. My dad found a job. My mother gets to be close to her side of the family, and Kevin can look for a job. I just have to suffer." He looked like he wanted to cry.

Charles stared at his friend and barely heard anything after Jacksonville, Florida. He assumed wrong. This would be much worse than a move out east in Suffolk County to a predominantly white community.

The two friends stared at each other, a range of emotion playing on both of their faces, still able to communicate through their silence.

It hurt to imagine next year without Victor next to him. The pain was worse than when his mother died. Adrienne had died from a drug overdose two years

ago, making his temporary move to Long Island permanent. He'd mourned his mother's loss. But he was numb when discussing it since their time together was spotty during his lifetime. He missed her because she was his mother, but he hadn't seen her in so long, the pain was not as severe.

Victor's announcement, however, he didn't know how to deal with. "When?" Charles finally croaked out.

"Next week."

"So soon? You sold your house already?"

Victor frowned. "My mother wants me to fly down with Kevin. Our tickets are already purchased. She thinks it will be better for me to spend the summer down there."

Charles had a guess at her reasoning behind flying down there so quickly. "What day are you leaving?"

"Monday morning."

He only had five more days left with his best friend. "I'll come with you to the airport." He barely kept it together just talking about it.

"Don't."

He shook his head. "But—"

"You're going to ride in a car with my mother?"

Charles frowned in return. He hadn't thought about that. Victor smirked. "Exactly." It might have been hasty, but he wanted to spend every minute, every second that he could with his friend. "I'll try to see if she'll let me come up before school starts. And I'll call you when I can."

"Long distance? Who is going to pay for that?" Neither of them had jobs, and Charles did not want to burden either of his family members when money was tight enough as it was.

"We can write letters to each other. There's nothing stopping that." Victor was always the optimist when it came to their friendship. He reached out to hold Charles's hand, not meeting his eyes. Charles sighed and reached over the table to hold his hand. Victor clasped his other hand over their joined hands. "I'm going to miss you so much. But it won't be so bad." Victor looked earnestly into Charles's eyes. They held each other's stare once more, and Charles began to feel uncomfortable. He wasn't... he couldn't... he was not gay. He used a familiar medium to break the tense moment.

"You'll probably forget me within a week." He pulled his hand out of Victor's hold and rolled his eyes comically.

Victor blinked and recovered with only a, "Bullshit. You're worth remembering for at least a month. Maybe even two months." He put his hands under the table and looked at the table top.

"Wow. Thanks, friend."

They resumed eating, both mulling over the change coming. Charles hated change. This was the hardest one he'd ever dealt with, even worse than moving to New York. He did not think he could be numb about Victor's leaving. He knew come Monday he was going to be a mess. It'd been Charles and Victor against the world since that rescue by his best friend five years ago.

"We can go to college together and be roommates. Three years. It's not going to change, Charles. You'll see."

Charles doubted it but appreciated his friend for trying to lighten the mood. Things might never be like how they were at that very moment.

August 12, 1981

Dear Charles,

Florida blows! If you were here, it'd be better. Mom loves the neighborhood. I don't. It's boring down here. I'm tired of people down here staring at me when I talk. I have a Yankee accent I've learned, many times over.

My mother is trying to set me up with her high school friend's daughter. Do you think she suspects something? I can almost hear you say I am worrying for nothing. But I don't want her to ever find out. She'll probably stone me. I'm gonna borrow some of Kevin's nudie magazines and hide them under my bed to throw her off. She's so nosy. I can't wait to turn eighteen and leave.

There's one good thing. I got a job working as a delivery boy for a pharmacy nearby. Anything to get me out of the house and away from her. Can you believe I found a job before Kevin? I can see you rolling your eyes. Kevin has been busy drinking and making friends, in bed and out, with the locals.

Did you and Phillip get your class assignments yet? Did I mention school starts in a week? School starts in August in Florida. Man, I miss New York.

Charles, don't go back to being that quiet kid I met in 5th grade, okay? I won't be there to protect you from the Harolds of the world. Though the last I heard, he got caught blowing some boy in his father's toolshed. They sent him to a strict Catholic boarding school to help pray away the gay. I know my mother would do worse. Dad wouldn't give a shit. But Mom and Kevin? No way. Make sure no one reads this. And pretend like you don't know if anyone asks about Harold.

You have to keep it together for me while I am stuck in the sticks. Then we can travel the world, my friend. Write me back!

Your best friend,

Victor

September 11, 1981

Victor,

You have an accent. Own it. School just started here. How are your classes going? Do they teach reading and writing in the sticks? Phillip had a minor pregnancy scare with Connie Giorgio, so he's calmed down some. I give it a week, two, tops.

I miss you something fierce. School's not the same without you. Since I'm taller (I grew a few more inches this summer) I'd be the one protecting you. Ha!

I figured it was something serious with Harold since he's not skulking about the neighborhood. I would have never guessed he was what you said he was. I don't think telling your mother would be a good idea, nor Kevin. I'll keep your secret until I die. Don't go trusting just anyone down there.

I think the magazine idea is a little gross. You're just going to leave the magazine for anyone to see? Suppose it backfires? Then you're going to be thought of as a pervert. Just be careful with whatever you do.

I think I have a girlfriend. Tina asked me to the Sadie Hawkins dance already, and it's not even until November. I kinda told her yes since she asked me in front of half our class. So she's been blabbing it out to the entire sophomore class. I wish you were here. You'd know what to do or at least what to say.

Should I get her flowers or what? Is she supposed to get me flowers? I don't think I can. If you find someone, you can tell me about them too. Even the other part. I don't want you to feel you can't ever talk to me.

By the way, I haven't found your replacement yet.

Charles

September 30, 1981

Dear Charles,

Play it by ear with your sorta girlfriend, Tina. She asked you out, so flowers from you would be a nice touch. I've even less experience than you with girls... Actually, I take it back. I confess I lost my virginity to a girl at summer camp two years ago. I am only telling you this now because it wasn't important to me. I wanted to try being normal for once, and I didn't like it. I finally figured out the way I felt about guys was okay by being with her. Weird right? The gay boy got his before you did.

You can say gay, Charles. You won't catch it if you write it. I am gay. Your best friend is gay. Your uncle is gay. It won't make you less straight.

I am officially 16! Less than two years until I am free.

Kevin is living over our garage because he prefers to do his partying without Mom hovering over him. This means she is even more of a noose around my neck.

I might have a sorta boyfriend. I tell you this because you're the only one I can tell this stuff. If you don't want to read it - IGNORE THIS PART: Ricky is more of a friend than boyfriend.

But he likes jerking us off together. He graduated from Sticks High in June, cousin to the girl I told you my mother is trying to set me up with. Well, he gave me the best birthday present last night. Hint: He's not the best-looking guy, but his mouth is top notch.

I'm going to return the favor to Ricky tomorrow night.

IT'S SAFE TO READ NOW - Enough about my sex life. (Yes, I am rubbing it in.) How are your grandma and uncle? Everyone's good? I miss being able to hang out at your house and being fed to death by your grandma. Even more now that I don't have a place to escape my mother when she's in one of her moods.

My dad told me I could call you on the weekend as long as I keep it under a half hour. My mother will be visiting my aunt that day. So what are you doing Saturday night around 9 next week? I hope staring at the four walls and expecting my call.

Your friend,

Victor

November 24, 1981

Happy Thanksgiving, Victor!

Wish you were here. We're all missing you. Grandma was bummed about the cherry pie this year, since you and she are the only ones who eat it. She's not going to make it now. Whenever you come up here to visit, let her know so she can make her favorite. I felt so bad when we went to the supermarket. She frowned at the cherry filling. I was tempted to tell her to make it anyway... I could force myself to eat it. Almost. Who am I kidding? I hate cherries with a passion.

Phillip went back to his horny ways. As expected. He's been working at the gas station around the corner from your old house. So he's set for the next year in condoms.

Guess what? I'm officially a member of the club. The 16 and popped-their-cherry club. Tina and I had the weirdest few

minutes of our lives together. I tried calling her last week, but she was busy. I think she's over me. I can't tell. I don't mind either way, I guess. She should at least let me know if our pseudo-relationship is over.

I told her it was my first time once we finished. She said she could tell. I'm thinking it was not a compliment. I saw her talking to Leonard Johnson after class yesterday. I don't know if I'm supposed to be jealous or not.

How is it going with Ricky? I bet a whole lot better than me and my mess. I hope you're being careful with him. There are all kinds of diseases out there. Phillip scared the hell out of me when he told me two of his friends came down with a case of the clap from some girl he slept with a few months ago. He's been leaving me free rubbers, so I'm sharing this PSA. I can't send you my stash, but I can send a warning.

Did I tell you the math club is in the national semifinals? If we win the next two rounds we're going to the national math tournament in Orlando. I don't think it's very close to Jacksonville, but maybe you can beg your mommy and daddy for a trip to Disney World around the same time. If our team makes it, that is. I probably jinxed us. Grandma is so excited about me being in the semifinals, she told everyone at work and church. People are expecting big things now. Luz, the other maintenance lady from Grandma's job, knitted me a lucky scarf with a cross on it. It is so bright blue, you could probably see it from Mars.

Thanks for the early birthday gift. I flipped when I saw that special edition. That must have cost you a pretty penny. Thank you!

Still looking for your replacement. You're a hard act to follow.

Charles

January 3, 1982

Hey Charles,

Thanks for the New Year's phone call. It was definitely worth it for that news! I never once doubted your team acing the state championships. You number nerds are ruthless. The lucky scarf worked! I wish I could have been there to see you guys get your trophy. Maybe I can see you in Orlando? I might be able to hustle a way to see you then. You are so set for your college application. My grades are not bad, but I wish school was over. My mom keeps bitching about my extracurricular activities or lack thereof. Since Kevin dropped out of college, I'm her only hope.

Thanks for being okay with me talking about my relationship. I'll try not to be graphic. Me and Ricky are just me and Ricky. He hasn't told anyone he's gay. We're both in the closet, so to speak. He's going to start attending the local community college later this month. He already moved into a one-bedroom apartment with four other guys, so finding a place to be alone together is getting hard. Ha!

We have finally done everything two gay boys can do. Before you ask, we both tried it. It hurt like a motherfucker, but I think if I keep doing it, I could like it. Messy as hell but enjoyable. Is me talking about this disgusting you? Tell me if it is. You know you're the only one I can talk to about any of this. The sticks... they're hateful against anything different down here. Well, a lot of them. Not me.

Don't worry about my parents reading the mail. Dad's always working, and Mom is busy with her clubs and associations. It's one of my chores to get the mail every day.

How goes it with Tina? Last you told me, it was officially off. But sometimes people can change their mind. I'm sure Phillip is willing to help you mourn with a new girl. He always seemed to have someone up his sleeve. Who is he with now? I can't keep up with him.

Tell your grandma and uncle thanks for the gift.

Happy New Year,

V

49 years ago – March 1982

Third place was not bad.

Especially for a kid who'd never left the Northeast. The farthest Charles had traveled was going to his grandmother's in New York from Newark, New Jersey. He and his team shook the other teams' hands, took pictures with their trophy and made plans for their last night in Florida. Charles didn't have much money to go visit the amusement parks like the rest of his teammates. Between his uncle and grandma, they barely scrounged enough money to pay for this trip. He didn't want to burden them to ask for anything that was more than necessary. The only other black kid on his team and assigned roommate (surprise) already let him know about his plans for the night. His family lived in the good part of town. And he hoped nothing would be missing when he left their room... Charles got the hint.

Charles was going to let his teammates know about heading back to his room in the hotel for the day when he heard a loud whistle coming from the audience area. He looked toward the source of the noise, a gangly, strawberry-blond teen who had his arm wrapped around his best friend's shoulder. He couldn't believe his eyes. Victor made it. Victor was beaming his signature thousand-watt smile at him, making him return the same. They'd spoken last week, and Charles had told him about the March math competition. He knew Victor's parents wouldn't be able to drive the hundred miles, and Kevin flat out refused.

"Where there's a will, there's a Ricky!" Victor called out and ran to hug his friend. Charles hugged him back just as fiercely. He looked over his shorter friend's shoulder and stared at the older teen, who he assumed was Ricky. Ricky winked at him and leered.

Victor pulled out of the embrace and smiled. "Way to go, man!" He couldn't help brushing their shoulders together. They were together again.

"We got third place." He shrugged.

"I saw. That's third in the entire country and first place against me. You know I hate math. You did great. I'm proud of you." He clapped Charles on his

back and turned him toward the guy he came with. "Ricky, this is my best friend in the entire world, Charles. Charles, this is my new friend back in the sticks, Ricky."

"Nice to meet you." He nodded and turned to Victor. "I can't believe you're here, man!" This was the best unexpected surprise. He took in the changes since he had seen Victor last: the added inch or two in height, shaggy brown hair and happy light in his brown eyes. His friend looked the same and different at the same time. Charles was sure he looked different as well with his growth spurt, mini 'fro and stubble.

"Wouldn't miss seeing you if we're in the same state, man!"

"You were great," Ricky chimed in as he got closer to the two friends. Ricky kept staring at him. Charles didn't think he was being paranoid.

"Thank you," he muttered uncomfortably.

Victor carried on without missing a beat. "Ricky has a friend who has a girlfriend going to college here. He dropped him off, and here we are. I kept telling him about you."

"I'm nothing special. I just like math."

"Just like math? Bullshit." He turned to the blond. "C'mon, give him an equation, Ricky. He can solve it like that!" He snapped his fingers.

"Cut it out, Victor." Charles looked at his secondhand shoes during the unwanted attention. "I was getting ready to head back to my hotel room for the night before you guys came. The entire team is going out for the evening. I was going to be alone. Now that you're here, makes it so much better."

Ricky perked up at the news. "Really? All alone? I've a math problem for you, Charlie. One of you, plus me and Victor equals?" He leered at Charles.

Victor put his hand on Ricky's chest and pushed him back. "It's not that kind of party, Ricky. Don't you have to go back to Debbie's dorm before we leave? Why don't you go now? Give me some time with Charles. Like an hour. What's your room number, Charles?"

Charles preferred that plan instead of spending any time with the flirting Ricky. He gave the room number, and went to notify his teammates about his plans for the night. The two friends left Ricky in the lobby and headed to Charles's hotel room.

The two couldn't stop bumping into each other as they walked inside. Charles closed the door and pointed Victor toward the left side of the room, where Charles's bag and clothes were neatly stacked. "That's my side."

"Oh I can tell, neat freak. Never met any other boy who was so neat." Victor sat at the end of the bed and faced Charles as he sat in the room's only chair.

"Shut up." He pushed his shoulder lightly. "Thanks for coming. Really. I still can't believe I'm looking at you right now."

"Mom heard the word college when I mentioned Ricky's plans, and she jumped at the chance. My parents think he's mentoring me." Victor smirked. "Mom all but pushed me to spend the weekend with him since he's a college student and positive influence." He laughed out loud. "If she only knew what he's *really* mentoring me in, she'd probably have a stroke."

Charles widened his eyes at the new sexual glow emanating from his best friend. He'd never experienced Victor's sexual side in person. Reading about it was totally different from seeing it.

"You look good."

Charles wondered if he meant in general, or in a sexual way, because he couldn't go there in his head. Just the thought made him blush uncomfortably.

"You too." He fiddled with the armrest, feeling bashful all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry about Ricky downstairs." He moved closer to the edge, their knees almost touching. "I wouldn't let him do anything. I know you're not into that."

"I'm not," Charles emphasized, then quickly looked down to their knees. He couldn't look into Victor's eyes. There were times when he wondered about what it would be like, especially when Victor mentioned something in their letters. He could never tell this to a soul though, not even his friend. "I'm straight." Being black was more than enough for him, thank you. Being black and gay? He didn't want to be like his uncle, living a half-life. He refused to go there even in his head.

"I know, Charles." Victor rubbed his knee. Charles pushed his hand off as a reflex.

"Charles, what, I can't touch you? I didn't touch your dick."

"It's not... I know you didn't—"

"You're so uptight, you'd probably like it if I did."

Charles folded his arms and would *not* meet his friend's eye. Victor tilted his head to the side and stared.

"You would, *wouldn't* you," he murmured for only Charles to hear. Like a vulture that scented prey, he didn't seem to be able to stop.

"Have you gone out with any other girls since Tina?"

"You already know the answer."

"Why not? You were a catch before I moved. I bet nothing changed since I left. Don't feel like looking?"

Charles finally met his eyes. "I'm focusing on my studies. I want to go to college. I want to study engineering and do better for myself. Make Grandma proud. You know my plans. As my best friend, you *know* this."

"There's nothing wrong with having fun sometimes, too. Didn't you have fun with Tina? Why not find another girl?"

"No one's caught my eye at the moment."

"Have you tried looking at the other half of the student body? Since no girl has caught your eye?"

"I'm not *gay*, Victor. Not everyone is going to be like *you* for not actively pursuing every fucking skirt in high school." He didn't yell but the emphasis was not to be overlooked.

In all the years they'd known each other, neither one of them was prejudiced toward the other. They might have squabbled here and there. However, the major stuff, the important things, like race, sexuality, family life, they never argued about. This time it seemed Victor was not going to stop pushing the issue. The walls that Charles built around him were getting tested whether he liked it or not.

Victor rose from the bed, standing angrily. Charles copied him, glaring. "You have a problem with me being gay? It seems that you do. I mean, you can barely write the word in your letters to me."

Charles looked down stubbornly and ground his teeth.

"You think it's wrong because I like boys? Think you're better because you're straight? Makes you a man? What makes you any better for liking girls?"

He didn't just like females. Sometimes, he wondered what Victor did exactly in his letters. From the looks Victor gave Ricky downstairs, it was more explicit than he ever did with Tina, Charles guiltily thought, shifting uncomfortably. "I didn't say—"

"That's right, you didn't say. I'm asking you now, you think it's wrong? Because I think you do. Why else would you push my hand away like I have the cooties? Think I'm going to give you a gay disease?"

"I don't care who you're attracted to, Victor. You know that!" He couldn't control himself from yelling. This argument was getting way out of hand. Fast.

"Me being your friend won't make you gay. Reading about me and *my gayness* won't make you gay. If I touch you, it won't make you gay. Fucking a gay means you are. And last time I checked you haven't, have you?"

Way back when Victor first came out to him, Charles felt weird thinking about having sex with another guy. He didn't find it as revolting as Victor seemed to think he did. In fact, he couldn't stop thinking about two men touching each other, especially at night. The dreams he had at night were vivid and real if the proof in his sheets was evidence. Just thinking about men having sex made him horny, especially at that moment, which made him feel more awkward.

He tried to move his hand stealthily to adjust himself, but, while trying to be inconspicuous, he must have glanced away from Victor's pissed glare. Victor looked down, watched his hand. Charles froze. Victor did too, and then looked at his crotch. Charles watched, wondering what Victor's next move would be.

Victor smirked nastily and waited until Charles met his eyes again.

With a disgusted sigh, Victor moved toward the exit. "It was good seeing you, Charles. I should go wait for Ricky in the lobby. He should be back by now."

He'd felt... weird looking into his eyes. It was the same set of brown eyes he'd always seen, yet different. He started to feel tingly in his gut, and he'd *never* felt that way for his friend. He wasn't going to try to think back about it and open that can of worms. "Wait. You're angry. Don't leave angry. Just wait—"

Victor looked back. "I'm not angry. I get it now. See you later, Charles."

Victor left without any fuss. Charles walked to the hotel door and stared at it. He couldn't even speak from the abrupt change of events. He was wrong for

shaking his hand off, but it was a reaction. Leaning against the locked door he sank to the floor, disappointed with the turn of events. What the hell just happened? His stomach was tied in knots from this fight. He hoped they could bounce back. Hopefully.

May 3, 1982

Victor,

I tried calling last month, but your brother picked up. He said you were out. I don't know if he was lying or not. Or if you're pissed at me.

If you're avoiding me, it's cool.

Just answer me back, at least. Let me know if you're mad, you don't want to be my friend anymore. Give me something.

I'm not calling again until you write me back.

Charles

July 24, 1982

Victor,

Just say you're mad. No answer from you, and it's nearly the end of July. The summer's almost over, and school's gonna start. We're juniors. I started looking into colleges. I'm thinking of applying to Queens College in the city. They have a great engineering program. And I could live at home. Or maybe if you go to college up here, we could dorm together and be roomies.

Update about home: Grandma has some heart problems. She's been fainting at work. Only found out about this from Uncle Lamont. She fainted at work, and one of the patients found her on the floor. She might have to have surgery. We can't afford it. I hope it doesn't come down to that. Maybe if she said something earlier, we could have done something about it. I hate feeling like this.

Will you quit being a shit and talk to me? I don't give a shit if you're gay. And I'm not gay. Don't try to guilt me for not being gay. I don't think that you touching me or any of those things would make me gay. That's ridiculous. It was a kneejerk reaction. I'm sorry.

I miss you.

Talk to me.

Charles

49 years ago – September 1982

Charles grabbed a glass of juice from the kitchen when the telephone rang. Uncle Lamont answered. Charles figured it would be for anyone else but him since Phillip was away visiting family for the summer, and Victor still ignored him. He was getting ready to leave the room when he heard his Uncle say a name he's been longing to hear for months.

"Who is this? Victor McQuade, is that you?"

Charles stopped in his tracks and kept his back to his uncle while he eavesdropped.

"Boy, it's been too long since I've heard from you. How you been?"

His Uncle chuckled at something his friend said. "We've been pretty good. Your friend's been moping around for a bit. You two fight?" *Was it that noticeable?*

"Mmhmm. Let me call Charles down from his room." His Uncle snapped his fingers to get Charles's attention. He continued once Charles met his eyes. "Whatever it is, it's not as important as your friendship. You two spat. Now just make up. He's stubborn, and you can be a hothead. It's bound to happen. But I never seen two boys who needed each other more. Hold on."

Lamont covered the receiver. "I know you heard every word I said. I meant it. Here you are." He gave the phone to his nephew and stared at him once more before leaving the kitchen.

Charles felt his defenses go straight up. "Now you know how to call me." He was pissed and felt he had a right to be.

"Charles."

“What?”

“I got your letters.”

“You should have with all the letters I sent.”

“Can you forgive me? I’m sorry.”

Charles pressed his mouth close to the phone and looked around once more, even though he saw his uncle go down to his room in the basement, and they were the only ones home. He whispered loudly, “You should be sorry. I don’t have a problem with you being gay. If I made you feel that way, I’m sorry.”

“I know. I read your letters,” he sighed. “Me too. I mean, I’m sorry for being an asshole and yelling at you the way I did. We’re still tight, right?”

“Why’d you wait until now to call me?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t feel like talking about it. Every time I tried to write a letter back, I was angry. And I just—I don’t want to be angry at you. And I don’t want you to be angry at me. And if you ever end up hating me for being who I am, it’d fucking kill me. Because you’re it for me. You’re the only one I tell everything to. You get me.”

Charles sighed into the receiver and switched hands, hunching over the phone. He really wished Victor was there right at that second as he twirled the phone cord around his finger. “Okay. I forgive you as long as you forgive me. You’re an asshole though.”

“You’re still my best friend. And you can be an asshole, too.”

Charles chuckled. “I know. You’re just a bigger one.”

The two talked for a few minutes more about their homes and their families, their bond a little dented but not broken.

September 9, 1982

Dear Charles,

I know I apologized when I called you yesterday, but I’m going to apologize again. I’m sorry.

We only got to talk about your grandma and not much else. Everything here is the same. Lame. Boring. Hot as hell. Closed-minded. Sometimes I feel like people are too ass backwards

down here. There was a kid who kicked this black kid's ass at school the other day, just for looking at a white girl. No one batted an eye or tried to stop it. I tried to step in but was held back by a classmate. I felt like a shit. Still kinda do.

Plus, I sorta got dumped by Ricky. Can you be dumped by someone who wasn't even your boyfriend? Turns out one of Ricky's roommates doesn't mind sucking cock. So my friend has found someone new. I'm a little pissed about it. Didn't tell you on the phone because Mom's been trying to figure out why Ricky isn't around as much, and also trying to listen in on my calls. She's so nosy.

I've been angry a lot this summer. Angry enough even my mom is not smothering me as much. Wait, maybe this is a good thing?

I'm going to focus myself on schoolwork. I kinda goofed off last year. Maybe I can end up being smart like you if I start paying attention in class and study. I don't know what I want to major in at college. What I'd really like is to have a year off after high school. Travel abroad to Paris or Greece. Learn how to be a man on my own terms. If I ever get a chance to do that, you can join me, maybe? I know you won't, but I doubt I'll get to travel anywhere like Europe anyway.

I'll make an appointment with my guidance counselor, see what schools in the NY area I have a shot at actually getting into.

I really wish I could erase what happened the last time we saw each other. I don't know what came over me.

I'm a shit. But I hope we'll still be friends.

Still your friend,

V

December 6, 1982

Victor,

Thanks for calling for my birthday last week. And you didn't have to send me a gift. I know you're trying to save for your Moving Out fund. I have been playing the hell out of Thriller. Michael Jackson is king. King, I say!

Phillip told me to tell you hi. He's over here working on a science project with me and hiding from Larry Drucker. He slept with Larry's girl, Tanya Peterson. You know, the redhead girl with the annoying voice and big boobs. Phillip's been staying here more often, since it's the other side of town, to avoid getting his face pounded in. I think it's gonna happen anyway. Phillip's plans never work out, as you well know.

I hope you can get into a NY college. Let me know which ones you're looking at, so I can see if they have any good engineering programs.

That's messed up, getting sort of dumped. I know this well. I'm sure you can find a guy out there for you. Good plan on getting your grades up. I wish you were here. I'd probably nag you to death about letting your grades slip. Can I talk about something serious? I read in the newspaper about a disease affecting homosexuals. I'm sure you even heard about it down there in the sticks. I don't believe any of that crap some people are saying. I know you can't catch it from shaking a gay guy's hand or anything. But be careful, okay? I would lose it if anything happened to you. I know we're at a good spot right now, but I want to get this out in the open to avoid a blow up.

I'd write more but my hands are falling asleep from all this writing we have to do. I'll call you on Sunday. Hopefully you'll get this letter before then.

Charles

April 24, 1983

Dear Charles,

The sticks might not be so bad after all. I'm sorry about not writing you as much lately. I met Roger, and he's been kinda taking up my time.

Roger moved into town last month, and his family is all kinds of rich. Don't worry; he's not your replacement. He's like me. You know, white. Just kidding. (He is though.) But he's also gay. His parents don't care. I'm jealous of that. I was almost stupid enough to talk to Dad about myself, but I didn't. Anyway, Roger knows how it is to be gay and have to hide in the sticks. We don't announce it or anything, especially with the AIDS scare. If you only knew what some of the homophobic hicks discuss out in the open. Makes me want to hide inside the closet with double locks.

Roger took me to this gay bar a few towns away the other day when I slept over at his house. Big eye opener. Lots of fun. I did some things. Careful things. Let's leave it at that.

Being Roger's friend is so different from being Ricky's. Maybe it's because we're going to the same school, and he gets me. Understands how it is. I'm not in love with him or anything, but it's nice to have someone who gets it. He doesn't flinch if I touch him in public. We're not holding hands or anything, but he never treats me like a shit for doing it.

So keep writing. I'll still be writing you.

I wish you could meet Roger. You two would get along pretty well. He likes math like you do. I told him all about you getting second in that math competition last month. It sucks how it was in Chicago, and I couldn't make it. I showed him the picture of us together before I moved. I need a new one. Remind me the next time we meet up. Gotta keep up with my hot best friend. (Ricky had a crush on you. I was jealous at the time, but I'm over it.)

Call you when I can!

Your best friend until the bitter end,

Victor

September 13, 1983

Victor,

We made it! We're officially seniors. The picture inside is me and Phillip at Action Park. He's such a dork with that sunblock on his nose. Wasn't the same without you there.

How was your summer? Last time we spoke, it was the beginning of June. I figured you were going to be busy between hanging out with Roger and work.

I spent mine mostly working. Nothing cool like you visiting bars. (You got a fake ID, didn't you?) A summer full of work and checking out colleges does a nerd make. I think I have it narrowed down to a few. I'll give you my list when you call. Don't feel like you have to choose the colleges I choose if they don't offer a program you want to study. We don't have to go to the same school. It'd be nice, but we like different things. Did you decide what you want to major in? Grandma says you could live here the first year, and we could save up for our own place for the year after.

I got my driver's license! Uncle Lamont lets me drive his station wagon to pick up Grandma from work. He says I drive better when an adult is present. Whatever. I think I drive just fine. I haven't hit anyone yet. Remind me to tell you the latest in the life of Phillip when we speak next.

Nothing on the girlfriend front for me. Phillip let me know the latest details on Tina. She got knocked up this summer. She won't say who's the father, but it sure as hell isn't me. Not saying it's a bad thing, because if I did knock her up, I'd be there, you know? But that's the latest from the gossip mill. This is my last year with the mathletes. I'm going to miss my nerdy team. I can hear your joke about me missing my mathletes. Don't pretend you didn't either. I can see you through your window from NY. Close the blinds! Ah!

Happy early birthday, by the way.

Charles

April 1, 1984

Dear Charles,

I have good news and bad news. So you might need to sit down for this.

Let's get the bad news out of the way. My great-aunt Mary died. I know you never met her, but she used to visit once in a while, and she loved my dad and me. I would listen to her life stories and not ignore her like Mom and Kevin did.

She left me and Dad money in her will. I got \$10,000 with my name on it! Can you believe it?! I had a talk with Dad about it. I'm not going to college this year. I will next year. Dad made me put half of my money in savings, and the other half is mine to do what I want. And what I want is to go to Europe and backpack. Roger plans on going because his family is cool like that, and now I can travel with him!

I'm so sorry about ignoring the college subject when you called for these last couple of weeks. I know we planned on meeting up for college, but I will never be able to make the grades you do, let's be honest. I've been dragging my ass with giving you a straight (ha!) answer. I wish you could come with me to Europe, but I know you can't and wouldn't.

I haven't told Mom yet. I plan to tonight. Wish me luck. If you hear on the news there was a woman who combusted in Jacksonville, it will be her. I know she'll blow a gasket, but it's my life. I'm going to tell her it's either my way or she can forget me ever going to school. I'll just move. Besides, I'll get some culture from my travels. That's going to be my main selling point.

I can hear you saying it's a bonehead move, but I have to play to my strengths. Once you finish with school, we can go on a trip together, and I can be your tour guide. So think of it as preparation for the main event. I will send you postcards and be back before you know it.

We're leaving after graduation. Roger has been to a few places over there with his family. It's all good.

Don't be mad with me. Our plans will still happen. Just a few adjustments to the time frame.

I'm calling you on Saturday, our usual time.

Your friend,

V

46 years ago – February 1985

Charles looked at the latest postcard from his friend. Victor was in Amsterdam, living the good life. Charles traced the scrawling handwriting with a smile. He might be envious of his friend having the wherewithal to backpack through Europe, but he wished him nothing but the best. It was funny his postcards made him feel closer to his friend. The snippets of his travels made him feel like he was there experiencing a new location with him. He added the postcard to the stack he'd collected and grabbed his textbook before heading out the door. Time to face reality and go to class.

He wished his friend the best out of life. But he didn't think the two of them would be heading in the same direction.

And he was mostly fine with that.

He had friends, a few new, some old, Phillip and his group being the friends he mostly hung out with. He worked at a nursing home as a janitor four days out of the week, had classes five days. Any free time he spent reading. He didn't feel like anything was missing.

Except maybe his best friend.

If you asked his grandmother, she would say "a significant other." Charles hadn't found a girl who interested him. He did meet a girl named Amber back in October. They had sex. It wasn't special for Charles. He didn't know what was missing. Maybe he was bad at sex? It'd probably be better with someone he cared for. He just hadn't met her yet.

He might have stared longer than normal at a student in his English 101 class who looked like Victor. He kept comparing their looks, which ultimately led to sex, then sex and Victor, which caused tighter pants. His feelings about sex with men were all over the place, but mostly he'd end up disgusted with himself for having these urges. He'd rather deny that part of himself, even if his subconscious was not letting him do so. Maybe he should try to actively search for a girl, or at least someone to let people know he followed the norm. He might be a bastard with a father he never met and a dead junkie whore for a

mother but he was not some black kid from the ghetto who wouldn't amount to anything in life.

He was going to stick to his plan: become an engineer, marry a woman, have 2.5 kids, live the American dream. *Be* the American dream, or as damn close to it as possible. He'd just shelve any wayward thoughts into the back of his being, right next to his pitiful childhood, and keep striving to achieve his plan.

The fact that he'd angrily jerk himself off most nights to the thought of kissing his best friend meant he needed to try harder at being straight. He was good at denial, he thought.

June 19, 1985

Dear Charles,

Your eyes are not deceiving you. I sent you this letter from Florida.

I stuck to the plan! I bet you thought I'd end up being a bum in Europe.

The things I did! The places I saw! The experiences I had! Charles, I was tempted to not come back. But I didn't want to blow my inheritance on that kind of life. I left Roger in London, of all places. He fell in love with this artist named Kent. We were all staying at Kent's flat for the last month and a half. I don't miss all the sex they had. They can wake the dead with all their groaning.

I made it back in time to sign up for the fall semester at the local community college. I'm going to stay at my parents' house (Kevin moved out of the garage apartment, so it's mine for the time being) and try to start the next phase of my life.

I fell in and out of love all over Europe. But you're the one reason why I knew I had to come home.

Enough mush. I hope you're not too pissed that I haven't called... I was on a budget, like I explained in some of the postcards.

We've got to travel together. I insist.

Your friend,

Victor

December 17, 1986

Charles,

I'm taking a semester off. Again. And changing my major when I go back... again.

Stop scowling, Mr. Dean's List. I'm going full time at the pharmacy. Bill wants to go halves on an apartment together. He's still living at home with his wife, but he's only there for the kids.

He found an apartment with a private drive. I can't wait. My mother's becoming too suspicious about my meetings with the professor. I can't believe I'm dating a professor. It's different being with someone older, you know? Not that 38 is that old. He says I keep him in tune with his students. Two months going strong with Bill and counting. I sent a picture of him and me together. I don't want you thinking I'm dating a geriatric. He looks a little like Sidney Poitier to me. You might think I don't know what I'm doing. But I do. Bill and I do, I should say. He's so grounded. I need that, especially now. I got a letter from Roger, my Europe friend. His lover has AIDS, and Roger's freaking out that he might have it too. Those two liked to have sex with other guys, so who knows where he got it from. I hope Roger is safe from that. It scared me. Thankfully, I don't have to worry about this with Bill. He told me he could never have enough stamina to be with anyone else. Apologies if that made you uncomfortable but it's true. Let's go to another fun topic, shall we?

Kevin moved to Arkansas to chase some woman. I don't know what his deal is. Don't care. Sometimes I wish I could return certain members of my family and trade up for a better model.

How are Mr. Lamont and Mrs. Diane? It feels like forever since I've seen you or your family. I found the goofiest Christmas cards for all of you guys. I think you're going to die of laughter.

Your friend,

Victor

43 years ago – March 1988

“Where the fuck is he?” Phillip asked Charles as he put his beer mug on the table.

It was the last day of their spring break. Charles had made plans with Victor to meet up. It'd been years since they'd all seen each other. Phillip, Charles, and a group of their college friends wanted to have their last hurrah before graduating later that year. Phillip was finally able to convince Charles to bring his “boring ass” to Daytona for spring break. For the few days of being in the party town, it had been nothing but swimming, drinking booze and ogling the other spring breakers.

Though, while Phillip eyed the pretty girls and Charles pretended to, neither of their hearts were in it. Phillip was committed to Tanya. The two were in love, and Phillip stayed true to her. It was very weird to see the ladies' man anticipating settling down. Phillip planned on proposing to her on the day of graduation. He'd already told Charles he would be in the wedding party.

Victor was supposed to be joining them for a few hours before driving to Ocala to go to a family function. *He's late. I hope he doesn't flake out.* Since Bill had come into Victor's life, his best friend wasn't always dependable.

Charles was tired of hearing the same country songs being played on the bar's jukebox. A little popular music wouldn't kill them to break up the monotony. His annoyance with the music added to his anxiety.

If he got one more stare from a patron... He knew he was the only black guy in the place, but did they have to make it so obvious? He'd gotten used to it back home, but it felt a little different down south. He sighed and checked the time again on his watch. Where the hell was he?

A loud whistle came from the left, and Charles looked at the friend he hadn't seen in a few years. Damn, Victor looked good. *A strictly platonic*

observation, he told himself. Victor's smile could light up the room and then some. He held his arms open, and Charles stood to hurry into them. When he bumped into Phillip, he remembered himself. It wasn't just Victor and him. Phillip was there, too. And what the hell was he doing acting like a fool? Next thing, he'd have hearts glowing out of his ass for the entire world to see, he thought derisively as tried to pace himself to not be too eager as he hugged Victor.

Phillip moved away to pat Victor on the shoulder, blabbering about Victor's late arrival, and Charles went in for more torture for himself.

Charles held on tight to his friend. Victor finally grew into those broad shoulders. They filled out nicely with the rest of him, not too skinny or husky. And as he embraced the man, he might've smelled his friend's close-cut hair as he squeezed him once more. He was sure no one noticed that he sniffed him. Victor was the one to let go first, Charles, a few seconds later. He chastised himself for acting so sentimental.

He stood close and noted the differences. Victor had the same warm brown eyes, the same dark brown hair, the same little gap in between the front teeth, and left dimple so deep it looked like it was carved into his face. Victor stopped growing at maybe five foot nine or five foot ten, definitely shorter than Charles' six foot frame.

Charles was sure he looked different too. He'd filled out his previously skinny frame with toned muscle, not overly defined under his cocoa-brown skin. He'd lost the afro for a low fade. He'd grown a goatee, and his voice had definitely deepened, but underneath the T-shirt and shorts, he knew he was the same Charles.

They went back to the table and sat. "We've been waiting forever. Me and Charlie over here had cows *and* ate their burgers," Phillip said good-naturedly, as he signaled for the waitress.

"What the hell, Phillip? Still the same old jerk-wad, I see."

"The jerk-wad who can walk outta here with your girl any day of the week."

"Doubt you'd ever do that on your best day, my friend."

Charles hid his smile. No way would Phillip be walking off with anyone Victor was interested in. Unless, of course, he had a secret lust of men he'd been hiding.

Victor caught Charles's smile and smirked, then picked up the soda bottle Charles ordered for him. "What's happening, dudes?"

"Dudes? You listening to this, Charlie? He thinks just because he lives down here and probably banged a surfer chick, he's a local. You're still a New Yorker, damn it! Talk like one!"

Victor chuckled and winked at Charles, which made the pit in his stomach flutter. *What the hell was going on?* He tried to follow along with the rest of the conversation, but he felt like he was listening in, rather than participating. He couldn't shake this... feeling he had. Maybe it was an extreme case of elation of getting to see his friend again. It had been a few years. He watched Victor's mouth move, listening to the deeper voice. *Had his lips always been so plump?* Why did he care? He shouldn't notice any of these things.

And he couldn't stop himself.

He planned to resume actively looking for a girlfriend after this trip. Maybe another try with Amber? She seemed amenable to dating him, if her hints were anything to go by. The second time having sex had not been any better than his first time with Tina. But it hadn't been worse either.

"Let's get out of here. There's a wet bikini contest happening around the corner from our hotel. I can't touch, but I most definitely will look," Phillip announced enthusiastically. The group followed and talked, Victor and Phillip doing most of the chatting. Phillip asked about Victor's job and return to college this semester, having finally decided on a liberal arts major.

What Phillip didn't know was that the reason Victor had taken the semester off last year was due to finding love with an older guy named Bill. Charles hadn't trusted the Bill character at all. He'd strung his friend along too many times to count in an almost two year love affair. And affair was the key word since Bill was still legally separated and not divorced as he'd promised Victor too many times to count. Victor used him as a sounding board, unleashing the frustrations that he never voiced to Bill on Charles.

Charles shouldn't judge, especially someone he'd never met, but he didn't think anything good would come out of this. What his friend told him about the older man, he didn't like. Victor was a loving guy; he deserved someone to appreciate him, not hide him or squeeze him into a schedule as an afterthought. He would never do that to Victor if he was in Bill's shoes. He tried not to entertain thoughts of that nature, because then it led to shameful masturbation that left Charles hating himself.

And thoughts like that caused trouble. He thought he'd tamped his feelings down, but Charles had had an increase of thoughts like that since learning of his friend's affair. And the tingling in the pit of his stomach traveled southward... leading to jerking off on just the thought of Victor... with him. Not that he would ever breathe a word of this to a soul. It was his deepest secret.

He tuned into his friends' discussion to add a laugh to a joke Phillip told. They made it to the event, a rock band Charles didn't know the name of blasting on loudspeakers, and hundreds of rowdy, drunk college students cheering on the scantily clad girls on stage. Phillip found his friends and made a party of it, yelling for his favorites. He didn't notice Charles's and Victor's eyes were on each other rather than the show.

"Wanna go someplace quieter?" Charles yelled, barely heard over the raucous cheering.

Victor nodded, and Charles led him back to his hotel room. A case of déjà vu hit him as he closed the hotel room door. This time, the room was nicer. There was a couch for both of them to sit, which they did. Charles folded his leg over his knee to face his friend and study any changes he might've missed. And if the tip of his toe brushed against Victor's leg, so what? It was completely innocent.

They talked to each other via phone and letters so much now Charles had nothing to say. He kept looking at his friend. He was lying to himself. There was something he wanted to talk about, but he didn't know how to go about it and avoid an argument. Victor could get testy, especially when homosexuality was the topic.

Charles wanted to know how Victor knew he was gay. Would dreaming about men from time to time make you gay? He still could get it up for a woman if he was attracted to her. Or a man. Maybe he could admit it out loud? Then he worried if he did, it would change everything he thought he knew about himself.

He was so conflicted, and he wanted to share. But he couldn't; it'd solidify his feelings. Feelings he was too scared to admit to himself much less discuss with another person. He wasn't ready. He shouldn't do this. He forgot to stop looking at his friend while he argued with himself.

Now Victor studied him. "What?"

"What, *what*?"

“Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“Looking at you like what?”

“Like *that*.”

“Nothing.”

“We’re not having a repeat of the last time I visited you. Ask whatever is on your mind. I can usually tell when there’s something, and you’re not making it hard at all.” If he only knew.

Charles chose the cowardly route. “How’ve you been? Really?”

Victor fiddled with his shoelace. “Me and Bill are kind of on a time out.”

“Let me guess: He has to spend time with his family?” This was not the first time he’d heard the excuse, and he doubted it’d be the last either.

“He has kids with this woman, Charles. It’s not easy.”

“So what does that mean? Time out? You can see other men?” He didn’t like him seeing Bill, but he disliked him seeing other men even more.

“Why, you offering?” Victor punched his arm, not noticing Charles’s hesitation.

Charles froze, any witty comeback stuck in his throat. “If I was?” Charles questioned boldly, then instantly regretted it. Of all the boneheaded things to ask...

Victor leaned in closer. “I wouldn’t take you up on your offer.”

Charles returned the gesture, getting into Victor’s personal space. “It’s not like you don’t date straight men.”

A small frown line appeared on his forehead, signaling to Charles just how pissed Victor was getting. “I’m not having this discussion with you, Charles.”

“Prefer them older, do you?”

“Are you flirting with me, *straight* boy?”

“If I was?”

“You think you’re the first straight guy to be curious and flirt, Charles? Please.”

Victor stared at Charles with the oddest expression on his face. Charles couldn’t tell if it was curiosity or disgust. But his emotions made him stop

thinking and just act. He lunged the few inches from Victor's face and kissed him.

It was Victor's turn to freeze as Charles assaulted his mouth. Charles turned his head to get the right angle. And Victor didn't push him away. He was doing this. Oh my God, he was doing this. His eyes were closed, and that was all the encouragement he needed. He sipped at Victor's closed lips, not having a plan at the moment, just going with the flow. He pressed the tip of his tongue at the closed seam, and Victor let him inside.

It was definitely different from kissing a woman. Stubble rubbed against his chin as a musky smell that was all Victor invaded his nose. Victor. This was Victor. Charles opened his eyes and pulled his mouth away abruptly.

They both stared and breathed heavily. God help him, he wanted to kiss him again. But he shouldn't.

"This is why."

"What?"

"This is why I don't want to deal with a *straight boy*. Charles, let's forget this ever happened, okay? I love our friendship, and I don't want this to come between us. Deep down, this isn't you. Let's leave this as a curious mistake and move on."

"It wasn't a mistake."

"Nothing will come from this. I'm seeing someone, and you have your hetero dreams. I don't fit in them. Am I the first man you kissed?"

"Yes." Charles looked to his lap.

Victor raised his chin with a finger. "Charles, this doesn't make you gay, just curious. Don't overthink it." He eyed him with the most serious expression. He didn't remove his finger until Charles nodded in agreement.

"I need to go. I have an hour and a half's worth of driving ahead of me. Tell Phillip I'll call him later." He hugged Charles and lingered for maybe a second longer.

Charles didn't think he could forget this, but he would damn sure pretend to. Being shut down by his friend hurt. When he went back to New York, he was going to call Amber, ask her out on a proper date.

He was forgetting himself. He must stick to his plan.

July 27, 1988

Victor,

I tried calling but I forgot that you're out of town with Bill. Hope you're having fun in Atlanta. Get a damn answering machine already.

I am officially an employed civil engineer. I can't believe I got a call back. It's the government job in the city. Grandma cried for half an hour when I told her the good news. Is it weird I wished my mother was still alive to see this? A lot of my memories of her aren't good ones, but I think about her at the oddest times.

I thought about her on graduation day. Wished she could see what I've become.

I'll be able to make more long distance calls! Plus help out around the house. I don't like Grandma having to work so hard at her age.

I'm seeing Amber again for a third date. I brought her home to meet Grandma, but she wasn't impressed. And no, it's not because she's white. You know she doesn't care about stuff like that. Grandma doesn't think it'll last. She says I'm just a passing fancy for Amber.

How can anyone ever know what the future holds?

Big (not really) surprise, Phillip proposed to Tanya. She said yes. Then told him she wants to be married after she finishes graduate school. Best happy-pissed face ever. He asked me to be his best man. I accepted. It would have been great if I captured the moment, right?

And that's why you have the greatest Polaroid picture on Earth in this letter. You're welcome.

Call me when you get this,

Charles

42 years ago – February 1989

“Hello, you’ve reached Victor. I’m sorry I’m not in to take your call. Please leave a message after the beep.”

Beep.

“Victor. She’s gone. She’s passed away. Grandma, she’s dead. She had a stroke. Her brain stem, they told me. She was brain dead. My grandmother is dead. I have... Victor.” Charles began to sob. “She kissed me good-bye this morning. She told me she loved me. How proud of me she was. Kissed my forehead like she used to every day when I was little. My grandmother is dead. I’m sorry for leaving this message. I didn’t know who—”

“—Hello? Charles? What’s going on?” Victor panted down the phone. It sounded like he’d been running.

Charles was barely able to repeat the words about his grandmother. She died so suddenly. Charles prayed she felt no pain.

“I’ll be right there, you hear me,” Victor promised. “Right there.”

True to his word, Victor’s “right there” did not last more than ten hours from Charles’s phone call. The house was so silent, Charles could hear Victor’s arrival through his open bedroom door. His bedroom was closest to the stairway, so he overheard his uncle greeting his friend. Murmuring from Victor. His uncle boomed, “I’m hurting. My mother is dead. I have a friend’s shoulder to cry on right now. Go do the same for our boy upstairs. He’s going to need it.”

He heard Victor run upstairs and watched his friend knock on his doorframe. “Come in.”

Victor walked inside and closed his door. Charles moved from the middle of his queen-sized bed to make room for his friend. Victor lay next to him, not saying a word but offering silent, comforting support in his time of need.

The two stared at each other, both making a move to embrace one another in a tangle of arms. Charles broke down once again, forgetting the mess of last time they were together as he took comfort in his friend’s arms.

January 2, 1990

Victor,

How are you doing? How did your finals go? You haven't told me. I know you were struggling this semester, the last you told me. I hope everything at work is good. I have some news to deliver.

I might think it is wrong for you being your lover's dirty secret, but you are happy. I'm jealous of that. So, I kinda asked Amber to move in with me. Her parents had a cow when they saw she was dating a black man. They disowned her. So I asked her to move in with me. It's only me and Uncle Lamont here, so why not?

Before you tell me we're not in love, I know this. She knows this. But she's in need of a place to stay, and it is sort of my fault she's out of her home. What's the worst that could happen? I get a roommate with benefits.

I'll call you when I can,

Charles

41 Years ago - June 23, 1990

"Charlie, you're a chick magnet today, my friend. You need to clean up for me, let me live through your bachelorhood," he finished with a boisterous laugh. "Thanks for being my best man and all. I ain't no gay, but you're not ugly. Put you in a tux, you're fucking Denzel Washington or some shit. If I get one more girl asking me for your number at my own wedding, I'm going to have to charge a finder's fee. Jesus, you think they smell you're back on the market after that Amber fiasco? Like blood in the water and a lot of hungry sharks swarming around." Phillip had his arm around Charles's shoulder, smiling at the crowd in the catering hall.

They'd finally finished having their pictures taken and made their way into the wedding reception. Tanya looked radiant in her wedding gown, and Phillip looked ready to burst with happiness as he watched his bride. "Go to her," Charles said, shooing him away.

Charles was happy for his friend, but he'd be happier when Victor arrived. The last time they'd seen each other was at his grandmother's funeral last year. His *Amber fiasco*? He should have never asked her to move in with him. Other

than a shared major, they did not have much in common. They used each other to scratch their itch, and Charles learned the hard way about trying to start a relationship with someone looking for room and board. In the end, all it had taken was liquid courage, a good meal and some honesty from them both. Parting wasn't easy, but it wasn't hard either, especially as Amber's family had welcomed her back with open arms now that he was out of the picture.

Single he might be, but he wasn't anxious to be bitten by the sharks at the reception. There was only one person on his mind, and he definitely wasn't female. He and Victor might have agreed to forget the kiss, but Charles couldn't. Even when he had been with Amber, it was all he thought about.

He'd been thinking about sex with a man more and more. He told himself he wasn't tempted to act on it, though maybe if he did it would be out of his system. The idea of being with a man wasn't as scary to Charles at twenty-four. Ask him ten years ago, he'd have shit a brick.

"And there goes the wayward son. V! Come over here, man, let me look at you. Another pretty boy on the loose!" Charles looked up at the mention of Victor's name and watched his best friend walk across the floor to greet Phillip.

"Congratulations, man. Tanya already passed by. She looks beautiful. I told her to give me a call when she comes to her senses."

"Hardy-har-har. You could try, but she's carrying my kid. Look surprised when we announce it before she starts showing. And, uh, I'm not going nowhere, pretty boy. Jackpot! There's Tanya's great-aunt Lois sitting by her lonesome at that table. She's loaded. Going to ingratiate myself with the in-laws."

Phillip clapped Victor on the shoulder, already smiling widely at a wrinkled old lady in a ridiculous hat. Victor and Charles were left alone, dressed to the nines and comfortable in their silence. Victor raised his eyebrows toward the closed patio door. Charles got the message and walked behind him. There was nothing on the terrace but stone benches overlooking the hall's front entrance. A few reception attendees were far enough away, that their conversation could not be heard. Charles had some time before his best man's speech was due.

"How are things?" Charles asked. They sat on the bench furthest away from the door in the sunny afternoon.

"What kind of things? Florida things? My relationship things? Work things? College things?"

“All of the above.”

“Florida is okay.” He took off his suit jacket and laid it in between them. “Bill and I are giving it a go again. His wife moved to Nevada with the kids to live with his mother-in-law. It’s probably for good. I applied for fall semester. I’m sticking to business this time. I’m attempting to actually graduate.”

“You let Bill take up too much of your time,” he blurted out.

“And you’re an expert on relationship advice? Amber hightailed it out of your life less than three months after moving in.” Charles folded his arms, and Victor sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Charles.”

Charles nodded and put his arms down. His hand brushed against Victor’s. He didn’t move it, letting their fingers graze. “Since he has the house to himself, are you moving in with him? You’d save money once you stop paying rent at your apartment.”

“Bill doesn’t want us living together yet. He has appearances to maintain. You know he’s a professor. What would happen if his students ever found out? Or God forbid, the faculty?”

“You guys have been together for some time. If he wants to be with you so badly, he should progress to the next step. Get divorced.”

“Not everyone has a five-year plan like you, Charles. Or have it all together. I’m still a work in progress.”

“A closeted work in progress,” he mumbled just loud enough for Victor to hear.

“Fuck you,” he returned with no heat.

The two looked off to the left when the others on the terrace closed the door to go back inside. “Looks like you might be needed inside soon, big man. I appreciate your concern, but it’s not necessary, Charles. I know what I’m doing.”

Charles doubted that but knew when he was talking to a brick wall. “Fine. New subject but more important. Do you ever think about our kiss?”

He looked around before leaning in. “The kiss we’re supposed to forget?”

“That one, yes.”

“Why are you bringing that up now?”

“Will you answer me?”

Victor tilted his head, signaling to Charles that he was more affected than he claimed to be. “Have you had anything to drink?”

“Stone cold sober.” Charles smiled and twined his pinky over Victor’s for a few seconds. “If we weren’t here, I think I’d do it again. Right now.”

“Charles, this is a rebound move. You only want to kiss me because you were dumped. There are a lot of ladies eyeing you out there. I noticed the moment you walked into the room.”

He shrugged. “I only have my eyes on you.” He didn’t notice anyone, but he was secretly happy Victor noticed him and the attention.

“Well, I’m not looking back. You know I’m in a relationship. And newsflash, you have only fucked women.”

“I think about our kiss. It’s been a year, Vic, and I replay it at least once a day.”

Victor started to breathe heavy as he removed his hand from Charles’s and picked up the suit jacket. “Charles, stop it. Just fucking stop it, right now.”

“I’m being serious. I can’t stop my feelings.”

“Don’t mistake what happened for more than what it was. It was misplaced rebound lust.”

“Really? I noticed you never pushed me away when I kissed you in my ‘misplaced rebound lust.’ I should know since that kiss has been a highlight for me. I could have let it drop, but I can’t. I’m still fascinated. I don’t think I built this up in my head. I’m straight, but not with a period. It’s beginning to end with a question mark.”

“I didn’t push you away because for a second I had a fantasy come to life when I closed my eyes. But reality came rushing back once I opened them.”

They were interrupted by a frazzled Phillip. “There you are. I should have known. You two are always off someplace together. Charles, you gotta learn how to share him, man.” He pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. “We’re getting ready to sit at the wedding table. C’mon, Charlie.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Not moving until you’re walking next to me. I know how you two get. Like magnets when you’re in the same room.”

Both sighed and tried to smooth their clothes as they stood.

“We’ll talk later, yeah?”

“About anything else but that, Charles. Find someone else.”

“Have regrets?” he asked boldly enough to be heard.

“No. But nothing will come from it. I’ve grown up.”

Charles watched Victor saunter inside, past Phillip, who gave him a “what was that about” face. Charles shrugged, checked his pocket for the speech he’d written down and went inside with the groom.

He wasn’t going to jump Victor in public, but he felt something. And he thought that Victor might have, too.

After the reception, Charles played his phone messages. There was only one from Victor, who left early. He knew when he was being avoided.

“Hey, Charles, something came up, and I had to leave Phillip’s reception. I’ll call you later. Hope you left with one of the bridesmaids that were eyeing you tonight. There’s something about weddings that make single people want to get laid. I’m counting our talk on the terrace as that. I will admit I had a crush on you when we were kids. But I’m over it. Respect my wishes. Forget all of that. Let’s just be friends. Bye.”

Charles replayed and analyzed his message. He got to his friend, but maybe he should give up on trying. He had been burned before by people not wanting him, people like Tina or Amber or his mother.

Friends was all he wanted to be? Then friends was what they were going to be. He tried to ignore the pang of regret in his chest.

May 11, 1991

Victor,

I tried leaving you a message... it's full. Delete some, my friend. I hate it when you and Bill are in your "off period." You mope and turn into a hermit. I'm not surprised his wife came back, and I think you would agree if you analyze it. It doesn't take that long to get divorced.

You should find someone worth your time. I say this as a friend. It's not the first time I've said this. I'm not speaking out

of jealousy or anger. You probably don't want to hear it again. But you listen better when it's in letter form. I just want better for you.

Anyway, I'm flying to Sacramento next week for work. In case you get this and feel like taking yourself out of your pity cocoon and can't reach me then.

By the way, Uncle Lamont is moving out. He's moving in with his "friend" Alan. He didn't come out, but he said it was time to have my own space. I offered to move and let him have the house, but he told me Grandma would want me to have it, raise her great-grands here.

Babies. I think he's getting sentimental now that Phillip brings his baby girl over here when he visits. Won't lie, Michelle's a cute baby. Doesn't look like an alien at all. Let's hope she doesn't get Tanya's squeaky voice.

My plan of marrying and living my dream? I don't think I can achieve it yet. I might have to change some things around. But I can say I'm working my way to being happy. I think it's why I want you to be happy too.

Love,

Charles

40 years ago – June 1991

"Are those tears, Uncle Lamont?"

"No, it ain't no damn tears. Just had something in my eye, is all."

Both sat down in the living room after Lamont did his final check of the house. His uncle moved all the heavy and important items yesterday. He could've left yesterday, but Charles thought his uncle didn't want to say good-bye. "I'll miss you too, Uncle Lamont."

"I'm only going to be one town over."

"I'll still miss you."

"You know, you were the best thing that ever happened to your mother. I was just a kid when you were born. Dad nearly had a stroke when your mom

told us she was pregnant. The day you were born, he changed his tune. She was my big, crazy sister who used to never mind me tagging along. Then you came and I'll admit, I hated you for maybe an hour." He chuckled. "But you were something special. Always knew. I loved you then. I love you now. I'll love you for what you'll be. I'm proud of the man you are, Charles. Your mother would be too. Ma always let you know. But I know Adrienne would be as well."

"What if I might be gay? Would you still be proud of me?"

Lamont stared at him for one of the longest minutes of Charles' life. "Hypothetical or actual?"

"Let's say hypothetical."

"Well, you ain't stupid. So you know I'm an actual, but I don't advertise it. It's different for us. There's a stigma. Now you... I've thought you could be a hypothetical, what with you following around that McQuade boy. I thought you was sprung especially that last year before he moved. But I realized he was like your other half. You needed him. You were the quietest little boy with the saddest eyes. Your eyes changed once you met Victor. You got to be a kid and started to enjoy yourself. Victor is...?"

"An actual, Uncle."

"I figured since you're asking. I have no problem with Victor nor you being... actuals. Might explain why you never really had a woman though. That Amber accident was just that, an accident. Unhappy girl, that one."

"What's life without a few mistakes here and there?"

Lamont grunted in agreement. Charles watched his uncle look bashful for the first time he could ever recall. "Never freely said this to anyone who wasn't in the lifestyle, though I might be talking to a new member." Charles was mistaken; it wasn't bashfulness. Lamont was uncomfortable. He held a hand in Charles's face. "I don't want to know if you been with a man, because you're family, and I've changed your diapers. Please leave me out of the loop about any of your sex stories."

"It's not like I have—"

"Please, stop talking. There are two bars close by that cater to *actuals* and *hypotheticals*. I'll give you the name of the one with the younger crowd."

"Why not the other one?"

“That’s where I go from time to time, and I’ll be damned if I see your bony ass over there.”

To: CJ*****@aol.com 17:34:53 October 24, 1993

From: VM*****@aol.com

Charles,

I can't believe we can talk electronically now!

I am still leery about sending messages though. How can I know it's not going to be read by others and posted in the newspaper for the entire world to read? You're a federal worker. You can't fool me that you guys aren't spying on the public.

I told Bill not to send me anything racy from work to be on the safe side.

Thanks for the picture of you and Phillip and his little family. Two kids and another on the way. He's not playing. You guys look like you had fun at Niagara Falls. I'll try to come the next time you plan a trip.

I miss seeing you guys.

But I miss you the most. Of course.

Victor

To: CJ*****@aol.com 17:34:53 May 17, 1994

From: VM*****@aol.com

Charles,

My holier than thou mother... has been having an affair with a neighbor! For years! She's judged just about everything and everyone. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. We're adulterers.

I'm so disappointed with myself. I have ended it for good with Bill. Not because he wanted to cool it, but for me. I'm tired

of hanging on and letting life pass me by. I miss the ten-year-old who stuck up for you against Harold. I miss me. And to reclaim myself, I'm changing.

I came out to my mother. She faked a panic attack. Said my year in Europe corrupted me and put those sinful thoughts in my head. Fuck her. We had a big argument. The entire family was there to hear it. Kevin, of course was on her side. Called me a faggot and said a cocksucker could never be his brother. I'm not hurting from the loss. My mother... even though I expected the hate, it still hurts.

Dad surprised me. He knew, Charles. He knew all along that I was gay; saw me making out with Ricky one night. And he still loves me. He's been keeping things inside. This is how I found out about my mother. Dad let it all out trying to defend me. He's been sticking his head in the sand for too many years and had it. He's divorcing her. He wants to move back to New York. I'm moving with him, away from the disappointment and temptation.

Dad is going to join his friend's construction company. He wants to go back to doing something he loves. They need someone to help out with the books and accounts, so I possibly have a job lined up. Dad's going to put in a good word for me. My aunt in Syosset has room so we'll be staying there until we get a place of our own. I should say until I get a place of my own. I need my own space.

I'm not hiding who I am anymore. If there are people who don't like it, tough. Don't worry, I won't start cramming the joys of gay sex down everyone's throat.

Finally we can be in the same state, back on the island. I'll call you later in case you don't reply soon enough.

V

37 years ago – September 1994

“The three amigos back together again.”

"I think it's more like three amigos and a señorita." The three men looked at the sleeping infant in Phillip's arms. Victor smirked. "God exacts the perfect punishment. You're the father of daughters."

"Hey, Tanya could be pregnant with a boy this time."

"I hope not. Can you imagine when his girls are teenagers?" He turned to Charles, grinning wickedly.

"Oh man, he's going to be bald. They carry his genes after all."

"My princesses won't know a thing about boys. Gonna forbid dating until they're sixty."

"Good luck with that," Charles chimed in. If they were anything like their dad, they'd be sneaky handfuls.

"This is the most sedate birthday party ever." They celebrated Victor's birthday with an after work get-together at Charles's house, pizzas and beer—soda for Phillip—living it up in style. Their schedules were never in sync between Charles and his job, Phillip and his family and Victor's resettling in New York. Finding days to hang out were not easy.

"You're the one bringing a baby for a date."

"Giving Tanya a break makes me a great husband, which equals hot pregnant sex."

"Phillip!"

"Don't knock it till you've tried it." Baby Gianna made her announcement that she was awake with a wail. "Be right back, boys, someone needs a changing." Phillip excused himself while baby speaking to his fretful Gianna. It boggled his mind that Phillip was someone's father.

Charles put down his beer can on the living room end table. "So how does it feel to be almost old? You'll be the big three-oh next year. You remember when we thought thirty was ancient?"

"Man, I stopped counting after twenty-five. Thirty was a lifetime away. Now, it's staring me in the face."

"I have two months left before I start singing the blues."

"Pizza and beer for your birthday then?"

"And strippers," Phillip chimed in with a bundled baby in his arms. "Fellas, we gotta call it a night. I gotta pick up the rest of the fam at my in-laws. Victor,

have a great birthday, man. We gotta find time to do this more often. I'm serious about the strippers though, so you two think about it." Charles shook his head as he locked the door.

"If Phillip only knew the strippers I'd prefer for your birthday." Victor smirked as Charles sat next to him.

"That might not be so bad." Victor looked out the corner of his eyes at him, not commenting. Instead, they watched the Jets game on TV.

Charles waited until the next commercial break to ask something that'd been on his mind since learning Victor was coming back to New York. "Any luck with apartment hunting?"

"Nope. But I need to find someplace soon. It feels weird moving out, then moving back in again with a parent."

"So move in with me."

"Um... no?"

"Why not? I have plenty of room. It's closer to your job. I'm not even here most of the time."

"I'm not looking for a handout, Charles. Thank you."

"Who said anything about handouts? I'd charge you rent. Lamont made a full apartment in the basement." Charles moved to hold Victor's hand. He tried to pull away, but Charles held on.

"Charles," Victor groaned.

"Listen to me, will you?" He waited until Victor looked him in his eyes. "Spend the night. Don't look like a compromised heroine. Platonically... though I would like to kiss you."

"Charles—"

"Before you go into your spiel about me being curious, you're right, I am. I'm curious about being in a relationship with *you*. Romantically. I think we've been courting one another for all of these years anyway."

"You're not gay, Charles."

"I'm not straight either, Victor. I've tried some things. Not all things like you, but a few things with a guy, for a few weeks. It was an eye-opener, but I don't regret the experience for a moment."

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Like you tell me about *all* the men you’ve been with?”

“So now you’ve slept with a man, and you’re gay all of a sudden.” He snorted. “Just one guy?”

“Just one. Steven. He’s taught me some things. I’ve learned to admit I was ashamed to be attracted to another man. I still am, at times. I’m learning not to bottle my feelings. It’d be easier to try to fit a straight mold. But why should I have to fit a heterosexual mold?”

“Who are you, and what have you done to my best friend?”

“I’m still Charles. I just don’t want to hide that part of myself I’ve struggled with from you. I’m not with Steven anymore, by the way. There’s this feeling that I have that I’m recognizing as want for you. It could be lust. But it’s not curiosity. I’ve had many thoughts about you unclothed. For years.”

“Years?”

He nodded. “Our kiss was the highlight of my life, as sad as it may sound.”

“It’s not sad. It’s just—you’re really serious?”

“Very.” Charles liked being honest with him. “I would like to date you. I don’t want it to start off with sex... though I will not lie. I hope we have it in the future.” Watching the hope grow in Victor in turn gave Charles hope. He didn’t want his friend to mistake his sincerity.

“We should take it slow. Can we take it slow? Give me time to wrap my head around dating you.”

He nodded with a smile. “No rush. In fact, you’re not getting a kiss out of me until the third date. How is that for slow?”

“Well... I don’t know about all of that.” Victor winked.

Charles was determined. “You’ll consider moving in?”

“The last time you moved someone in, you struck out. I don’t want to fuck up our friendship. It’s the most solid relationship I’ve ever had.”

“Friends make the best lovers.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“We’ll make our own.”

“Charles, promise me, if at any point you want out, you’ll tell me. I don’t want secrets or hard feelings. We’re going to fight, but at the end of the day, you’re it for me.”

He wanted to hear Victor agree. He needed to hear the words. “So you’ll move in?”

“Yes. Besides, I don’t think you’ll take no for an answer.”

“No, I really won’t. I have a plan written down on how to win you over.”

“You and your plans.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to be a secret to another man, Charles. Can you handle that?”

“I sort of came out to Uncle Lamont. It was a joint outing of sorts. I’m a hypothetical who wants to be with an actual... which probably means I’m bisexual.”

“What?”

The start of their first day as a couple was an interesting one.

April 2031 - Present day

“Don’t forget your nighttime glasses, Charles.”

“I don’t need them. I see just fine.”

Victor shook his head. Rather than start an argument with his lover of over thirty years, he just picked up the glasses from the bedside table and slipped them in his shirt pocket. He knew Charles would need them once he tried backing out of the driveway. He was just too stubborn to admit having a minor handicap.

The couple was getting ready to leave for their son’s engagement dinner, an event he and his husband never thought they would ever see. For a few years, they were worried about their son making it to thirty. But Brandon straightened out. Barely. Brandon’s fiancée was a major factor in their boy having focus.

They’d adopted three kids: Brandon, Dawn and Thomas. They made the couple’s life all the better. For those three drug addicted, special needs and unwanted children, Charles and Victor provided a nurturing home and made a family on their own terms.

Victor’s father was the proudest grandfather on the island and loved to show their pictures to anyone he could. Victor’s mother refused to acknowledge

Victor and changed her number when she learned Charles was her son's life partner. Victor finally stopped trying to connect with her and his brother thirty years ago. Besides, Victor's father had remarried, and she embraced the entire McQuade-Jackson brood as a doting grandmother. Lamont spoiled their kids as well. He and Alan were the cool uncles that helped out when needed.

Coming out to family and friends as a couple was not as hard as Charles had feared. He was more surprised with who chose to remain their friend, namely Phillip, who made a single request after they announced being partners "not to start screwing until he left the building."

Being in an interracial gay relationship had its ups and downs. It certainly was not easy in their conservative neighborhood. They got stares, were called names, and when the kids came along, some neighbors became hostile. Thankfully, nothing escalated to violence. Charles remained in his grandmother's home, making it into his and Victor's family home, and refused to be driven out by bigots. Throughout the years, the committed partners only became closer, a unit that was bonded and never broken.

"Before we leave, I wanted to show you something. I was going through some boxes in the basement the other day, and look what I found." Charles opened a drawer and pulled out a stack of envelopes. It was the letters Victor had sent from the time he lived in Florida. Charles had kept every one.

"You kept all the letters I sent you?"

"Down to your postcards."

"We'll add to the collection now that you're finally retired." Victor let Charles know every day how much he loved having him at home more often. "We can send new postcards from our travels to the kids and make them wish they were on our two-month-long vacation with us."

"Sounds like a plan."

"I know how you love planning, lover of mine."

"You helped make those plans better, my friend."

The End

Author Bio

L.L. Bucknor loves to read... a lot, drink caffeine (coffee and tea the best, yum) and has been known to do some things for chocolate (there might or might not be a case pending—j/k, maybe). She writes sometimes too. She used to write slash fan fiction for the masses many years ago. She figured it's time to get back into the game. A staunch believer in happy endings and the various paths one can take to get there.

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VILLAINS

By Andrea Speed

Photo Description

Two manga-style young men on the verge of a kiss. One has white hair, while the other has his face partially hidden by a hood, although his eyes seem to have a reddish tint.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I know that everyone believes that I'm the monster, and that He keeps me on a leash. I don't mind; it's funny how everyone is deceived by our act and while they look at me with fear and loathing, His secret is safe. No one is going to know that behind his innocent look and smile there is a soulless and sadistic man. I love Him the way He is and even if He isn't capable of love, I know that I'm the most valuable person in his life. He trusts me, He cares about me and He wants to be with me. And it's enough.

Sometimes, I wonder—am I monster too?

***Please no: BDSM*

Sincerely,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, urban fantasy

Tags: superhero, supervillains, genetic engineering, mad scientist, crime boss, action/adventure, alternate universe

Content Warnings: violence, cursing, bombing

Word Count: 6,917

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VILLAINS

By Andrea Speed

The funny thing to Kaede was how accustomed you could get to hate. In fact, now he found it kind of amusing.

Not the spitting or the thrown objects, but the sneers and evil looks, the muttered curses behind his back. Then one day, he wasn't sure when, they made him smile and chuckle. Why that turn happened he had no idea. You'd think all this negative energy would have beaten him down, as it had threatened to when he was a teenager, but now he almost welcomed it. As Kaede Hayashi, he was never going to get any other reaction anyways. Might as well see the comical side of it.

His first few days in Apex, he successfully hid in the shadows, as Ash had advised. Ash liked to lurk in the darkness, and people often didn't know he was there, even though he was within arm's reach of them. Kaede used to tease him about it, suggest that maybe there was something supernatural in his abilities, but they both knew there wasn't. They were an unusual pair, as Kaede was all nature, and Ash was all nurture (sort of). Maybe that's why they were so perfect together.

Kaede was enjoying the view of the city from the roof. Kamani Towers was the tallest building in Apex, and Kaede owned the entire penthouse level, as Kamani Corp was one of his father's secret holdings. Considering dear old dad was dead, they were his, but he found it hard to think that way. After all, how many times had his father faked his death? Three times? Four? Something like that. And they were all totally believable, until he suddenly sprung up again, working his technical magic. That was one of the perks of being a brilliant but completely insane scientist. Or, as the tabloids called him, Doctor Terror. Create one designer, flesh-eating microbe, and no one ever forgave you.

The city looked like stars at his feet, the beautiful lights of so many dying dreams only now reaching Earth. He was so far above the streets, the noise of cars barely registered.

Kaede was aware he was no longer alone a few seconds before he bothered to speak. "Social call?" he asked, not bothering to turn and look.

The self-styled “superhero” who called himself Dark Justice made a noise somewhere between a scoff and a grunt. “I bet you want a thank you, don’t you, Hayashi? I bet you think you’re being a good guy.” He used a voice modulator to give him a deep, threatening voice, and it was all Kaede could do not to laugh. Did he really think that and the dark cowl covering everything except his eyes and mouth was enough to disguise the fact that he was actually Anthony Moreau, wealthy industrialist with a shit ton of daddy issues? Who else could have afforded so much custom molded body armor and experimental tech? Dark Justice could literally have been no one else in all of Apex, and yet the press treated him like his identity was such a big mystery. Then again, he did own the newspapers, didn’t he? And the biggest TV station in the area. Being obscenely wealthy had its privileges.

Dark Justice appeared in front of him, looking almost twice as wide as the average person in his black body armor suit, and he towered a foot over Kaede, although he was sure Moreau’s boots had subtle lifts in them. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, DJ.”

From the way his steel-gray eyes moved beneath the cowl, Kaede knew he’d annoyed him. He really didn’t like to be called DJ. “Right. Four high-ranking members of the criminal underworld have died violently since you came to Apex, and you have nothing to do with any of them.”

“Why would I? Sounds like it’s doing you a favor, and I’d never do that.”

Moreau continued glaring at him from beneath his silly little mask, probably trying to intimidate him, but he was about as intimidating as a marshmallow Peep. “What are you doing up here, Hayashi? Without your watcher.”

Kaede smirked at the would-be hero. He thought he knew, but he only knew what Kaede and Ash wanted known. The truth was theirs alone. “What am I, a child?”

Moreau’s grim mouth turned down into a heavy, manly frown. “You’re a rabid dog. I know you’re not Terror’s son. You’re his clone.”

Kaede snorted and shook his head. “Humans can’t be cloned.”

“Humans can’t make gene-specific, flesh-eating bacteria either, but somehow your so-called father did and took out half of Newport.” Moreau grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him violently close, so Kaede’s chest was pressing up against Moreau’s body armor. Kaede wondered if he was going to kiss him, and then wondered what Moreau would do if

Kaede kissed him. Moreau had the whole industrialist, ladies' man thing going on, the kind that was so goddamn overblown that, combined with his overdone machismo, it screamed "closet case". "I don't know what game you're playing, Hayashi, but I'm watching you. I'm going to make you regret ever setting foot in my city."

"Have you considered breath mints?" Kaede wondered aloud. Although really, his breath could have been worse. Mainly it just smelled like he was slamming kale smoothies and protein bars all evening (which he might have been).

Like Kaede knew he would, Moreau shoved him back violently in disgust, making him stumble, but Kaede kept on his feet. "If I were you, I'd leave now while you still can."

There was a droning noise in the background, getting louder, and Kaede knew it was the modified helicopter that Dark Justice occasionally used. It didn't land, it just swooped in close to the roof, and Moreau used a modified grappling hook to attach a line to the open door before the chopper flew away, taking DJ with it.

Seriously, you needed a pilot's license to fly a helicopter, and you needed all kinds of permits to fly in the city, keep it, and land it. Why hadn't a single blogger figured out his secret identity? It was crazy. Maybe his father/progenitor dumped IQ blunters in the water. Or maybe Moreau did. Keeping people stupid did seem to behoove superheroes and politicians alike.

"If you gave the signal, I would have ended him," a familiar voice said.

Kaede smiled, and turned to face Ash. If Moreau thought he disappeared in shadows, he was a rank amateur compared to Ash, who seemed to melt into and out of darkness as if he dissolved into it. In fact, Ash had appeared on the roof as soon as Moreau had, but Moreau had never noticed him. All Kaede would have had to do was give him a hand signal or say his name, and Moreau probably would have been dead before he even registered that Kaede's "minder" was looking on.

Ash pulled back the hood of his black jacket, revealing his shocking white hair. Sometimes he'd dye it for camouflage purposes, but it never stayed for long. It was as if his hair rejected the chemicals, and it was possible that's exactly what occurred. Ash was human, or at least seemed that way, but his twisted past obscured much about him. Which was surely by design. "Why

would I want him dead?" Kaede asked. "He's hilarious. Can you believe he thinks I don't know who he really is? Or that I'd be afraid of him? He's a clown who doesn't realize he's a clown."

Ash's expression was impassive, but then again it usually was. By nature he wasn't ever overly expressive or effusive. His hazel eyes, which occasionally took on an almost reddish-brown tint in the right light, remained clear and, as always, intense. "He's still a pest. I don't see how you can find all of this funny."

"Because it is. I don't care about any of it," he said, and suddenly realized that was true. He didn't care about the so-called superheroes or tabloids or vicious rumors about him, or the truth about his "father" (or whatever he actually was). "The only thing I care about is you." It was corny, yes, but that didn't make it any less true.

He pulled Ash in for a kiss, and Kaede felt his warm arms encircle him. It was like coming home.

Maybe Ash was why nothing else mattered, and everything seemed ridiculous. They hadn't spent a day apart since they'd first met four years ago, and Kaede only realized he'd been missing something vital in himself when he understood that Ash was his other half. Together, they were both whole. He'd never actually bought into love as even a concept before Ash, but now he didn't see how he could live without it. Or without him.

After a few moments, Ash broke away from the kiss and buried his face in Kaede's hair, which he loved to do. Once, in a rare burst of poetry, Ash told him his hair always smelled like rain. Despite his naturally taciturn nature, Ash always held him and kissed him like he was holding on to him for dear life, and in bed snuggled up against him like he was afraid to let him go. Kaede never minded at all. "All is in readiness," Ash whispered in his ear. Their bodies fit together automatically; Kaede felt himself melding to him, drinking in his warmth and strength. On the surface, Ash was always placid, but he felt as taut as a coiled spring. He was a sleeping tiger.

Kaede stroked his hair, which felt silkier than the average person's. Just another mystery. "I thought it would be," he replied. "You never disappoint me."

Ever since they met, Ash had been the North Star of his life. Kaede couldn't see that ever changing.

To the outside world, Ash was Ashburn Croft, a professional “minder” hired by his father’s estate to look after his affairs. There was an unspoken assumption that he also kept a leash on Doctor Terror’s quiet but inherently suspect “son”, Kaede, as Kaede was assumed to be as potentially lethal as his infamous father. Kaede cooked up a fake identity that would hold up to intense scrutiny, casting Ash as a Londoner who went to school in France and university in America, so he had an unusual, cosmopolitan background. And he was an orphan, of course, with no living family.

The truth was much more tragic.

There was a small island in the Indian Ocean named Devishna that wasn’t on most maps, or Google Earth, or anywhere of note. Just five and a half miles across, it was entirely privately owned by a company called Global Science Dynamics Limited. Which, of course, meant it was a shell corporation for his father, Doctor Goro Hayashi (a/k/a Doctor Terror). There, he experimented on genes, and it was rumored he started work on the flesh-eating bacteria there, but it was never proven. There were also rumors he had somehow acquired alien DNA, but again, never proven. (When his father abandoned a place, he adopted a scorched earth policy. Literally. The only thing on Devishna now was a four mile wide crater full of ash.)

What was known was his father bought children, mainly street urchins from India, Indonesia, and former Eastern European countries, where life could be very cheap indeed. He used them as lab rats for his experiments in altering DNA in living subjects. He wasn’t completely heartless. Those that lived and seemed otherwise healthy were sent to a religious order in Indonesia to be raised by the brothers and sisters there.

The religious order was an apocalypse cult, of course, awaiting the day the world would end, and training the children to live up to their new genetic potential as living weapons. This order, known as Tabaah Karna (Karna for short), was considered a terrorist organization by many governments in spite of their intense secrecy, and one night there was a massive, violent raid on the compound. The fight was ugly and became an international incident, with an official death toll of twenty-two, and many children were supposedly smuggled out of the compound before the raid. The unofficial, true story had a death toll of thirty-three, with most of the raiders killed or seriously injured by the children they were supposedly rescuing. Some of the children were killed, but most scattered to the four winds. His father hired people to find them, although

that proved to be a losing proposition, as the children didn't really have proper names, just the designations given to them by their head trainer, and were taught to disappear. Still, one investigator got lucky and found a boy nicknamed Ash in Laos, where a Caucasian with honey-colored eyes and bone-white hair couldn't help but stick out. His father arranged for a close associate and his wife to take the boy in, but Ash was fourteen at the time, and the habits he'd learned with Karna were ingrained. It was why he was so taciturn, why expressing emotions of any kind was hard for him. In Karna, emotional displays were strongly discouraged, and silence was valued above everything but discipline. Also, he was indeed a human weapon, and his father had to spend a lot of capital to make sure no one ever picked up on that.

Kaede didn't meet Ash until they were both nineteen, when his father, concerned for Kaede's safety at college, sent Ash to be his bodyguard. (His father's many enemies would have loved to have gotten at Doctor Terror through his son. Kaede always knew there was a target on his head, which was part of the joy of being the son of a supervillain. That and the hatred and revulsion he sparked in people who didn't know him at all.) While it wasn't exactly love at first sight, he was intrigued with the quiet, odd-looking boy right away, and soon they became inseparable in a way his father never could have foreseen. They'd been together ever since.

Ash wasn't like normal people. He was human *ne plus ultra*, the best genetic engineering technology could buy. For instance, his muscles were twice as dense as a normal human's, and his lungs and bloodstream processed oxygen more efficiently. He could have shattered every athletic record known to man, but that would draw attention to him, and that's what couldn't happen. He wasn't some bulky 'roid monster; he looked quite willowy in fact. So slender, you'd think there was no way in hell he could bench press over seven hundred pounds, or palm strike his way through a cement wall, or best adult Marines in hand-to-hand combat when he was thirteen years old, but he was able to do all of those things. His fine-boned features and large eyes made him look pretty and almost delicate, and certainly on the good side of harmless, but that just showed how much thought the engineers put into their work. After all, a human weapon that looked like one had limited usefulness. One who looked like the dreamy junior captain of the swim team could go absolutely anywhere.

Sometimes, when Ash was asleep, Kaede would study him. His beautiful body looked normal in every way, from the sinuous curve of his spine to the firmness of his chest. It looked like he had no body hair at all, but he did. It was

so pale you could feel it more than see it, not so much white as almost translucent. Kaede had asked him about the whiteness of his hair, but Ash had no idea why his hair was this color, any more than he knew why his trainer in Karna had dubbed him Ash. From the few files he'd been able to recover about his father's activities on Devishna, there were mentions of unexpected side effects and unavoidable consequences, and Kaede had decided that's what Ash's hair color and eyes were: a side effect of what was done to him. Kaede hated the thought that anything was done to him, especially by his own goddamn father. But the past was gone, and all they could concentrate on now was the present and the future.

Kaede very rarely saw his father when he was a child. He was mainly raised by a series of nannies and minders in many different places (and under many different names) across the world. It was the problem of being the son (or clone) of a famous supervillain. But Kaede had come to realize his distant, almost mythical father was a selfish monster who forgot he had a son most of the time. Still, there had to be some good to extract from his madness. Ash was probably the best thing that ever came out of it, although he'd be damned if he ever shared that with the rest of the world.

Since it was a busy day with a lot of important work ahead, they showered together, as was their custom. The shower in this suite was so large they could have fit a football team in with them, and still had room for a couple of referees. Kaede and Ash joked about it a bit. Father's "safe houses" (or suite, in this case) were always rather grandiose, for no reason. From what Kaede had been able to piece together about his father, he'd been alone most of his life, mainly surrounded by employees and weirdly groupie-like hangers on, most of which were junior scientists who thought he was god. He wasn't. Doctor Terror was just an obsessive scientist who alienated a lot of people, shot himself up with an experimental serum he created that was supposed to boost intelligence, and succeeded. But while Terror increased his own intelligence fourfold, he also made himself more than a little insane. Or, as he wrote in one of his journals, "madness is a slight drawback".

They made breakfast in companionable silence (silence was Ash's default state), and shared the newspaper while they ate. It was good to keep an eye on what the local press would or wouldn't say about the local gangland killings and about Dark Justice, as well as any notices about Kaede. The paper had been underplaying the gangland slayings, reporting them as homicides without launching into too many details. Kaede wasn't sure if they were withholding

details because the police asked them, or because Moreau told them. He'd probably never know which.

Once they had loaded the breakfast dishes in the machine, they did a final check on the equipment they'd need for the plan, which was probably a needless redundancy. But with a plan that had so many moving parts, it never hurt to be absolutely certain.

Then Kaede donned his disguise and uniform. Along with being a scientist, dear old dad was an inventor, inventing thousands of technologically advanced items in his mania. One of those things was a device that worked with a 3-D printer, creating a perfect, skintight mask that could transform your face seamlessly. You had to provide the hair if you wanted to change that, but his father had a collection of many realistic wigs. Why, he didn't know, but it didn't matter, and to be completely honest he didn't even want to think about it.

Kaede transformed himself into an older Caucasian man, wearing a public works outfit. If Moreau was having the building surveilled, they'd pay no attention to him, especially since Ash was heading out first, undisguised. Ash never had any problems shaking tails, so he liked being used as bait.

Kaede then went to the Lincoln Avenue Apartments, which was almost smack dab in the center of downtown. He used a thermal scanner to get an exact number of people in the apartments, and went to work.

He went to the landlord, and informed him there was a gas leak, and they needed to evacuate people and pets from the building right away. Kaede had perfect fake credentials ready, in case the man ever asked for them, but he never did. He must have looked convincing enough, or used the correct words to scare him, or both. Between them, and a guy who worked for the landlord, they were able to cover all the floors in no time. Once the building was evacuated, he used his thermal scanner to confirm it, then went to the second floor to plant the bomb.

He'd studied the structural integrity of the building, and computer modeled it just in case. In the second-floor elevator shaft, this type of bomb would create a flashy explosion and send lots of debris all over, which was exactly what he wanted. He needed chaos, but he saw no reason to kill any of these people. Their only crime was living downtown.

Kaede left through a rear exit, and shed his disguise along the way, dumping the face mask and hair in one garbage can, and taking off the coverall and

throwing it in a dumpster behind a fast food place. Underneath he wore dress pants and a T-shirt. He stopped in a clothing store downtown to buy a suitable button-down shirt, jacket, and shoes. He left his public works hiking boots in an alley, to be found by some lucky homeless guy.

Kaede had timed it all perfectly, as the bomb went off a minute after he found the used car Ash had bought and left in a pay parking lot the day before. Driving away, he could see the large plume of black smoke still unfurling in his rearview mirror.

Superheroes being unbelievable fame whores, in spite of “secret identities”, he knew Dark Justice would be there, and while there was no one to rescue from the apartments, there would be several car crashes and other extraneous damage, including a fire. Moreau would be forced to help, freeing him and Ash from his scrutiny for several hours. He’d probably want to pin it on him, but he couldn’t, because Kaede made an exact replica of a bomb used by the Lewis gang when they used to blow up safes and bank vaults. Since the Lewis gang was all in jail, DJ would probably assume Kaede had done it to taunt him. He would be correct, but the poor, dumb bastard could never prove it, and the cops would be left chasing their own tail.

Kaede drove out towards the waterfront, and left the car abandoned behind a run-down old bar known for biker gangs and aggravated assaults. He had no doubt it would be stolen within twenty minutes.

In theory, it was a short but dangerous walk to an abandoned cannery near Pier 31, but despite his youthful, somewhat-fey appearance, it wasn’t dangerous for Kaede. He wasn’t Doctor Terror, he hadn’t injected some hyper-neuronal stimulant into his gray matter, and he wasn’t even in the same galaxy as Ash, but he was far from helpless. You couldn’t be the child of a supervillain without picking up a few things.

Although he arrived on time, Snow’s gang was already in the warehouse, and he was frisked with needless roughness by two of his no-necked goons, who glared at him like a couple of hicks from the trailer park suddenly let loose in the big city. “I don’t like guns,” he told them, and their puzzled, disgusted expressions were almost quaint.

He was cleared to enter the warehouse, where Cyrus Snow, the current underworld kingpin, sat at a metal table with four of his most thickly muscled men. There was a single open chair at the opposite end, where, coincidentally, a bright lamp was aimed like a spotlight. So much for being a welcomed guest.

As soon as Kaede took the seat, Snow sat forward, and asked, "Should I thank you for wiping out all my competition?"

Kaede scoffed and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. The packaging was all in Japanese, but if you caught a whiff of them, you'd smell clove and a hint of almond. They weren't tobacco cigarettes, as he'd never understood how anyone could smoke them. They tasted terrible. "First Dark Justice assumes that, and now you. I don't suppose you and he are close."

That provoked a dark, gravelly chuckle from Snow. He had a long, thin, knife blade of a face, which his dark, receding hairline just emphasized, and dead shark eyes spaced a bit too widely on either side of a slender nose. He had no idea why, but Kaede had yet to encounter an attractive crime boss. It was the rare job that didn't welcome the pretty.

The lights illuminated the table and a few inches of space beyond it, but no more, casting the rest of the cannery in shadow. Still, Kaede was aware of shapes moving in the dark, shifting restlessly from foot to foot, moving heavy guns from one shoulder to another. Snow had probably assumed he was coming to kill him, even though Snow had arranged the meeting. How many men were here, including the ones outside? At least a dozen, all armed with the biggest weapons they could carry.

Not nearly enough.

"Hardly," Snow said. He clasped his hands together on the table, and Kaede noticed he had a pinkie ring the size of a cherry tomato. Super tacky, and made worse by the fact that the garish gemstones in it were probably real, and he probably thought it was cool. "But there have been a lot of deaths since you came to town."

"Do I look that dangerous to you?" he replied, fishing his lighter out of his pocket. There was derisive sniggering from the dark, confirming locations of gunmen, and Snow smirked at him.

"Nah, can't say you do. But you mad scientist types rarely look that bad."

"Who said I was a mad scientist? That's my father, not me. Speaking of which, I don't suppose there's any chance you'd give me back the sonic blaster, is there?"

"The what?"

Kaede dug a cigarette out of the pack, and placed it between his lips, taking his time to light it before responding. "Come now. The sonic blaster, stolen

from a high security vault by the Resalos, but intercepted by you in transit. I dare say neither of you knew exactly what you had, but since it's my father's invention, it's mine now. Return it and I leave."

Now Snow laughed, a genuine gut buster of a chortle. He slapped the table before he calmed down. "You got stones, Hayashi, I'll give you that. Comin' here, all by yourself, unarmed, and demanding I give you something. You got guts."

Kaede inhaled deeply, and let out a large plume of smoke. It had an aftertaste like spice cake. It was very pleasant. "Who said I came here alone?"

Snow shook his head. "Got lookouts on the roof. They saw you walkin' in. Really ain't that smart to walk this area alone. Or to come in here alone."

"Are you insinuating something?" There were almost always lookouts or snipers on the roof. Crime bosses could be so boringly predictable.

Snow smiled, but the grin was sharp and oily. "Your father was a big brain, and odds are you are, too. Even if you ain't, you got access to his stuff, right? I'm thinkin' this could be the start of a beautiful friendship."

Kaede exhaled another plume of smoke. It dissipated slowly in the light, a gray-white fog moving across the table. "Whether I like it or not?"

The left corner of Snow's mouth hitched up even higher, showing one of his eyeteeth. "Now yer gettin' it. Just think of what we could accomplish. We could get rid of that fuckhole Justice once and for all."

Now it was Kaede's turn to chuckle as he tapped ash on the cement floor. "You aim very low, don't you?"

Snow's grin faltered. "What?"

"How much do you know about my father? I'll assume you know what everyone else knows. Which is fine, because the authorities would rather downplay all the significant strides forward he made. He was the pre-eminent genetic engineer of our time. Not just in creating flesh-eating bacteria that will only activate in people with certain genes, but in various other substances as well. In fact, he created special toxins, and also created cures to them, which he tested on himself. After rigorous, illegal human trials, of course. The thing about these cures is they were genetic. He inserted genes in his own DNA that would essentially deactivate all these designer toxins he created, so they could never be used against him. He inoculated me as well." The thug on his

immediate right started to cough, followed by the thug on his left. Kaede pulled in and then exhaled another large plume of smoke. "In essence, I can breathe poison, and it has no effect on me at all. How about you, Mr. Snow?"

Snow's blue eyes bugged out as Kaede's words sunk in, so much so that Kaede could count the broken capillaries that decorated his whites like discarded ribbons. All the other gun thugs at the table were coughing, except the two closest to Kaede, who had slumped to the floor, no longer coughing. Or moving. Their lips were a peculiar shade of blue.

Snow reached under his jacket, obviously going for his gun, so Kaede threw the table on its end, propping it up as bullets slammed into the scarred metal. He threw his cigarette away and lit the whole pack on fire before tossing it towards the center of the room. The faster the smoke filled the place, the better. Kaede was proud, because while the toxin was his dad's idea, putting it in smokable form, in a Japanese clove cigarette pack, was all his. He saw movement from the corner of his eye, pulled a coin out of his pocket, and carefully threw it at the shadowy target, never touching its edge.

They weren't really coins. They looked like silver dollars, and were designed to bring no attention to themselves, but they were the secret, Doctor Terror-designed update to throwing stars. They had an edge so lethally sharp Kaede had to keep them in a special "coin purse", designed to keep them from falling through, and were made of an unusual material more slippery than Teflon. It didn't just avoid sticking to things, but aggressively pushed itself away from anything trying to adhere to it. With just a tiny amount of force, it cut through everything: muscle, bones, fat, tendons. He'd had more than a few embed themselves in walls and floors when they finally lost their momentum bouncing around in lead shielding or titanium. And they were so sharp, most people didn't realize they'd been lethally stabbed by the thing pinballing around their system until they noticed all the blood pouring out of them. Kaede couldn't see where he'd hit his target, but he heard the clatter of his gun on the floor as he went down.

Kaede didn't like guns. But he really liked knives.

There was more coughing and more bullets, but now a new noise entered the fray. A sound of dull thuds and the sharp crack of bones, and Kaede knew Ash had arrived right on time.

Ash had actually come here well ahead of everyone else, in a display of his infinite discipline and patience. He waited and scoped out the cannery, counting

each and every one of the thugs who arrived, and noting their positions. As soon as the ones on the roof reported Kaede's arrival, Ash would have gone up there and killed them. The ones on high ground you had to take care of first. Next he would have started on the thugs at ground level, as that was the most logical secondary step. Then he'd simply wait for Kaede to make his move, and he'd finish off the stragglers. Ash was wearing a syntech suit, also designed by his father. It was made of a substance five hundred times better than Kevlar at stopping bullets, a synthetic spider silk that was lightweight, but so powerful it could stop a close range shot from a Desert Eagle. Ash, as a Hayashi engineered human, was also immune to the toxins in the cigarettes.

Kaede peeked around the table to see the still living thugs attempt to attack Ash en masse. A good plan really, all they could do since bullets didn't seem to work, but doomed to failure. Ash delivered a palm strike to the throat of one thug, crushing his larynx, while delivering a full-force kick to the chest of another man, collapsing his sternum. One goon grabbed Ash from behind, only to get a sharp elbow to the face that shattered his nose (and possibly his skull—it wasn't only blood gushing from his nose as he fell). Ash then headbutted another man, who collapsed to the ground seizing, and while the remaining man leveled his Uzi point-blank at Ash's chest, Ash grabbed his arm snake quick, and Kaede could hear his bones snap like a dead tree branch as Ash twisted his arm until he dropped the gun, screaming. Ash put him out of his misery with a well-placed kick that most likely pulped his solar plexus on contact. Ash didn't always fight at full strength, because, as he said, "it was too damn easy", but on missions like this, the sooner they were done, the better.

Snow attempted to crawl away, and Kaede saw him. He got up and walked over to him, grabbing the gun of one of his fallen men on the way. By the time he reached Snow, it was easy to kick him over on his back. Although Snow was still alive, his lips were becoming cyanotic, and his eyes were bulging from their sockets due to oxygen deprivation, not shock. "Why?" he wheezed, barely able to manage it.

"I don't like people who steal from me," Kaede informed him. Although he aimed the gun down at Snow's face, he didn't pull the trigger. He just had to wait a few seconds for the poison to finish its job.

With all thugs dead, Kaede discarded the gun and pulled out his thermal scanner to confirm there were no living surprises awaiting them. He then started scanning for the special isotope his father tagged his inventions with, so he could keep track of them no matter where they ended up. Ash came and

stood beside him. The syntech suit looked like black ninja gear, as it was surprisingly nonbulky, and had a cowl that covered his forehead, nose, and mouth, leaving only his eyes exposed. And even then, a clear syntech faceplate covered his eyes, which was a good thing, as the plate was splattered with blood. "You okay?" Kaede asked.

"You know that's a stupid question," Ash replied.

Kaede smiled. "I know. But I still have to ask." He held up the scanner towards him, so Ash could see the readout. "It shows the blaster as being outside, behind the cannery."

Ash only needed a second to think. "There's a large van parked out back."

"How about that. They haven't even unpacked it yet." He pocketed the scanner, and while Ash went ahead, Kaede stamped out the still-smoldering cigarette pack, and picked it up with a plastic bag he also slipped into his pocket. He wanted to leave no hints for the cops. The toxin would totally dissipate within twenty minutes, without leaving a trace of itself. The coroner might judge them all dead from suffocation, and they'd never figure out exactly how it was done. Kaede knew it shouldn't please him to imagine how confused they'd be, but it did.

By the time he got outside, Ash had the heavy titanium case of the sonic blaster slung over his shoulder, like an unwieldy and overly large backpack. It probably weighed about two hundred pounds, but that was child's play to Ash. The sonic blaster was exactly what it sounded like. A gun that shot concentrated noise at various frequencies. The lower settings would stun a person and render them unconscious. The higher frequencies would blow out ear drums like cheap speakers, pulverize fine bones, and kill people in a very messy way. The military was working on such a weapon, but most were only capable of stunning people, and were generally mounted on tanks or vehicles of similar size. The sonic blaster was shoulder mounted and technologically years ahead of what any military had.

They briefly discussed burning the cannery down, but Kaede didn't want to. He wanted Moreau and the cops to be taunted and flummoxed by a crime scene they would never understand, and could never pin on him. Kaede then followed Ash to the car he had stolen earlier, and they returned home, although Kaede slapped on a hasty disguise (of course Ash had one waiting for him), and walked the last two blocks home. Ash ditched the car, and returned with the sonic blaster case wrapped up like a birthday present. You couldn't say they didn't have a sense of whimsy.

As soon as Kaede stowed the blaster away in his secret safe, he joined Ash on the couch. The big-screen TV was tuned to the news, which was still reporting on the explosion, meaning no one had found all the bodies at the cannery yet. Considering how police-adverse the waterfront was, people might not actually call the cops for days. That would make the crime scene all the more useless.

Kaede nestled against Ash, who put an arm around his shoulder, hugging him close. He'd peeled off the syntech suit, and was wearing nothing but boxer briefs. The suit was so skin tight, he usually couldn't wear anything else under it.

Kaede stroked one of Ash's pale, muscular thighs. It felt like he had steel cables under his skin. Kaede wondered, not for the first time, if getting married would blow the whole minder cover story. In a way, he felt like they were already married, they just hadn't bothered to make it official. Sometimes he felt so much love for Ash he thought his heart might burst.

Ash stroked the back of his neck idly. "You're now the crime boss of Apex, you know."

Kaede nuzzled his face into the side of Ash's neck. He had a slow, steady heartbeat at all times. "No I'm not. I don't want the job. Let there be a power vacuum, because the resulting chaos will keep Dark Justice too busy to bug us. Besides, it's too much work, and I'd rather spend the time with you." He lifted his head and kissed Ash softly on the mouth. Ash responded in kind, the rub of his stubble burning Kaede's face.

To be honest, Kaede didn't really know if Ash was even capable of love. But Ash trusted him, needed him, and he neither trusted nor expressed desire easily. In fact, Ash had once told him he was the first man he ever trusted at all. It didn't come naturally to him. Kaede loved him so much that this was good enough. He couldn't imagine a life without Ash.

Ash pressed him down into the sofa as they kissed, Kaede wrapping his legs around him and urging him on. But Ash broke away long enough to look down at him, and trace the line of his jaw with his thumb. "What are we going to do with the sonic blaster?"

Kaede smiled up him, feeling better than he had since coming to this godforsaken city. "Whatever the fuck we want."

The End

Author Bio

Andrea Speed has always wanted to write a superhero novel, but now thinks that this is just the beginning of Kaede and Ash's exploits, as she now wants to write a supervillain novel. She's the author of the Infected series for Dreamspinner Press, the Josh of the Damned series for Riptide Publishing, and the recent Merged for Less Than Three Press, as well as a whole bunch of other things. Guys, she really likes to write.

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WAITING, HOPING, WISHING

By Nic Starr

Photo Description

A gorgeous young man is lying on a bed in nothing but his grey boxer briefs. He is clean-cut with a tanned, smooth and beautifully defined body. He should be enjoying the luxurious bed with its crisp, white linens as he relaxes in the hotel room, but his look is pensive. In the first photo, he is clearly worried and slightly sad. In the second photo, he is focused on his phone, as if it can provide the answers he is looking for.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He's been waiting for that text for more than a week. Please tell us either what happens next or what happened to get him here and whether he frowns or smiles next.

Thank you so much,

Sincerely,

Melanie~~

P.S. Prompter requests:

** HEA. (The picture scene can be the beginning or the end of the story.)*

** No BDSM, dub-con, or non-con, please.*

** At least some smexin', please. (I love frottage, but most of the standard sexiness is good, too.)*

** Humor or sweetness is a plus, but total fluff isn't required.*

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, homophobia, new adult, blue collar, slow burn/UST, (partially) in the closet, coming (the rest of the way) out

Word Count: 21,130

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Dedication

For Melanie, whose choice of photo and letter prompted this story—I loved writing the story and I hope it meets your expectations. To Robyn, in appreciation of all your suggestions, support and encouragement—it's been a ton of fun. To Nicole, for your fabulous feedback and to Beany, for your wonderful editing. To Meredith Russell, thank you for the gorgeous cover. Finally, thank you to the Love's Landscapes organisers and volunteers who make this event possible.

WAITING, HOPING, WISHING

By Nic Starr

Chapter One

Dean came out of the bathroom and made a flying leap onto the bed, landing on his stomach. At the same time, he reached out to the bedside table and snatched up the phone, hitting the send button.

“Hello?” he greeted as he flipped over onto his back.

“Hey, Dean, it’s me.” He smiled at the voice and the familiarity that meant Matt didn’t need to introduce himself.

“Hey, Matt. How are things?” He fully expected small talk and the usual “fine”, so he was surprised by the response.

“Fucked.” Matt cut straight to the point.

Dean had absolutely no idea how to respond, so he stayed silent. After a moment or two, Matt filled the silence with his quiet voice.

“Stuart and I are splitting up.”

Dean continued to stare at the ceiling, unable to voice a response, heart singing just a little inside, but at the same time, immediately recognising that Matt would be hurting.

“It’s been coming. I mean, you know things haven’t been the best lately.”

“Yeah, but I thought you guys were working it out?”

“So did I. Well, at least I thought things were on the improve. It seems Stuart didn’t have the same idea.” Dean waited for Matt to go on, but he didn’t continue.

Dean had played sounding board to his friend over the last couple of months, listening as Matt confided the problems that he and Stuart were having. They’d met in Sydney, being introduced through a friend of a friend, and been together for a couple of years now. About a year ago, Stuart had a job offer in Melbourne, and Matt had successfully arranged a transfer within the company he worked for and had followed his boyfriend to the new city. The first six months had gone really well, at least according to the stories Matt had shared—a great terrace house, good jobs, new friends, new restaurants and hot clubs to visit. The last six months were not so rosy.

As far as Dean was aware, it came down to a clash of what they wanted out of life. Matt had tired of the party scene. He’d not been a huge club goer while

in Sydney, enjoying the occasional big night out, but being just as happy getting together with friends for a quiet dinner, getting out of town for the weekend, catching a movie or doing something a bit more active. Dean and Matt had spent many a great time together indulging in their shared passions for all these things.

During the new flush of his relationship with Stuart, Matt had seemingly embraced the excitement of a new group of people and being on the arm of his handsome new admirer, but Dean knew he'd been ready to settle down around the time of the move to Melbourne. Rather than wanting to move to Melbourne to set up a home, it seemed that Stuart had gotten itchy feet and just wanted a fresh party scene. And it was clear from the conversations he'd had with Matt, that Matt had been happy to enjoy the new experience, at least for the first few months, until he realised it was pretty much the same shit, different city.

"It turns out he doesn't want to settle down, isn't ready for a commitment. What does he think relocating to another city is, if not a commitment?" Matt sounded more angry than hurt. "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think he was making a commitment. It may not have been half the way around the world, but I had to negotiate with work, find a new home, leave my family and friends. Leave you."

Dean remembered the night Matt told him he was moving as if it were yesterday, and not a year ago. That was the night he realised he'd left it too late to finally tell his best friend how he felt. Not that he *would* have, but the possibility had been there—he *could* have. Acknowledging that admitting the truth was no longer an option was like permanently closing a door, turning the lock and throwing away the key—final, absolute... heartbreaking. So Dean had just continued doing what he'd always done, locked away his feelings and continued to love and support his friend from afar.

Dean finally found his voice.

"Is there anything I can do? Do you want to talk about it?" *Please say no, please say no.* He didn't think he was up to offering advice, not without being able to psych himself up to it. He needed preparation and time to get himself into a calmer state.

"No, at least not yet. But I do need to get away. I need some time to clear my head. I was thinking of coming to Sydney the weekend after next. Is it okay if I bunk down at your place?"

“You know it is. There’s always a place for you here. Just let me know your flight details and I’ll pick you up from the airport.”

“Thanks, Dean. I knew I could count on you. I’ll catch a cab, though, and see you back at your place if that’s all right.”

“Sure, no worries. See you then.”

Dean hit “end” and dropped the phone on the bed beside him, then fell back onto the pillows and exhaled with a big sigh. Hope flared briefly as he realised that Matt would now be single and available, but he stamped it out quick smart. He knew there was no way Matt could fit into his life, not in the way he wanted anyway. He stared at the ceiling, watching the fan slowly circulating, and contemplated the coming weeks with a sense of foreboding and anticipation.

Dean worked tirelessly to make something of himself, to gain the skills and experience he needed to eventually establish his own business. It was hard work, but he was proud of what he’d managed to accomplish in a relatively short time. Dean’s apprenticeship had taught him the skills of a plumber. It wasn’t the sort of job that suited everyone. He’d been the butt of a few jokes amongst his friends, and quite a few comments had been made about the downside of clearing out people’s pipes, but hey, someone had to do it.

He was employed by a big operation, a company that took contracts on large residential jobs, but in another year or so, Dean would have enough saved to set up his own business. He’d be able to buy his own truck and tools and keep himself afloat until he’d had time to build up his own client base.

Dean pulled his truck to a stop outside his parents’ house. He put on the handbrake and grabbed his phone before he locked the truck and headed inside. He tried to join his family for a meal at least once a week, often complaining, but in reality enjoying spending time with his parents. His brother, Warren, and his brother’s fiancée, Janet were usually there, too.

He didn’t bother knocking, just pulled open the fly screen door and called a greeting as he entered the front hall. “It’s just me,” he called as he made his way towards the kitchen. His family didn’t stand on ceremony, and most of the entertaining happened in the kitchen or the family room. As expected, his mum stood by the stove, stirring the contents of a saucepan.

“Gee, Mum, that smells great,” Dean said as he leaned over her shoulder to look into the pot. “You know I love your beef stew.”

She left the spoon resting on the side of the pot and turned slightly to kiss him on the cheek. "It's good to see you, darling. Your dad is in the study watching the news if you want to go see him."

"Sure, just yell if you want any help."

Dean stopped by the fridge and grabbed a drink before he went to visit with his dad. Apart from a quick greeting, they sat companionably in silence while watching details of the latest atrocities that were taking place in the world. As the news bulletin transitioned into the weather forecast, his mum called out from the kitchen to say Warren and Janet had arrived and the dinner was ready. His dad flicked the remote to turn off the television, and they made their way to the dining table in the family room.

"Hey, Janet. It's great to see you," greeted Dean as he gave her a quick kiss and looked towards his brother with a nod. "And you too, big brother."

"You're always such a charmer," laughed Janet as she took her usual seat at the table.

They all took their places as his mum, Nancy, brought a large ceramic casserole dish to the table and placed it on the trivet in the centre. She started dishing out great ladlefuls of the wonderfully aromatic beef, as his dad sliced the loaf of bread and placed it in the basket. The bread was passed around, as was the butter, and they all got stuck into the delicious meal.

The conversation followed the usual pattern, each of them giving an update of what had happened in their lives over the past week, before Janet piped up.

"There's this guy at work you just have to meet. He's absolutely perfect for you."

"Oh geez, here we go again," Warren said under his breath, and gave Dean a sympathetic smile.

"He works in the Finance department. He's so friendly and he's totally gorgeous. Blond hair, blue eyes, hot body—everything you could ask for."

"Really," Dean stated, then decided to humour her. "Perfect match, hey?"

"Definitely! He's very clever. He's only been with the company for six months, but he's made his mark already." Janet worked at an energy company with a role in the Sales division. "And you know the best thing?" she looked at Dean expectantly.

“No, what’s the best thing?”

“He’s gay!” she laughed.

“Well, thank God for that. I’d hate for you to set me up with a straight guy,” Dean deadpanned.

Her heart was in the right place, but Janet seemed to work on the theory that gay men only needed their sexuality in common—the fact that they were gay should be enough for a relationship. Janet didn’t rise to the bait.

“So you’ll meet him?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “We’ve got team drinks after work coming up. You and Warren can meet me towards the end, and I’ll arrange for you to meet Justin. I’m sure you’ll really like him.” She turned immediately towards Nancy and started updating her on the wedding plans.

“Oh, man. You so have to meet this Justin now,” Warren announced. “Otherwise I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Their dad just looked at them both with a resigned look on his face. Dean decided it was best not to get into it. He just wasn’t comfortable discussing dating guys in front of his dad. For all the acceptance of his mum, his brother and Janet, he knew his dad struggled. He never said anything directly, but his silence and inability to make eye contact during these conversations spoke volumes.

Saturday was the day that Dean looked forwards to most during the week, and he’d spent it in a way that was both productive and relaxing—a bike ride, grocery shopping and some housework. Once the cleaning was done, Dean booted up his laptop to pay a couple of bills and check his email. There was nothing that really needed his attention, so he closed the email program and launched Facebook, automatically checking Matt’s wall to see what he’d been up to recently. He didn’t know why he felt so guilty, but he felt a bit like a stalker. However, he couldn’t resist the lure of the details of Matt’s life posted for him to see.

Matt was his closest friend and had been since they were at school. They’d been part of a group of boys who’d bonded over the usual sporting activities, but had recognised something in each other which had sealed their fate as best friends. When he was fourteen, Dean had been caught gazing at the naked

backside of a front-row forward. Josh Lyons might not have been the best player on the senior team, but he was definitely the best looking. Dean hadn't even been aware that he was staring, pretty much unblinkingly ogling with his mouth hanging open. He may as well have been drooling because his admiration was so obvious. So when his classmate, Peter, had called him on it—"Watcha gawking at, fag?"—he'd had absolutely no comeback and stood there like a stunned mullet. Even now, he cringed just remembering how stupid he had been.

He'd remained silent, too afraid to open his mouth and waited for the other shoe to drop. But before Peter could get another word in, Matt had slipped, knocking into Peter, and causing him to drop the armful of equipment he'd been carrying.

"Sorry," Matt quickly apologised. "The tiles are slippery."

By the time everything had been picked up and placed back into Peter's arms, he'd obviously forgotten his original target, and was berating Matt for his clumsiness and stupidity. He finally stormed off, leaving the two boys alone. Matt glanced around before grabbing his hand and giving it a quick squeeze. No more was said, but the message was clear.

From that moment, Dean learned to watch every step he made and censor every word uttered. He became a master at sizing up a scene, identifying the risks and steeling himself against anything that would be a temptation. His eyes never wandered, he spent most of the time in the change room looking at the floor or the inside of a locker. He kept himself distant and out of harm's way.

But a good thing came out of that day—he'd discovered someone he could finally talk to. As the only gay boys, at least the only gay boys they knew of, they'd naturally gravitated together, giving each other friendship and support. But it didn't take long for them to realise they had a lot in common, besides just their attraction to boys. They were alike with their sense of humour—the sillier the better; enjoying the same types of movies—drama and comedy; and both had a love of music. Matt was prepared to cycle with Dean on the weekend and Dean repaid this by playing indoor cricket, although he didn't particularly enjoy team sports. And of course, they both shared a newfound interest in gay porn—thank goodness for the Internet.

They may have been similar in many ways, but they still had their differences. Matt was much more scholarly than Dean and did well at school, wanting to do further study. He tutored Dean in the subjects he struggled with

such as history—he hated remembering the names and dates and details of events from so long ago. Dean was practical and hands-on, so he helped Matt in woodwork and with things like repairing his bike. Matt was more outgoing and confident, and took the lead on their new adventures.

In their younger days, they'd spent their time playing or watching sport with their friends from school, or hanging out at Dean's house to play video games or watch movies. Matt's favourite movie, the one they'd watched time and time again, was *The Outsiders*. They'd come across the classic movie with its cast of hot, young actors and loved the story of boys from the wrong side of the track. Matt still had a thing for Rob Lowe to this day. Dean also had fond memories of the time they'd managed to hire *Brokeback Mountain* when it was first released. He'd been a bit nervous watching it with Matt, and still blushed when he thought of his own reaction to the movie.

Then Dean had left school early at the end of Year Ten to take up his apprenticeship, while Matt continued at the local public school through to Year Twelve before going to university. When Dean had started as a plumber and was no longer seeing the guys from school regularly, he was worried that his friendships would disappear. He needn't have been concerned—Matt wasn't going to let him go so easily. If anything, and despite Dean's heavy workload, they spent more time together. They saw less of the other guys, but this wasn't something that overly upset Dean. He was happy just to spend time with Matt, often lying on his bed listening to music with his headphones on while Matt sat at his desk and completed his assignments.

Occasionally, they'd go to parties together. A time or two, they'd managed to slip by less-observant door security and hang out at a local pub. Matt usually led these adventures, dragging the group along and convincing them of how much fun it would be to have a beer or two while underage. It was a challenge to beat the system. Once they'd become legal, it was Matt once again who'd shown Dean the ropes, encouraging him to venture out to Oxford Street and discover the world of gay clubs. But it had been agony watching Matt hooking up with other guys, not that either of them hooked up very often. Matt found the short-term sexual gratification of hook ups left him feeling guilty and dissatisfied.

For Dean, the attraction was there, both the physical—definitely the physical—but also the mental attraction. He knew deep in his bones that Matt was the man for him. But they never hooked up. Things had never moved beyond friendship. Not only was Dean painfully shy about his sexuality when

he was younger, he also didn't want to rock the boat and risk the friendship that meant so much to him. The one person he could truly be himself around with no pretence, no trying to hold anything back, no having to watch his words or worry that he'd be seen giving someone the wrong look.

As he remembered the good times with Matt, he opened the folder of photos on his laptop and started clicking through—birthday parties, family dinners, at the cricket, at the beach, Matt on the back of a motorbike, Matt standing on top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and hundreds of ridiculous selfies that Matt had taken and messaged him. He saved each and every one, and they still brought a smile to his face.

He loved Matt so much he wanted him to be happy, even if that happiness was to be found with someone else. If he'd had any hint or inkling that Matt had an interest in him, maybe things would have been different, but Matt had only shown interest in others. Whenever they headed into the city and hit the gay bars, Matt always found someone who caught his attention, while Dean struggled with his shyness and fear, compounded by his unrequited feelings.

With a sigh, Dean shook himself out of his memories, slammed the laptop shut, and stood up from the desk. He retrieved his washing hamper, and decided doing the laundry would distract him from thoughts of what he could never have.

"Dean, sweetie, over here!" Janet called out enthusiastically, unfortunately waving the hand that held her wine glass and sloshing the remnants of the drink over Warren, who stood at her side. "I'm so glad you could make it. I wasn't sure you were going to get here on time." She turned to nudge Warren. "Honey, can you go and get Dean a drink while I introduce him around?"

Warren gave him a brotherly squeeze on the shoulder as he headed towards the bar, and Janet wrapped her arm around him, giving him a friendly peck on the cheek.

"Some of them have gone home." She waved her arm in the direction of a group of people seated around a large table "But the stayers are still here. See the guy on the end?"

He looked in the direction she was indicating. "That's Justin. I told you he was gorgeous, didn't I?"

She was right. Justin was a good-looking guy. He'd taken his jacket off and also removed his tie, leaving him in an open-necked shirt. The white business

shirt with a fine, pale stripe in the fabric, served to complement his fair skin. He obviously didn't get to spend a lot of time outdoors, or maybe he just did a good job with the slip, slop, slap. As Dean studied him, he looked up from the conversation he'd been having with the young lady seated beside him and smiled shyly Dean's way. Slightly embarrassed at being caught staring, Dean looked back towards Janet.

"Yes, he's good looking," he agreed. "But that doesn't mean that anything is going to happen."

"I know, but it could," she responded with a grin. "That's the beauty of meeting new people—you never know what is going to happen. You need to be prepared to put yourself out there, Dean, otherwise you're never going to find the man of your dreams."

Dean didn't contradict her, although he was tempted to tell her he'd already found Mr. Right. It was just a shame that Mr. Right didn't know it.

He looked over at Justin again. He looked a bit younger than Dean, but maybe he wasn't, given he was some kind of whiz-kid at the company he and Janet worked for. His baby face could be deceiving. He was fair-haired with a longer lock that fell across his forehead, which he kept flicking out of the way by tilting his head. He was slight in build, but not skinny, and appeared tall. Although from his seated position, it was hard to say for sure.

Warren returned with the drinks, passing a beer to Dean while Janet wandered over to the table where her friends were sitting. It wasn't long before she returned, this time with Justin in tow.

"Boys, I'd like you to meet Justin. Justin, this is my future husband Warren Clark and his brother, Dean."

Warren stuck his hand out and shook hands with Justin before Dean did the same. "Nice to meet you." Justin gave him a tentative smile, before looking down at the drink he was holding.

Janet tucked her arm in to Warren's. "If you'll excuse us, boys, I need to talk to Warren about something." She dragged him in the direction of the bar while Warren hunched his shoulders apologetically. Janet was definitely not subtle.

He turned his attention back to Justin who was now watching Janet's retreating back with a look of fear on his face. *God knows what Janet's told him*, he thought, knowing it was obviously something, given Justin's reaction.

"Listen," he began. "I'm not sure what Janet's told you about me, but I'm pretty harmless." He gave Justin a reassuring smile.

Justin looked at him and returned the smile, visibly relaxing. "Yeah, she did have a few things to say, but nothing bad, I swear."

"Shall we sit down?" Dean asked, relieved the tension was dissipating.

They moved to a small table, rather than joining the larger table with the half-dozen or so of Janet and Justin's work colleagues still seated around it. Silence descended as Justin looked nervously around, and Dean wondered how to start a conversation.

He'd originally thought he would give Janet's matchmaking a chance, or at least try to keep an open mind and not dwell on Matt's upcoming visit. But since the call from Matt, Matt was all he could think about, and his heart just wasn't in it, overriding his best intentions to put himself out there. He also acknowledged that, for all his good looks, Justin just wasn't his type. The perfect man for Dean was someone who would take charge—he found confidence a real turn on. Justin was too shy and nervous, and was definitely not going to make the first move. That was okay; Dean would put him out of his misery.

"Justin, I know Janet had grand hopes for us hitting it off, but I wanted to let you know that I'm not really looking for anything at the moment. I'm sure you're a great guy, but I don't think it's going to work out."

"Oh, thank goodness." Justin smiled. "I was going to say the exact same thing to you. Janet's got it in her head that she needs to help out her lonely brother-in-law. That had me worried at first, as I wondered what was wrong with you." He laughed. "I was relieved to see you weren't an ogre or anything, but I hate to tell you this, you're not really my type."

Dean grinned in relief. "I'm not, am I? So what exactly is your type?"

"Well..." Justin glanced around the room before finally resting his eyes on a guy playing pool. "See that guy holding the pool stick?"

"The one with the dark T-shirt, buzz cut, bulging biceps and tattoos? No, I didn't notice him."

Justin laughed, "That's the one. That's my type."

As they watched, he leaned over the table to take his shot—nice ass, nice biceps, nice girlfriend. Dean gave Justin a rueful look as the object of their

attention placed his arm around a slender girl who folded herself against his side. His hand was in the waistband of her jeans, giving the major clue that Justin wouldn't be snagging this particular prize.

"Yeah, story of my life." Justin sighed.

"Tell me about it," Dean echoed. So Justin did.

They actually ended up spending a great evening together, comparing love lives, or lack thereof, and by the end of the night, Dean thought he might just have found a new friend. They now just needed to work out how to break it to Janet. When she'd left an hour or so earlier with Warren, she'd given them both a quick kiss and given Dean a wink, telling them both to behave.

"Let's not tell her anything. Let's just say we've exchanged numbers and leave it at that. She can come to her own conclusions."

Dean was amused by Justin's suggestion. "Great idea. It'll give us both some breathing space. I could do without the matchmaking for a while."

Justin agreed. "Her heart's in the right place. She just wants everyone to be as happy as she is now that she's found her man. But I think she's tried to set me up with every gay man she knows. I'm hoping you were last on the list."

As they parted, Justin rang his mobile phone, enabling Dean to save the number into his phone. It gave him a good feeling to know he had a least one friend besides Matt who understood him, and he was looking forwards to getting to know Justin better.

As Dean lay in bed later that night, he wondered if he'd ever meet anyone who could replace Matt in his heart. Was he unconsciously measuring everybody against Matt? Was he doing himself a disservice by not at least giving other guys a chance? Maybe the time had come to put a stop to the hopeless waiting and wishing for something that he would never have.

Chapter Two

It had been one of those days, hot and sweaty work as they laboured to finish the job and meet the deadline.

“Vince, you take the dishwasher and the kitchen sink. Johnno, you connect the fridge. Shout when you need a hand moving it.”

“Sure, boss,” grinned Johnno.

“Hey! Cut it out,” warned Dean. He knew Johnno was only winding him up, and tried to lighten his response, but it irked him no end when the guys referred to him as *boss*. He was supervising the job, but the last thing he wanted to do was provide any more separation between him and the men. Things were all ’round better if he was just seen as one of the guys.

Between the three of them, it didn’t take long to complete the job, and before he knew it they were packing up the tools. He looked at his watch and noted it was nearly midday. “Okay, boys. Let’s grab a break and we can finish up after lunch.”

There were another two teams on-site so they grabbed their lunches and wandered over to where the others were congregating in an open space, but under the shade of a huge gum tree. He sat on the grass, not caring about the leaves and debris, but eager to get stuck into some food—it was hungry and thirsty work. Like most of the other guys, he brought lunch in with him in the mornings, as it was too far to drive to the nearest shop. Not only that, it was cheaper to bring lunch from home, and Dean was grateful for every penny he could add to his savings. The quicker the money accumulated, the quicker he would be able to get a loan and start his own business. He opened the lunch pack, pushed the ice brick out of the way, retrieved a ham and cheese sandwich, and dug in with gusto.

Vince produced a Tupperware container full of chocolate slice and handed it around to the boys.

“This is great,” praised Terry, around a mouthful of the rich treat. He shoved the rest in his mouth and grabbed a second one. “If my wife packed me lunch like this every day, I’d be in heaven.”

“And as big as the side of a house,” teased Johnno. “Not to mention the fact that you don’t have a wife.”

“Yeah,” chipped in Vince. “No girl in her right mind would want to settle down with you.”

Terry leaned across and punched him in the arm. “What would you know? I’m always having to fight them off with a stick.”

The bantering continued, and Dean watched the boys as he finished his sandwich. They always gave each other a hard time. It was friendly teasing, nothing meant too seriously, and he enjoyed watching them try to one-up each other. As with most conversations between this group of guys, the discussion turned to the activities of the past weekend—girls and football. When he’d first started working as an apprentice, he’d been introduced to the world of the Aussie bloke—pool, beer, sport and women—stereotypical maybe, but actually a true reflection of the guys he worked with. It had been an eye-opener and reinforced to Dean just how different from his co-workers he was. Now he was much more comfortable with the joking and enjoyed spending time with the guys. All but Terry, that is. Terry was the asshole of the group, mean and bigoted, and one of the main reasons Dean liked to keep his private life to himself.

“Don’t forget the barbeque on Sunday,” Brett reminded them as they finished up.

As they started packing up the remains of their lunch and getting ready to head back to work, Dean thought of the weekend barbeque. He wanted to be thankful for the invitation and look forwards to the chance to hang out with the guys in a casual setting away from work, but sometimes it was a strain and he found it difficult to relax. The longer he knew them, the harder it was to avoid the questions about his *dates*, and why he never brought someone along to the pub or their other gatherings.

He wanted to be honest. He was honest with himself about his sexuality, he was honest with his family about being gay, but he just didn’t know how this group of guys would react to that side of him. It was probably a stereotype, but until he was proved wrong, he believed the blokes he worked with day-to-day—the builders, plumbers and electricians—wouldn’t understand his attraction to other men. These guys were tough, hardworking and into their football, beer and girls. He’d had a run-in, well more than a run-in actually, with Terry early on in the job and discovered the hard way that it was best just to keep quiet and be one of the boys.

His mum had decided to use the weekly dinner with his family to have a heart-to-heart.

“We just want to see you happy, darling. Your father and I don’t mean to pressure you, but you seem so sad, Dean, and we only want to help. I just wish you’d talk to us.” His mum grabbed him and pulled him into a surprisingly strong hug. “You’re our baby—” He pulled away.

“Okay, Mum, now you’re pushing it.” But he gave her a smile, which she returned.

She put her hand to his cheek. “You’re not doing yourself any favours, you know. You need to get out there and live your life, darling. I know it’s hard, but hiding away won’t make it get any better.”

She moved away, opening the overhead cupboard and taking down a wine glass before moving to the fridge and taking a bottle of chilled white wine from the shelf. “Would you like a drink, darling?”

“Sure,” Dean responded, taking a beer from her, twisting off the cap and throwing it in the bin. After his mum poured herself a glass of wine, he took the bottle from her and put it back in the fridge. They took their drinks and moved to the table.

“What about those clubs in town? Have you thought about going there?” she questioned.

“Mum!” he said in shock, totally surprised his mother would suggest such a thing.

“Don’t *mum* me,” she said. “I’m not as old and out of touch as you might think. I’ve even been to a club or two in my day, which wasn’t that long ago, I’ll have you know.” She laughed and took a sip of the chilled Chardonnay.

“Really?” he asked, surprised.

“Really,” she affirmed.

“Then why would you want me to go there?” Dean really was confused. He was sure her idea of what a gay club entailed was probably not too far from the truth, and couldn’t fathom why she’d want him to be in that type of environment. *I am her baby after all*, he thought.

She took another sip of her drink before placing down her wine glass and looking at him solemnly. “It’s not the club, Dean. I just want you to go

somewhere where you can be yourself. Somewhere where there's at least a chance that you'll meet someone. Ever since Matt moved away, you've been so alone."

At the mention of Matt's name, Dean stiffened.

"At least when he lived here in Sydney you had someone to talk to, someone you could truly be yourself around. You haven't been the same since he left. You don't talk about him much. Do you stay in contact?"

Dean answered truthfully, the bare facts with little embellishment, just answering the immediate question. "Yeah, we talk. And there's Facebook and a Skype call every now and then. He's actually coming to stay next weekend."

"Oh, that's nice, darling. I'm glad you're still close. I remember when you were boys and lived in each other's pockets. You must bring him around for a meal. I'd love to see him. It's been much too long."

It had been much too long—eleven months. He had thought not seeing Matt would be the best thing, thinking that it would be easier with some space between them, and he'd tried not to think of Matt and his boyfriend Stuart establishing themselves in a new city. His mum was right, they had been really close, maybe too close, and the distance now was preferable. But the eleven months apart hadn't had the desired effect, and Dean's feelings for Matt were as strong as ever.

His mum rose from her seat. "Speaking of dinner, excuse me, darling. I'm going to see how the roast is coming along." She left him sitting at the table, nursing his half-finished beer and dwelling on the past.

His mum's questions about Matt only served to make Dean think about him all the more. They'd exchanged a few messages over the last few days, but Dean was looking forwards to having Matt in Sydney where he could provide the support Matt needed. For such a long time, Matt had played the role of protector, looking out for Dean's best interests and seeing him through difficult times. It would be nice to do the same for his friend for a change.

Of course, thinking of Matt in his hero role reminded Dean of one of the worst nights of his life.

One night, when Dean had been exiting a gay club, he'd literally run into someone. He tried to apologise to the person he'd bumped into, shocked to see

it was Terry who had recently started working at the same company. Terry was pissed, and he was not a happy drunk. He shoved Dean hard, forcing him back against the brick wall of the building, knocking the wind out of him.

“Don’t touch me, you little faggot,” he hissed as Dean tried to right himself, this time pushing him so aggressively that the back of Dean’s head snapped into the brick hard enough to leave him reeling. He raised his hand to the back of his head where the pain was radiating violently, and realised too late that Terry thought he was going to punch him. In his drunken state, Terry raised his fist, and if not for the arrival of his equally drunken mates, Dean had no doubt Terry would have hit him. He was left paralysed with fear and labouring to catch his breath.

Matt had been furious when Dean had finally gained the courage, a few months later, to tell him what had happened. He had wanted Dean to report him to the boss, but too much time had passed, the incident hadn’t happened at work and he didn’t think Terry was a real threat to him. Dean wasn’t even sure how much Terry remembered of the incident, if anything, due to how much he’d obviously had to drink. He had never said anything directly to Dean; however he made a lot of snide and derogatory remarks about gay men, so Dean preferred to stay on the safe side. He kept out of Terry’s way and tried not to say or do anything to antagonise him. Matt hadn’t been so forgiving and had wanted to seek Terry out—to make sure he knew his actions weren’t acceptable, and most likely give Terry a taste of his own medicine.

Dean had been relieved when Matt had agreed not to rock the boat, but it still made him feel warm inside to know he had someone like Matt who cared enough about him to go to battle on his behalf. Matt made him feel safe and secure. Now it was his turn to make sure Matt was given all the love and support he needed to get his own life back on track.

On Fridays, they tried to finish the day at the local. The local was whatever pub or bar happened to be closest to the current work site. This time it was a pub close to the city, a block or two from the building site and the typical hotel for this type of location—two bars, a tiny beer garden, a bistro and a gaming room. They’d managed to grab one of the few tables outside and made the most of the late afternoon sunshine while they enjoyed a couple of beers. They’d already had one round and a small cheer went up when his co-worker Steve returned bearing a metal tray laden with round two.

“Here you go, boys,” he said as he handed over the glasses filled to the brim with the amber ale.

“I’m so glad this week’s over. The weekend couldn’t come fast enough,” Dean said before taking a long swallow of the cold beer.

“Yeah, bring it on,” exclaimed Johnno in agreement. “A chance to sleep in, no place to be, nothing to do. Bloody brilliant!”

They all nodded in agreement, raising their glasses to toast the two days with no seven o’clock starts and hard labour. All except Vince.

“It’s all right for you blokes. I’ve got the missus on my back. She’s got plans for the yard this weekend. Not only do I have to do the lawns, but clean out the gutters, too,” he complained. “You boys don’t know how easy you have it, what with living at home with the folks or living in a small flat. There’s nothing relaxing about living the dream on the quarter acre block, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” He downed the beer in one long gulp.

“Aw, come on, Vince, it can’t be that bad,” Johnno cajoled. “Not with a missus like yours.”

They’d all met Vince’s wife, Anne, and she was as nice as they came. Vince loved his home, his wife and his kids, and everything that came with it. He had the good grace to look sheepish.

“So what’s everyone up to on the weekend?” asked Joe, and the conversation moved on to weekend sporting activities, family engagements and household tasks.

Dean watched his work buddies, enjoying the conversation and the teasing. The sun was warm on his shoulders, the beer cold in his hand, and the conversation a comfortable buzz surrounding him. He relaxed as he thought of the upcoming weekend, his own plans including a night on the town—for once he’d take his mum up on one of her suggestions. A drink, a dance, and maybe he’d get lucky. Certainly nothing to lose, and it sure beat sitting around on his own for yet another Saturday night. Sure, he could meet up with one of the guys, either a work buddy or one of the small group of school friends he still kept in contact with, but it wasn’t the same. He needed to be able to be himself and let his hair down so to speak.

“Who wants chips?” Joe’s question dragged him out of his reverie, and he stared at his empty glass and then the group around him before standing.

“I’ll get them. It’s my round anyway.”

After placing the order, he made a quick trip back to the table with a couple of bags of chips and some straw baskets to put them in. He then returned to the bar and stood waiting for the beers to be pulled. As he waited for his order, he looked around at the crowd that was starting to fill the small bar. He and the guys had gotten there early. Their early start also meant they finished work early so they’d been able to arrive at the pub not long after three. As it was coming up to five, the corporate crowd was now starting to filter in.

Just looking at the men in their dark suits, with their crisp shirts and ties, reminded him of Matt. *God, he had a thing for a guy in a suit!* Matt looked great in anything, but when he wore a suit, he unintentionally did things to Dean that were torture. Tall and slim, just a little taller than Dean at six foot two inches, his strong shoulders and narrow waist were just made for the tailored lines of a suit.

Dean found himself staring at a couple of guys who approached the bar and stood next to him. The younger man picked up the wine list from the bar, and together with his companion, browsed the extensive selection of wines stocked by the inner city pub. Just watching the fair heads tilted close together brought a lump to his throat as he thought of his friend. Matt’s hair was a dark blond which he kept fairly short in the usual corporate standard, although he always left a little length on top, a sign of his slightly rebellious nature. But where Matt differed from these two handsome men, at least in Dean’s eyes, was in his sex appeal—it didn’t matter if it was late at night or first thing in the morning, Matt’s strong jaw always had a well-groomed, dark shadow of stubble. The contrast of sophisticated suit and sexy scruff was enticing, and when combined with his olive complexion and clear, blue eyes, set a standard that no man had been able to beat.

“You ’right, mate?” the voice of the man behind the bar interrupted.

Dean jerked his attention back to barman, “What? Yeah, everything’s fine.” He left a tip, picked up the tray and made his way through the now busy room back to the boys.

He passed out the drinks before squeezing back into his seat and reaching for the chips that were almost gone. He dragged the basket in front of him and made do with the crumbs.

“Sorry, mate.” Terry laughed. “I guess we were hungry.”

“Hey, look at that, will you?” Terry nudged his shoulder, using a tilt of his head to indicate the two men who’d entered the beer garden and headed towards a table nearby as another group departed.

It was the guys from the bar. One held an ice bucket, filled with ice and a bottle of white wine. Two wine glasses rested in the top of the bucket. His companion carried a chip basket in one hand and used his other to gently steer his friend. He assumed it was the sight of the man’s hand on the small of the other man’s back that had caught Terry’s attention.

Terry rolled his eyes in... was it disgust? Dean wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but his meaning was clear. Luckily though he didn’t say anything further.

Dean determined that he would make this his last beer of the day. Suddenly the enjoyment of an afternoon at the pub had faded, and he wanted nothing more than to go home and have a quiet night in.

He wished he felt as good as he knew he looked. At a touch over six foot, tanned and muscled, Dean was in good shape. He had the taut body of someone who worked physically for a living, not the muscles obtained from countless gym sessions. His tight, dark jeans and fitted, black T-shirt, made the most of the slim hips, flat stomach and well-formed chest and biceps. There was nothing flashy about his appearance, just simple clothes and boots with a plain leather band tied at his wrist, but he knew he’d made the most of his assets. Dean had never gone over the top with his appearance, just accentuated his natural good looks—what you saw was what you got—Dean, pure and simple. But Dean pure and simple was pretty hot. He’d been told he was good looking often enough in the past to believe it, but he didn’t like to play on his good looks. Well, not too much.

He knew he wouldn’t have any problems attracting attention because he hadn’t in the past, and that’s what he counted on tonight. He’d been looking forwards to getting out, to some dancing and flirting, and maybe finding someone for something more. If he was honest, it was the something more that drove his plan to hit the clubs. It had been a while since he’d last visited this part of the city, and he’d been looking forwards to the Saturday night out. Thinking about Matt had almost made him change his mind about heading out, some weird sense of being disloyal, but he pushed the thought aside and resolved to have a good time.

As he stood at the bar, waiting for his vodka tonic to be poured, he scanned the crowd. As usual, the club was doing a busy trade. The corners of the room were relatively dark, the gloom being brightened at regular intervals by flashes of light. Over the dance floor the flashes were more constant, the seething mass of dancers illuminated by strobing beams of light. It was hot and crowded and noisy, perfect to get lost in. He felt someone push up close next to him, drawing his attention back to the bar. It was crowded, but not so crowded the guy had to be pressed to his side—the games had started already. He glanced at the tall, dark-haired man at his right. The greying at the temples gave him a distinguished look. Despite his maturity, or maybe because of it, he was an attractive guy. He indicated the glass he put on the damp surface of the bar and leaned close to be heard over the pounding music. “Buy you a drink?” So, good looking, generous and gentlemanly.

Dean swept his eyes over his admirer, preparing to accept his offer when it occurred to him that Mr-tall-dark-mature-and-handsome was just the type of guy that Matt usually went for. *Shit! Why did he have to think of that?*

“No, thanks anyway,” he said. “I’ve got it covered.”

He picked up the glass the bartender had just placed in front of him, threw a twenty onto the tray and turned away from the bar. He pushed through the crowd and headed towards the back where some small tables were situated, cringing slightly at the stickiness underfoot.

Over the next hour and a half he repeated the action—head to the bar for a refill, turn down any guy who approached him, back to the relatively secluded spot he’d secured, slowly finish his drink, repeat. However, by the time he reached drink number four, things were looking a lot better. He’d moved to a booth and was enjoying the atmosphere, body relaxed and swaying to the music, so when Mr-tall-dark-mature-and-handsome made his second approach, he forgot all about his reasons for turning him down in the first place.

The guy wandered over to Dean’s table, indicating the empty space beside him. He leaned over and raised his voice to be heard over the low throbbing bass.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

Dean tilted his head, nodding towards the seat beside him, and the guy moved in, not needing any more of an invitation. He placed his drink on the dark timber tabletop and pointed to Dean’s drink.

“Do you want another one?” he asked.

What was it with this guy? All he seemed to want to do was ply him with drinks. They hadn't even exchanged names yet.

Dean thought for a few seconds, but had enough sense to realise another drink was the last thing he needed. He shook his head to decline the offer.

He watched the older guy play with his own drink, swirling the straw and moving the ice cubes around in the glass. He must have been mid-thirties or even forties, at least judging by the silvering hair at his temples and the faint lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes, although in the dim light it was difficult to tell. He was wearing dark pants and a dark, buttoned shirt, the top few buttons undone and exposing an expanse of his chest with only a smattering of dark hair. He was well put together—great clothes, fabulous hair, neatly groomed scruff on his jaw—but his actions didn't reflect any of the confidence he should have been entitled to feel. Long moments passed, and he kept stirring the drink, the ice cubes now no more than ice chips.

Dean found himself getting pissed off at the guy's silence, *for God's sake*, Dean thought, *he approached me, you'd think he'd have some sort of line ready or at least strike up a conversation!* Strong and silent definitely wasn't the type Dean preferred, more like strong and take charge. He sighed and took another large sip of his drink as he prepared to get this thing moving.

He started with the obvious. “I'm Dean.”

“Ah, hi. I'm John.”

“Well, it's nice to meet you, John.” Dean had to lean towards him to be heard over the music. John didn't expand. There was silence again.

This wasn't going to be easy, and Dean wondered why he was bothering. He really only wanted one thing, and he wasn't at all sure that John was going to be the one to give it to him. But just then, John looked at him, dragging his eyes from the top of Dean's dark hair, down his torso and finally stopping at his crotch. Okay, so maybe this was going somewhere.

“Do you want to dance?” Dean asked, deciding the dance floor was the most obvious way of getting them together.

“I'm not much of a dancer,” John responded. “I seemed to miss that part when they gave me my gay gene.”

Dean laughed. Well, it appeared that maybe John had a sense of humour.

After a brief period of convincing John to dance, ending with Dean squeezing past him and then dragging him by the arm to get him out of his seat, they found themselves amongst the crowd. The vodka started to kick in and a wave of dizziness swept over Dean causing him to stumble on his feet and knock into John. John just grabbed him, wrapping his arms around Dean's waist and holding him upright. They moved like that for a while, swaying back and forth, rather than actually doing much dancing, but still it didn't take long to get hot and sweaty.

They were surrounded by guys making out on the dance floor, the crowded space a perfect opportunity to bump and grind. The half-naked bodies left little to the imagination and reminded Dean of why he had come to the club in the first place. He was here to scratch his itch, to find someone for a night to satisfy his urge. Over John's shoulder, he watched two guys push up against one another. Equal in height and dressed similarly in jeans and no shirts, their chests glistened with sweat. The leaner of the two, with fair skin and auburn hair, had his hands on his dance partner's shoulders, and as Dean watched, shoved him backwards until he came up against the wall and couldn't move any further. With nowhere to go, he was pressed hard between the plaster and the man who was now holding him by the wrists and grinding against his body. His head fell back and Dean saw, rather than heard, him groan. He was held tight, and the relentless pressure from his partner kept him immobile and straining, unable to do anything but be at the mercy of the red-haired man.

Dean let out a groan of his own as he watched the scene unfolding before him, his cock thickening as he imagined being the one forced against the wall, mouth forced open to accept the kisses of his partner. John gave his shoulders a gentle squeeze and pulled back to smile at him. So maybe John wasn't the man of his dreams and maybe he wasn't going to take charge and give Dean what he wanted, but from the feel of things, he wouldn't be adverse to Dean's advances.

They made their way back to the table, via a quick stop at the bar, for refills. Stupid probably, but Dean wasn't driving, and he now found the idea of losing himself in the drink, noise and the other man was so appealing. He tumbled back into the booth, sloshing the vodka onto the table where the alcohol pooled, adding to the sticky mess that was already on the timber top. "Whoops." He laughed, licking the liquid from his fingers.

He proceeded to end the night in a way he knew he'd regret in the morning. The temporary alcohol-induced happiness and short-term sexual gratification left him feeling guilty, unfulfilled and wanting.

Chapter Three

It had been a shit day at work. They'd been plumbing apartments again when a burst pipe outside had meant turning off all the water to the building. He and Joe had been diverted to do the repair work, although it wasn't usually something he did, well at least not recently. It was hard and dirty work and he was covered in mud from head to toe. All he wanted to do was jump in the shower and stand there until the water ran clean. He'd been on the go since before six that morning so he was bone-tired as well as filthy. So the plan was shower, and an hour's nap, and then prepare for Matt's arrival. He figured he'd have a few hours, trusting that Matt would have finished his day at the office and then needed a couple of hours to get himself to the airport and fly to Sydney.

He took the lift instead of the stairs, stumbling with exhaustion as he reached the door of his flat. It took him a minute to fumble with the key in the door before he finally got it to turn. As he pushed it open, the door was suddenly pulled from the inside, and he found himself falling through the opening into the small foyer. "Umphhh!" Matt's arms came up and caught him as he fell forwards, and he looked up in shock.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Matt laughed. "Saving your butt, it looks like."

He still had his arms wrapped around Dean, so Dean pulled himself together and stood back up straight. His heart slowed a little and he flushed with pleasure as he took in the sight before him. Matt stood in all his glory. He'd removed his tie and jacket, but still wore his dress pants and white shirt, which now had dirt on the sleeves. He took a large breath, exhaled and stepped back.

"Geez, you scared me half to death. Sorry about your shirt, mate, but you deserve it. Frightened the living daylights out of me," Dean exclaimed.

He reached across and brushed the grey dust from the sleeve of Matt's previously spotless white shirt.

"What are you doing here so early anyway?"

Matt turned and started walking back towards the living room as he spoke. Dean suppressed a groan as he watched him walk away, his beautiful arse perfectly showcased in the dark trousers.

"I was too antsy to wait for work to be over and couldn't concentrate, so I took a half-day. They owe me time anyway, what with all the extra hours we've been putting in."

Matt plonked himself down on the couch and made himself comfortable, leaning back into the throw pillows and throwing an arm along the back.

Dean stayed standing, not wanting to dirty the fabric of his lounge. He felt off balance, still shocked from the surprise of falling into Matt's arms and overwhelmed by the feelings of pure joy at having Matt finally here, but also feeling concern for his friend.

"I'm just going to take a quick shower and change. You'll be all right? Help yourself to a drink or something."

Matt laughed and pointed to the beer bottle already open on the glass coffee table.

"Right. Well, I guess I'll shower, then. I'll be back soon."

He walked down the hall, turning to sneak a quick glance at Matt, seeing him pick up the remote and aim it at the wide screen television. He looked so at home on Dean's couch, feet on the table, relaxed and comfortable.

He kept the temperature cool to help distract himself from the knowledge of Matt sprawled across his couch, and focused on a quick and functional wash. He felt somewhat more composed after his shower, but was still slightly on edge, rattled by Matt's early appearance. He dressed in an old pair of comfortable, worn jeans and a grey T-shirt, and looked at his reflection in the mirror, pleased it didn't reflect his inner turmoil. He pushed his damp hair back from his forehead before padding, barefoot towards the kitchen.

He called to Matt as he walked through the living room, "You hungry? I'm going to throw together a stir-fry."

"Sounds great." Matt followed him to the small kitchen.

While Dean gathered the ingredients from the fridge and grabbed the kitchen utensils he'd need, Matt wandered around to the far side of the island bench, taking a seat on a stool before taking a sip of his drink.

Dean eyed him as he started preparing the vegetables. Even slightly rumpled, he looked gorgeous. His jaw was shadowed with the day's growth of stubble and his hair fell forwards into his blue eyes. He'd rolled his sleeves up,

which exposed the strong muscles of his forearms with their light smattering of hair. He imagined touching those arms, or even better, those arms holding him.

"So do you have any special plans for the weekend?" he asked as he cut into a red capsicum and attempted to divert his errant thoughts.

"Not really. I just needed to get out of the house for a couple of days. Maybe we could hit a club tomorrow night or grab a movie or something."

"Sure," Dean responded. He picked up the capsicum and started cutting it into long strips. "So you're okay to stay in tonight? I thought we could eat and then watch a movie."

"Yeah, okay." Matt smiled and reached across to grab a cutting board, dragging it in front of him, along with some carrots. That little smile made Dean's heart flutter just a bit. He sighed and passed Matt a vegetable peeler. "I really do appreciate you having me this weekend, Dean. I know it can't be a barrel of laughs, having me land on your doorstep like this."

"Hey, that's what friends are for, right? Besides, you're no trouble. You should know that by now."

Matt nodded, finished peeling the carrots, then picked up a knife from the bench, and started slicing them into thin round discs. After finishing one carrot, he placed the knife down on the wooden board.

"Stuart doesn't think that. That I'm no trouble, I mean." He took a deep breath before continuing. "Supposedly I place too many demands and have too many expectations."

He started peeling the label off the corner of the beer bottle.

"So it was Stuart's choice to break up?" Dean couldn't help but ask as he picked up the last carrot from Matt's board, bypassing the onion which he remembered Matt didn't like.

"No... yes... sort of." Matt took a minute to think over his answer. "I guess it was both of us in some way. It hasn't been working for a while, for a lot longer than a while, if I'm perfectly honest. I thought the move to Melbourne would help and show Stuart that I was committed to making our relationship work. It turns out that moving in together wasn't really the commitment I thought it to be. Apparently, although he was willing to move in together—to *buy* a house for God's sake!—he doesn't think he's ready to settle down." Matt gave a funny sort of half-laugh.

Dean was pissed off to hear that Stuart had used Matt like that, had led him to think they had a forever kind of relationship and played on his emotions. However, he wasn't surprised. Stuart had never had Matt's best interests at heart. He had a job offer that meant he had to move cities, and he would have gone whether Matt was prepared to relocate or not. Stuart was a user and had never been known to put anyone before himself. Sure, he'd been fun to be around, the life of the party, but he wasn't there when the going got tough. Like the time Matt's dad was rushed to hospital with a suspected heart attack. Matt had called Dean, and together they'd raced to the hospital and spent a countless number of hours pacing the corridors while they waited for news. When Dean finally suggested calling Stuart, he'd been held up in a meeting and unable to join them until the end of the work day. Matt hadn't seemed too upset by that, but Dean was fuming at the way Stuart treated his boyfriend.

"Anyway," Matt was saying. "It doesn't really matter now. To be perfectly honest, I'm relieved. I think I knew Stuart wasn't the one, but it seemed easier just to stay together. All that matters now is that it's over, and I need to work out what I'm going to do."

Dean looked up as he placed the snow peas he had sliced into a bowl and reached for the chicken fillets. "Have you had any ideas?"

"Well Stuart's moved out the house, but we haven't worked out what to do with it. I think it's an okay time to sell."

"Have you thought of moving back to Sydney?" Dean asked hopefully.

"I have, but it's not that easy. When I got the job transfer, it was a sideways move, but since then I've had a promotion, which means more responsibility and more money. If I move back to Sydney, the only position available would be a step backwards. Plus, until the house sells I need to keep paying my half of the mortgage. If I come back to Sydney, I'll also need to fork out rent."

Dean tried not to let the disappointment show. "So you'll stay in Melbourne?"

"It looks like it, at least for now," Matt said. "Speaking of work, how's the contract going? Terry still giving you a hard time?" Matt successfully changed the subject, and they spent the remainder of the time preparing dinner chatting about Dean's job and the guys he worked with.

"I know you worry about how they'll react," Matt said. "But is it really worth hiding for the rest of your life? From what I can see, Vince and Johnno

seem like great guys. Are you sure they'd react badly? Maybe they wouldn't necessarily be celebrating, but I can't see either of them making too much of a deal either. And you keep telling me that Terry won't cause any real trouble."

"You don't see how they all behave. It may sound stereotypical, but these guys are true blokes. The few times anything remotely gay has come up, they've laughed and made jokes. And I might not be afraid of Terry anymore, but I still think it's best to leave well enough alone."

"But the others haven't done anything other than poke fun, have they? Maybe they don't know how to react, and it's easier to make fun than deal with their own fears," Matt persisted. "I'm not saying that making jokes is right, and I'm sure it makes you uncomfortable as hell. Plus, I'm not in your shoes and only you can know what's really going on, but have you ever thought you're maybe using them as an excuse?"

Dean looked at Matt in shock. *What the hell?*

"I know you don't like to talk about it, but I sometimes think what happened that night is the cause of your fear of coming out. Anyone going through an experience like that, of being assaulted, is bound to have fears. You never reported it and you never really spoke to anyone about it. You only mentioned it to me in passing and wouldn't really talk about it. No wonder you are afraid of coming out."

"But I'm not afraid of coming out!" Dean insisted. "I'm out to you and to my whole family. I've gone out with guys and I go to clubs. I'm not closeted."

"You're right, but you're also wrong. You're not really out and free," Matt said. "You're not free to live your whole life in a way that will make you happy. You're fearful of the reaction of people you spend five days out of seven with. That's not being out. What happens when you meet someone, someone you finally let into your life? Will you hide them too or will they be able to meet your friends? How will you introduce them and talk about them?"

Matt had a point, but as far as Dean was concerned, it was never going to happen. He wasn't likely to meet someone he'd want to have in his life like that anyway. That ship had sailed. He'd felt a brief flicker of hope when he'd heard that Matt was breaking up with Stuart, thought he might finally take a chance to talk about how he really felt, but Matt's plans to stay in Melbourne, and his own reluctance to come out at work, dowsed that idea.

"You know I love you and just want the best for you, right?" Matt walked around the bench then put his arm around Dean's shoulder and gave him a

friendly hug. "Come on. Let's get this stir-fry finished so we can eat in front of the TV and watch that movie you were talking about."

A short while later, they picked up their meals and cutlery and made their way to the lounge, balancing great bowls of stir-fry on their laps while they watched *The Outsiders* together, just like they had so many times when they were younger. No matter how often they'd seen the movie over the years, Dean still loved watching it with Matt. He loved seeing Matt's enjoyment and maybe teasing him just a little about his Rob Lowe crush.

As the credits rolled, Dean turned to look at Matt and found him already looking his way. The room was dimly lit, but his eyes glittered as they reflected the light from the TV. For a moment, Dean was fifteen again and back in Matt's room, filled with the longing that had started all those years ago and been part of his life for so long. In that moment, he wanted so badly to reach for Matt, to pull him into his arms and press his lips to his mouth. He wanted to kiss him with all the passion that he'd restrained for a decade. But once again, Dean lost his courage and was the first to look away. Their gazes separated and the spell broke.

They stood against the far wall, squeezed together, sipping their drinks and checking out the crowd. Dean watched Matt's eyes roam over the men in front of them. They were facing the dance floor, which was a seething mass of bodies. It was like a smorgasbord, a range of choices for every taste—young and old, tall and short, muscled and lean, smooth and hairy chests, bearded bears and baby faces.

Dean loved just standing next to Matt, feeling him at his side and enjoying the sensation of his body nudging his every now and then as someone sidled past and forced them closer together. His presence was comforting and something Dean was all too aware of. Finally, Matt put his drink down on a nearby table and took the glass out of Dean's hand before grabbing him by the hand and dragging him through the crowd and towards the dance floor. He followed as Matt pushed his way through the crowd until they found themselves deep in the centre of the heaving mass. They started to sway to the beat, moving in time with the others around them, becoming part of the crowd of dancers who were moving to the beat.

He kept his eyes fixed on Matt as his friend smiled at him before Matt was grabbed from behind by an eager pair of hands. The hands were attached to an

attractive, older guy—tall and built—who pulled Matt backwards, hard against his chest. Matt didn't miss a beat as he turned his head to look at the guy who held him captive.

The sense of disappointment that washed over Dean wiped the smile from his face. He knew the inevitable would happen, but he'd hoped he'd have Matt's attention for longer. He resigned himself to losing Matt to his sexy new dancing partner and turned to head back to the area of small tables. As he pushed through the crowd, arms grabbed him around the waist to stop his exit. He wasn't in the mood to dance and flirt, and tried to free himself, but the voice in his ear stopped him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Matt's arms held firmly and he moved even closer.

The feel of the body pressed tightly against his back rendered him incapable of speech. *Oh geez*, he thought as his body instantly responded to his best friend pressed against his arse. Dean shivered as Matt's hands wandered across his belly and his breath caressed his cheek. Muscles instantly tensed and his erection began pressing against his fly. Between the music and the lights and the feel of Matt's body, he could hardly come up with a coherent thought—no thoughts beyond, *oh my God!* Being held like this was heaven. Being held like this was hell. As they continued to rock, chest to back, pelvis to arse, Dean could only pray that this torture would never end.

He could feel Matt's erection through the denim of his jeans that forced him to utter a frustrated groan. He knew Matt's excitement was a natural response to the friction, most likely being helped along by whomever Matt was watching over his shoulder. But oh, how Dean wanted that to be for him. They danced like that for a long time, Dean making the most of the unaccustomed contact, lost in the feel of being held in Matt's arms, lost in his fantasy of a different sort of future with Matt.

Eventually Matt released his arms and stepped back, and Dean felt the sudden loss of contact acutely. It wasn't until he was released that he realised just how much he'd loved the security of the tight hold Matt had on him, the way he'd been held in position, captured and unable to escape until Matt had freed him. His face burnt with shame at the realisation of what he was feeling and how he'd let his body respond to his friend. But Matt just turned him around, threw his arms around his shoulders and pulled him close again, giving Dean no choice but to encircle Matt's waist in a hug of his own. This time they swayed together, foreheads touching as Dean endeavoured to still his beating heart and get his breathing under control.

The music picked up in pace and the seething mass of bodies started to move faster to the darkly sexy song. It felt totally surreal as Matt pulled back and stared at him, his hands never leaving Dean's shoulders, never breaking contact. His eyes were dark and his handsome features shadowed, but when he smiled, it lit up his whole face and Dean's heart with it. Matt's hand left Dean's shoulder and travelled up to graze along the side of his face, soft and slow, just a gentle whisper that scraped against his stubbled skin. His eyes never left Dean's until finally, that tender smile turned into a sexy grin and he suddenly moved.

He struck like lightning—quick and without warning—wrapping Dean once more in his arms, then moving against him. But this time the dancing wasn't slow and seductive, it was sinfully sexy. Matt had a way of moving his body that really shouldn't be called dancing. The music flowed through his body, he had perfect rhythm and the way he moved was pure sex. The fluid motions of his hips as they rocked and swayed and pressed into Dean could only be interpreted one way. Although fully dressed and standing on a crowded dance floor, he was worshipping Dean's body. It was obvious in every provocative thrust against his body, every touch of wandering hands as they skirted down Dean's sides and across his belly and back up until fingers grazed his nipples. It was in the way Matt's eyes locked with his and in the feelings it generated. Matt made Dean feel sexy and alive and wanted. He surrendered to the irresistible urge—gave himself over to the moment and gave back as good as he got. They danced together, touching in ways they'd never done before. Dean gave himself permission to touch his friend and, after some initial hesitancy, did not hold back. Grasping hands and hard bodies, Matt not only allowed his touches, but also sought them out. He pushed his obvious erection against Dean's and wrapped his arms around his neck once more, pulling Dean closer. Their dancing gentled. They were both panting, hot and sweaty.

"Jesus," Matt whispered in Dean's ear, as he caught his breath.

Finally, the heat of the crowded dance floor, together with their own exertion, drove them to take a break. Dean followed as Matt pulled him by the hand towards the bar and bought them each a bottle of water. Thrusting a cold water towards Dean, Matt twisted the cap off his own bottle. Beads of sweat in his hairline darkened his naturally blond hair, and even as Dean watched, a droplet rolled down the side of his face, across his jawline and down his neck. Dean followed the path with his eyes, enthralled by the movement of Matt's throat as he swallowed the cool water. He'd never been so physically aware of his friend, and gulped from his own bottle in an effort to cool things down.

“Come on. Let’s go home,” Matt said. He took Dean’s now empty bottle and placed them both on the bar, then took Dean’s hand, dragging him towards the exit.

When they got home to the flat, the door was hardly closed before Matt was pulling his still damp T-shirt over his head and shoving Dean down the hall.

“I need a shower. I stink.” Matt dropped his shirt outside the bathroom door and toed off his shoes. His bare torso gave Dean a glimpse of the gorgeous dragon tattoo covering his shoulder. Dean forced himself to look away as Matt started on the buttons of his jeans.

Oh, God! His breath caught—a choking sound in his throat as he turned towards his own bedroom doorway. Matt’s hand on his arm stopped his movement.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Dean raised his eyes, and they stood looking at each other for a few moments, before Dean nodded his head. Another moment or two passed where he could feel his heart beating rapidly, trying to bust out of his chest. Matt’s hand on his arm felt like a solid weight tethering him and preventing him from moving. He looked at that hand—long, strong fingers gripping his upper arm so firmly that the knuckles had started to whiten—before raising his eyes to Matt’s again. Another couple of heartbeats—

They came together in a crashing of mouths, eagerly grasping at each other. Dean wasn’t sure if it was him who had made the first move or whether Matt had instigated the kiss, but *oh, what a kiss!* Hot and wet, no restraint. Matt’s tongue was in his mouth, devouring him. One hand was behind his neck, tilting Dean’s head so that he could get better access, and he didn’t hesitate to give Matt what he wanted. The other arm was pulling him tight, moulding their bodies together. Then as fast as the kiss started, it gentled. The passionate invasion of his mouth became a slow and gentle suckling as Matt ran his tongue softly over Dean’s lips before ending the kiss and resting his forehead against Dean’s. Dean could feel the pounding of Matt’s heart as he continued to hold him close.

“Christ, mate,” Matt said, sounding as overwhelmed as Dean felt.

Eventually, Matt stepped back and the sense of loss was immediate.

Matt looked at him, those now dark eyes searching his. Seeking reassurance perhaps? Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it. He reached for the buttons of Dean's shirt, starting at the top. The anticipation of watching those buttons being undone one by one was almost too much, as was the slight grazing of Matt's fingertips against his skin. Once the shirt was unbuttoned, Matt slipped it off his shoulders and pulled his arms free, letting the shirt drop to the carpet.

Once again, Matt took a step back. This time his hands went to the buttons of his own jeans. Dean found himself mirroring Matt's actions, undoing his own button and pulling down the zipper to expose the blue boxer briefs underneath. Their eyes never left each other, and as Matt dropped his jeans, Dean kicked off his shoes and hurried to remove his own pants, followed quickly by his socks. It didn't take long for them to both be standing almost naked outside the bathroom door.

Finally, Matt made a move, taking Dean's hand and pulling him towards the bathroom door. Dean followed and then waited while Matt turned on the shower, adjusting the temperature until the water ran warm and the steam started to fill the small room. He turned to Dean, leaning to brush a gentle kiss on his lips. It was tender and sweet, the whole encounter a surreal dream, and he was overwhelmed by the immense emotions bubbling up inside. Unsure what to do or how to react, he stood there, allowing Matt to minister to him.

Matt grasped the waistband of Dean's boxer briefs, a hand at each hip, as he looked once again at Dean with question in his beautiful eyes. Dean nodded. As Matt bent to take the briefs off, Dean's previously restrained cock sprung free. Once released from the confines of the fabric, his dick bounced upward to slap his belly, his response to Matt no longer a secret. Not that the briefs had done much to hide his obvious erection. He held his breath as Matt stared at the sight in front of him before finally looking up and smiling. The grin didn't leave his face as he stood, spun Dean by his shoulders and pushed him backwards into the shower. He wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or relieved, conflicting emotions as his body reacted the way his heart had always wanted to.

Dean's heart rate rose as Matt shimmied out of his own boxer briefs and joined him in the shower. He took in the vision of the gorgeous man in front of him as Matt lathered a sponge before soaping him gently—chest, arms, and stomach—then turning him to cleanse his other side—shoulders, back and arse. The glide of his smooth hands over Dean's equally smooth skin, now slippery

with soapsuds, was heaven. The touch, combined with the pounding of the warm water, was maddeningly seductive. His cock still stood proud, but his muscles relaxed and he focused on the sensations.

The bathroom continued to fill with steam and the citrus aroma of the body wash filled his nostrils. He leaned his hands against the cold tile of the wall as Matt's hands continued to wash with their seductive caress. Matt's fingers alternated between firm kneading of Dean's tight muscles and long gentle strokes down the length of his torso. One of Matt's hands snaked around his middle and the palm pressed flat to his belly, as Matt plastered himself to Dean's back. Matt's right hand massaged Dean's shoulder.

Wanting to touch, Dean started to lower his hands and began to move, but Matt grabbed his hands, pushing them back against the tile, his body holding Dean firmly in position. Unable to help himself, Dean pushed out his arse. He could feel the erection against the curve of his left butt cheek, and moaned at the thought of having Matt this close, but wanting him even closer still. As if aware of what he was thinking, Matt moved his body and arms at the same time—as his left hand moved to press against Dean's belly again, he twisted slightly and allowed his cock to fall into the crease of Dean's arse, pulling him tightly back against him.

Matt then started the ultimate torture, drawing that perfect erection slowly up and down between Dean's butt cheeks. His movements started slowly, just gentle sliding movements against the slippery skin, but he soon started to speed up while at the same time pulling even harder to hold Dean closer. Infuriatingly, the hand on his pelvic bone, just skimming the hair there, didn't move to touch Dean's erection, a touch he was now desperate for. He released the wall to grab for his cock, but once again, Matt reached his wrist, forcing the hand back to the wall, then slowly ran his hand down Dean's arm and back to his waist. The action made Dean harder, if that was possible, his lust driven to an all-time high by Matt being the one to control what was happening.

He groaned, thrusting uselessly into the air, his untouched dick aching for any kind of touch, the action forcing his arse back onto the thrusting cock behind him. He couldn't remember ever being this turned on. And then it happened. Matt's hand finally moved an inch or so lower and gripped his cock. There was nothing soft and gentle to the touch, his grip was firm and sure. Dean nearly lost his footing with the intense pleasure that overtook him. Matt's hand on his cock became his sole focus and his orgasm wasn't going to wait.

Years of wanting were about to erupt and he couldn't do a thing about it. He pushed back against Matt's cock, loving the slide against his hole, and forwards into the sure grip, but it was Matt who controlled the movements, Matt who was giving the pleasure and dictating Dean's release. Matt moved slightly, his cock now shoving hard into Dean's hip, leaving Dean wanting. But not for long—the stroking of his dick sped up and Matt's other hand found its way to his arse, his fingers massaging and seeking. As one of those gorgeous long fingers found his opening and pushed inside, he thrust back, at the same time screaming out his release and jetting long strands of cum onto the tiles. Matt squeezed him tight and groaned, and Dean felt Matt's release pulse from him as he pressed against Dean's side.

They stood in their embrace for a long time, both catching their breath, before Matt finally moved. Without a word, he took the washcloth and used more body wash to gently clean Dean off. Matt washed his own cum from Dean's hip then soaped his balls and arse, before wringing the cloth and hanging it on the rail. As the water started to run cool, he turned the taps off and stepped from the shower. Matt wrapped a plush, navy blue towel around Dean's waist before getting another towel and using it to wrap around Dean's shoulders, coaxing his shaking body from the shower cubicle, before drying him off.

A short while later, Dean was tucked up in bed. Body totally relaxed, his limbs felt heavy and sleep wouldn't be far away, but he stirred as Matt sat down on the side of the bed before he pulled up the covers and slid in between the sheets.

“Matt—”

“Shush, baby. We'll talk tomorrow,” he heard Matt whisper as strong arms pulled him into Matt's side. He snuggled against the perfect warmth of Matt's body. As his head rested on Matt's chest, the gentle rise and fall of Matt's breaths, lulled him to sleep.

Chapter Four

The sun was high, casting a bright light into the room and shining directly onto the bed where Dean lay. He opened his eyes briefly before squeezing them shut and throwing his forearm across his eyes in an attempt to keep out the light. He chanced opening his eyes again and glanced at the clock. Eight in the morning. He could still grab a couple of hours sleep, so he rolled away from the window, pulling the sheet over his bare shoulder at the same time.

As he turned on his side, he came face to face with Matt. He looked beautiful in his sleep—his dark blond hair tousled and his features relaxed. The scruff on his jaw had thickened overnight, giving a rugged, sexy appeal to his already good looks. Usually there wasn't too much of Matt's skin on display in his corporate uniform of a suit and a long-sleeved button-up shirt. When he was relaxing, he was a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy. So Dean made the most of his undressed state to study his tattoo.

Dean knew he had the tattoo and had seen it before, but he'd never really had the chance to study it up close. It hadn't been appropriate to give it more than a cursory glance. Now he took the time to admire the talented artwork, the fine lines and the delicate colouring. The tattoo took up most of Matt's right shoulder. The dragon curled over the smooth skin of his shoulder and snaked down his bicep. It was masterful and beautiful. The dragon was a symbol of wisdom, strength and bravery. Dean wished he was like Matt and had the courage to follow his own dreams, all of them. He reached out, drawn to the dragon, and traced a finger lightly over the design, causing Matt's muscles to quiver under his touch. He looked up, afraid he'd woken him, but Matt's eyes stayed closed. He took his arm away and closed his eyes, enjoying the simple delight of waking up with Matt beside him.

When he next opened his eyes, it was to find Matt staring at him intently. He looked serious for a moment and then he smiled, reaching to place a hand on Dean's cheek. "Morning, sleepyhead," Matt greeted. He was obviously a morning person.

"Morning," he said in return, his voice gravelly with sleep.

Dean sat up, twisted to push the pillow up against the headboard and lay back against it, at the same time becoming aware of his nakedness. He pulled the sheet up to his waist, tempted to pull it higher, but not wanting Matt to think he was uncomfortable.

Matt mirrored his actions and they sat next to each other, staring out the window. Just when he was actually starting to feel a bit awkward and thinking of what to say, Matt started talking.

"You want to hear something funny?" Matt said, with a short deprecating laugh.

Dean turned to look at him, concerned at his tone. Matt didn't expect an answer and continued.

"When we were younger, I always hoped it would be you."

"Me?" Dean frowned at him, unsure about the direction the conversation was taking.

"Yeah, you and me. You know, together as a couple." He gave that little mirthless laugh again, just a sharp, quick burst before twisting and looking Dean straight in the eye. "I used to imagine us together. I got so pissed off that you seemed oblivious."

Dean oblivious? He couldn't remember a time when he thought Matt wanted him as more than friends. Surely he would have noticed that? For goodness sake, he would have jumped on that!

"It was my last year of school and you were in the second year of your apprenticeship. I was focused on studying for the end of year exams and you used to come over and sit on my bed and listen to music while I hit the books. You'd be lying there, headphones in, eyes closed or maybe staring at the ceiling, and I would be trying to concentrate on the books, but all I was aware of was you. You'd been working hard and all the physical activity had caused you to bulk up. I was still a tall and skinny kid, and you were tanned and fit with muscles." Matt laughed again. "I had it bad."

"I didn't—" Dean started, but Matt interrupted him.

"No, let me finish. I need you to hear this before you say anything."

Dean nodded and kept listening.

"I finally got up the courage to say something. It was the middle of January before my first year of Uni started and I went to your place one night. You were in your room watching a movie, just an ordinary night. You made room for me next to you on the bed and we finished watching whatever was playing. You then changed the disc. I don't even remember the movie. I was just lying there

waiting for the right moment and practising what I was going to say. The words were going around in my head, over and over, as we lay there in the dark. You watched the screen and I watched your face as the light flickered over it.”

“I remember that night,” Dean said. “We fell asleep.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed. “We fell asleep. The next thing I knew it was the early hours of the morning. Somehow, I’d curled up into your side and thrown my arm over your chest and my leg was resting across your thigh. I remember laying there, my nose in the crook of your neck, just enjoying the smell and the warmth and the closeness. The next thing, you woke up and bloody threw me from the bed. I landed so hard on the floor, I had bruises for days.”

“What?” Dean was surprised. “That’s what happened? I hurt you?”

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think you meant to hurt me. I think you were just surprised to wake up in that position, and so pissed off at me for making a pass at you. I don’t blame you, after all you were asleep and I had no right to touch you.”

Dean laughed, his laughter suddenly turning in a sob. “Oh God, Matt. I don’t even remember pushing you from the bed. I just woke up in the morning and wondered where you’d got to. I just assumed you’d gone home to your own bed.”

“Well that explains why you never mentioned it. I was on tenterhooks for days waiting for you to say something.”

Now it was Dean’s turn to talk. “Do you remember a couple of years ago when I told you about that incident at work?”

“Of course I do,” Matt answered. “But it wasn’t an incident, it was an assault. You should have reported that guy Terry to your boss or gone to the police. He had no right to rough you up like that.”

“I know, but that’s not the point. The point is, it happened only a couple of weeks before you came over. For months afterward, I couldn’t bear to be touched. I had nightmares for a year.”

Dean picked up Matt’s hand, which was resting on top of the sheet and turned to face him.

“Matt, I wouldn’t have pushed you out of my bed. At least not intentionally.” He wanted to be sure that Matt understood what he was saying. “I would have *invited* you into my bed.”

Matt looked at him, his eyes bright and maybe a bit shocked, before pulling him forwards into a hug. Matt's warm breath caressed his neck and they stayed like that for several minutes, just holding each other. Dean wondered how much they'd missed all these years, and hoped that Matt was thinking about the same thing.

The question was, *what now?*

The barbeque at Brett and Lindy's place was on Sunday afternoon and Dean felt obligated to attend, although he was tempted to give it a miss. He wanted to stay home and talk to Matt, to firm up their plans, but Matt was understanding and insisted they go.

"It's only a couple of hours, and I think it's important that you maintain the friendship with these guys. Plus we can talk later on the way to the airport."

At first, they'd had a great time. They drank a few beers—well, he drank beer and Matt sipped from a glass of wine—and stood around the barbeque cooking chops and sausages. When the meal was ready, they'd sat around the table and shared the food along with some funny stories. The couple of beers, combined with a full belly and the warmth of the afternoon sun, lulled Dean into state of peace and he enjoyed standing back and watching everyone laughing and having a good time. Particularly Matt, who looked relaxed and very much like he was enjoying himself.

Things started to go downhill when Terry arrived. Matt had tensed immediately when the introduction had been made, and Dean was grateful that Terry hadn't tried to shake his hand. Instead, he'd wandered over to the esky, pulled out a beer and sat in a seat at the end of the table. Dean glanced at Matt and tried to convey a look to indicate he was all right and not to cause a scene. He was relieved when Matt seemed to pick up on his message and nodded his head.

Dean had had a long time to come to terms with the incident with Terry. First, he'd tried to put it behind him because of the feelings thinking about it generated. It had been all too easy to remember the fear of that night. Then he tried to reason that Terry wasn't even aware of his actions and made excuses for the man. It was also easier to play down the whole thing because he knew it still upset Matt to think about it, no matter how much Dean had downplayed it and reassured him that he didn't need to worry.

Dean pushed his memories away, making an effort to pay attention to the conversation around him.

The conversation moved from weekend sport to an accident on a local building site, and then to the renovations Brett and Lindy were doing to their red-brick bungalow. Matt chipped in with his own tales of the nightmare that was his renovation project. Dean was really interested to hear just how much work Matt had done on his Melbourne terrace house. He hoped it would reflect in the sale price once it was put on the market. After a while, Matt excused himself to visit the bathroom and went into the house.

"Lindy, you did a great job with the food, and you've both done wonders with the house," Dean said.

"And speaking of wonders," interrupted Terry. "What about your friend? Where did you pick him up from?"

"Matt? He's been my best mate since school. Why?"

"Just seems a bit not your type, that's all," Terry said, once again not saying anything directly, but his meaning was obvious.

This time Dean had had enough. He felt his face flush and his anger build, and he knew the time had come to finally take a stand if he was ever to be free to have the future he wanted with Matt.

"You know absolutely nothing about my type, Terry. If you did, you'd know just how far off the mark you really are!"

After a brief moment of stunned silence, Terry took a step towards Dean, but stopped at the sound of Matt's deep, authoritative voice, as he came to stand by Dean, "Is there a problem here?"

"No problem, your boyfriend here was just telling us he's a bloody fa—" He didn't get any further as Matt's fist slammed into his jaw, effectively halting any more words from spouting forth.

Dean and his work buddies got between Terry and Matt before any more blows could be exchanged. They held Terry back as he regained his voice and began shouting. "You fucker! Just you wait! Let me go!" He pulled at the arms restraining him in an effort to get to Matt.

Dean grabbed Matt by the arm and dragged him into the house where he could calm down and not antagonise Terry further. He wrapped his arms

around Matt and whispered softly in his ear. They were still standing there when Brett came into the room, but they quickly pulled apart.

Brett looked at Matt. "Don't worry about it, mate. The bloke's an arse. I've told him he's not welcome here."

They rejoined the group, but not for long. It was good to see everyone's concern for their welfare and it was reassuring to know the other guys had his back, but they just wanted to get out of there so they called a cab.

They hadn't come to any final conclusions when the time came for Dean to take Matt to the airport on Sunday night, at least not in terms of making solid plans about Matt moving back. They were both still flustered by the events at the barbeque on top of everything else that had happened that weekend.

They arrived with time to spare before Matt's flight left so they decided to have a coffee at the airport cafe. Dean stirred his latte, adding a sugar, before looking across the small table at Matt. Matt, always his protector, and now his lover. He knew they were meant to be together, that they were more than best friends, and what had happened at the barbecue just reinforced his conviction. If Matt had the courage to stand up for Dean, then Dean could at least have the courage to tell Matt exactly how he felt. No more hints and shy looks. The time had come for words.

"I want you to move home," he blurted out. Well, at least it was out there now. "I want you to be with me. I don't care what anyone at work or anywhere else thinks. I love you. I want to be with you, out and free." He let out a shaky breath and looked at Matt to gauge his reaction to his sudden confession.

The look on Matt's face was priceless. God, he wished he could take a picture. Matt looked as though someone had just given him a precious gift, the most glorious smile lighting up his face. That one look was enough to flood Dean with warmth, and he knew he'd made the right decision.

"I want that, too," Matt said softly, his smile never leaving his face. Matt reached out and they entwined their fingers and he whispered the words Dean thought he'd never hear, words that made his heart sing. "I love you, too."

After a few moments, Matt's face grew thoughtful.

"I'm not sure how it's all going to work out. There's a lot of variables with my job and the house. But, I'll talk to Stuart and my company, and see how

quickly we can sell the house and transfer my job back home. I'll phone you when I know something."

Matt's flight was called and they stood and embraced quickly, squeezing each other tight.

"Stay gold, mate," Matt whispered in his ear.

Dean couldn't speak, just nodded his head. Matt put his hand on the back of Dean's neck pulling him in for a soft, sweet kiss. Then Dean watched the man he loved walk away.

Chapter Five

It was frustrating, the waiting, hoping, and wishing. He hated the wondering, the not knowing. What was going to happen next? They'd already wasted so much time and although Dean was desperate for an update from Matt, he didn't want to hassle him. He was under enough pressure as it was, having to deal with Stuart and make so many arrangements.

It had been four days since Matt had returned to Melbourne, and he'd suffered through every single one and couldn't believe it was only Thursday morning. He was desperate to find out when Matt was returning, but he was also eager to see him, to support him, and most importantly, let him know just what was waiting for him back in Sydney. They'd talked since he left, but what if Matt didn't understand the true depth of his feelings or what if Stuart managed to convince him he deserved a second chance? *That didn't even bear thinking about!*

He started to freak out about Stuart until he made a decision. He wasn't going to sit back and wait, he was going to go after Matt, make sure he didn't feel like he had to deal with everything alone. He was not going to pace the flat for another minute or spend another restless night. He'd rather go to Melbourne and see Matt sooner rather than later.

Decision made, he called work and arranged a few days of personal leave and jumped online to buy a plane ticket. Packing took no time at all, just throwing the basics into a duffel bag, a quick call to his mum to let her know he'd be out of town for the weekend and he was free to go.

The flight was uneventful and it was just after nine thirty that evening when he checked into the hotel. As tempting as it was to call Matt straight away and let him know he was in town, he decided to resist the temptation. Matt had work tomorrow and there'd be plenty of time together tomorrow night and over the weekend.

Instead, Dean used the time to arrange a dinner booking, calling the front reception desk and asking about the nicer restaurants in town. He wasn't really into fine dining, so he was pointed in the direction of a popular bistro, and thankfully was able to make a reservation for the following evening.

Satisfied with his arrangements, he took a shower, threw on some sleep shorts and crawled under the covers. He was definitely looking forwards to the

next night when he wouldn't be in the bed alone, but could spend the whole night with Matt. He'd briefly thought that perhaps he shouldn't have booked a hotel, but he didn't like the idea of staying at Matt's place even though Stuart had moved out. Besides, he thought Matt would enjoy the luxury of the hotel room with its king-size bed and huge spa bath. Those were his last thoughts as he drifted off to sleep.

He'd been waiting all week for that one important call. The one that would mean his future could really begin. Matt had said he'd call on Friday, once he'd been able to confirm arrangements with his job. Matt was also planning to meet Stuart for lunch that day to discuss the next steps in getting rid of the house. If they put it on the market straight away, Matt had told him, they could anticipate a sale in a matter of weeks, and settlement six weeks after that. That would be the severing of the final tie to Stuart.

Dean decided to use the morning to do a bit of sightseeing in Melbourne. He hadn't seen a lot of the city so there were plenty of options open to him. A quick stop by the hotel concierge saw him armed with a map and on his way. The hours went quickly as he wandered the streets and parks of Melbourne, finally stopping to have lunch by the river. It was lonely sitting at the café by himself, and he found himself continuously looking at his phone waiting for Matt's call. Eventually, he finished his burger and coffee and headed back to the hotel.

The hotel had a pool, but Dean hadn't packed anything to swim in. However, he'd brought along shorts, T-shirt and runners so he decided to use the hotel gym to kill some more time. With his phone propped on the treadmill dashboard, he listened to music while jogging through the kilometres, half-hoping his workout would be interrupted by a phone call. However, it was not to be.

After sweating it out for an hour or so, he headed back to the room for a quick shower and finally collapsed on the huge bed, sinking into the plush white quilt. He checked his phone one final time, disappointed to see no messages, and tossed it onto the bedside table. The stress of the week, combined with the day's physical activity, resulted in slumber quickly overtaking him.

He only meant to shut his eyes for a minute or two, but the dim light outside showed it had been longer than that—either it was getting on in the afternoon or

the weather had come over cloudy. A quick glance at the bedside alarm clock indicated the latter—it was still only mid-afternoon. He closed his eyes again, but was jolted fully awake by the buzzing of his phone as it skittered on the table where he'd left it. The sound indicated a text message. Excitedly, he jumped up and reached for the phone, never moving so fast in his life. His excitement didn't last long as he read the message.

Things not going to work out as planned. Will talk to you about it later. Matt.

What the fuck?

Dean sat in the taxi as it headed along the expressway towards the airport. He had no idea if he'd be able to get on a flight, but anything was better than staying another minute in that goddamn hotel room. What had started out as a romantic trip to Melbourne had quickly become a total fuck-up. He'd hardly given it a second thought, just seen that message, the total opposite of the one he'd been waiting for, and knew he had to get away. Matt was backing out. Things weren't going to work out between them. Matt had changed his mind. Maybe he'd gotten back with Stuart after all. He had chucked everything he'd brought with him back into the duffel, including the damp gym clothes, and been checked out within half an hour, on his way to the airport and back to Sydney.

He stared out the window of the cab, morosely noting the Friday afternoon peak-hour traffic crawling past. The grey skies echoed his mood perfectly, and the rain finally started falling, droplets running down the glass and obscuring the view. Belatedly, he remembered the dinner reservation and half-heartedly thought of calling the restaurant to cancel. He pulled his phone from his pocket and pressed a button, the screen opening to the last place he'd been. He found himself staring at the message again.

Things not going to work out as planned. Will talk to you about it later. Matt.

The more he looked at the message, the more pissed off he got. He went from shocked and heartbroken to totally pissed off in the blink of an eye. Then the confusion set in. Would Matt really end their fledgling relationship and friendship like that? He owed it to Matt and himself to find out before he left Melbourne. If it was over, he deserved better and he was definitely going to let

Matt know how deeply he'd hurt him. He still couldn't believe that Matt would behave like that, but he wasn't going to allow him to get away with it.

In an instant, he had ordered the taxi to be turned around, and half an hour later was pulling up in front of Matt's house. He sat in the cab for a moment, listening to the rain's staccato beat on the roof of the car, and psyching himself up for the possibilities that lay ahead. Finally, he took a deep breath, withdrew some notes from his wallet, which he passed to the driver, and grabbed his bag from the seat next to him. He exited the cab and stood on the footpath, the rain soaking him in seconds, before walking towards the house.

Matt's house was a narrow brick terrace. He stood on the veranda, shaking water from his hair and dropped his bag at his feet before pressing the doorbell. It didn't take long for the red painted door to be opened and Matt to be looking at him in surprise.

"Hey, Dean," he greeted happily. "What are you doing here? Come inside out of the rain."

Matt reached for his arm to pull him into the house. Dean shook him off, but entered the house anyway.

"Dean?" Matt looked confused.

"I deserved better," he said in a low voice. "You might not want me, but you should have at least had the guts to tell me over the phone or in person. Not send a goddamn text message! Our friendship is worth more than that!" His voice vibrated with anger. "Or maybe it isn't?"

"What are you talking about? Dean, stop for a minute. You've got to explain, I don't understand what's going on," Matt sounded concerned and confused.

Dean dragged the phone from his pocket again, the now-damp fabric making it difficult to free the device. He finally got it out and waved it towards Matt.

"This. This is what I'm talking about. The text message." He was shouting by this time, and the tears had started to fill his eyes.

Matt grabbed the phone and hit the home button, bringing up his own text message. He stared at it for a moment before looking at Dean.

"I still don't understand. This is the message I sent to you this afternoon." Matt looked at the message again.

“Yeah, you said things weren’t going to work out with us.”

Matt looked confused at first, but then he smiled gently at Dean. “No, Dean. I didn’t.” He reached for Dean’s hand, and Dean didn’t pull away.

“I said things weren’t going to work out *as planned*.” He didn’t wait for Dean’s response, just launched straight into an explanation. “Stuart doesn’t want to sell the house. He says the timing isn’t right, and he wants to hold off until we can get a better price. He’s going to rent my half and live here until we do eventually sell.” He paused for a breath. “To top it off, work doesn’t have a position for me in Sydney, so a job transfer isn’t possible.”

“So you’re not moving to Sydney,” Dean said, his voice flat.

“No. I *am* moving to Sydney. I resigned. I didn’t want to wait for an opening. I wanted to come to Sydney as soon as possible. I’ll get another job. It may take a while, but I’ll find one.” Matt looked pleadingly at Dean.

The sense of relief that Dean felt was overwhelming. His heart finally slowed down and he was able to take a breath.

“So that’s what the message meant? You were referring to the house and the job?” he asked, wanting absolute confirmation.

“Yes. I was coming home to tell you in person.” Matt looked towards the door and Dean followed his gaze. It was then he noticed the heaped pile of bags stacked near the open front door.

Matt looked at his watch and grinned.

“My flight leaves in, oh, about an hour. I aimed to be in Sydney by seven. I guess there’s not much point going now is there?”

“I feel like such an idiot.”

“You are an idiot,” Matt laughed. “But you’re my idiot.”

At last, Matt reached over and pulled Dean into his arms, the heat of his body and the firmness of his chest warmed Dean inside and out. He lost himself in that hug, in the feel of Matt and the knowledge that they were about to start their future together.

They pulled apart slightly, but never lost body contact, just enough so that Dean could gaze into the depths of Matt’s beautiful blue eyes. The love he saw reflected back was overwhelming.

“I shouldn’t have doubted you. I don’t know why I reacted the way I did.” He felt like he owed Matt some kind of explanation and most definitely an apology. “I feel like I’ve spent my whole life waiting for you and couldn’t believe it was true, that it was finally happening. And when I saw the message, I just panicked under the crushing disappointment. If I’d stopped and really thought it over—”

Matt interrupted, showing his forgiveness by halting Dean’s words with a kiss. It was breathtaking, soft lips sweeping over his, lingering a little before fully claiming his mouth. As Matt’s tongue glided against his and he tasted Matt’s sweet mouth, as he felt the love and passion in the kiss, he knew everything was going to be all right.

He’d been waiting for Matt all his life and now the waiting was over. He’d been wishing and hoping that Matt would be his, and now it looked like all his dreams were going to come true.

Epilogue

Dean ran into the house through the open sliding glass door and lunged for his phone, which was skittering on the kitchen bench. He looked at the screen briefly before hitting the send button.

“Hello?” he greeted, slightly breathless from his rush to pick up the phone.

“Hey, Dean, it’s Warren.”

“I hope you’re calling with good news,” Dean responded excitedly. “Has she had the baby? Am I an uncle?”

As he spoke, he wandered out onto the back patio where a crowd of eager people surrounded him, waiting to hear what he had to say. He smiled at their obvious frustration at only hearing one side of the conversation.

He kept the conversation brief, just finding out the basic details, so that Warren could get back to Janet and the baby.

“Yeah, I’ll let them know. I’m sure Mum will be up at the hospital as soon as she can get there. Give Janet our love and we’ll see you tomorrow. Congratulations, big brother.”

As soon as he ended the call, he put them out of their misery, passing on everything Warren had said.

“It’s a boy. Eight pounds. Mother and son are doing well.”

“Oh, what wonderful news.” His mum said before turning to his dad. “Did you hear that, Bob? We have a grandson.” His dad pulled his mum into a hug, and watching their happiness put a smile on Dean’s face.

He turned and received his own hug as Matt swept him into his arms, obviously also delighted with the news. “Congratulations, baby. I can’t believe we’re now uncles!”

Dean held onto him tightly and whispered into Matt’s neck, “Yeah, uncles.”

As he stood, wrapped in Matt’s warm embrace, he couldn’t help but think that things were exactly as they should be. He was with the man he loved and surrounded by good friends and family. He gave Matt a squeeze and pulled back. The look he saw in Matt’s blue eyes, that familiar look of pure love and joy, caused him to choke up. *Oh God, he was going to get all sappy any minute now.*

He took a breath to pull himself together. "I'll grab the champagne. We've got lots to celebrate." And they did, so many reasons to be thankful.

Matt smiled and released him, before turning to give his best wishes to Dean's mum. Dean could hear him as he headed back into the kitchen. "You must be so thrilled, Nancy. All the months of worrying, and now you have a beautiful baby grandson."

He didn't hear his mum's reply as he opened the fridge and retrieved the bottle that had been put there earlier to chill in anticipation of the big event, but he knew she would definitely be feeling the relief. After a wonderful wedding, made all the more special because he had Matt on his arm, Warren and Janet had fallen pregnant pretty quickly. Of course, everyone had been thrilled, but when complications with Janet's blood pressure had set in, the joy changed to worry. It had been a tough couple of months as they'd all waited for her to see out the nine months. He couldn't even imagine how Warren must be feeling now that it was over, and he was so happy for his brother.

He took the champagne to the bench and placed it down before hunting in the cupboard for some champagne flutes. The kitchen had seen better days, but he and Matt had only recently purchased the house so they hadn't had long to make their mark. They had grand plans to do the house up and extend out the back, but for now, they made do with things just as they were. Dean had all he needed, anyway. So long as Matt was living with him, he didn't care where they lived. He counted his blessings that Matt had secured work fairly quickly and the sale of the Melbourne house had been favourable, leaving Matt in a good financial position. He was so relieved that Matt was able to transition back to Sydney smoothly.

As he stood at the bench and looked out the window, he could see the small group on the patio. His mum had moved to the outdoor table and taken a seat. She was in animated conversation with the two men who were seated opposite her, both who were regularly at the table when Dean and Matt hosted their family gatherings.

Justin was all smiles and loud laughter as he said something to Dean's mum, which made her laugh in response. He had become a good friend over the last year and half, and Dean could not imagine not having him in his life. Janet still tried to set Justin up with any potential eligible man she came across, but he'd successfully outmanoeuvred her each and every time. He remained steadfastly single, but quietly hopeful that one day he'd find that elusive brawny, tattooed man.

Johnno was equally as exuberant, matching Justin with his outgoing personality, and had become indispensable to Dean, as his one and only employee. Without Johnno's skills and hard work, and his willingness to work the long hours needed, Dean didn't think his fledgling business would be the success it was today. In the twelve months since he'd set out on his own, taking Johnno with him, the business had gone from strength to strength, largely because of the quality of their work and word-of-mouth. He was even looking at bringing on an apprentice to join him and Johnno due to the amount of work they were getting.

But his greatest source of happiness was the home and family he'd built with the man who now captured his attention. His eyes were drawn to Matt, as they always were. It seemed they shared a natural homing device that meant they were always aware of the other's presence. Even as he watched, Matt looked across to the window, and a smile lit up his face as he spied Dean looking at him. He looked away and said something to Dean's dad. His dad patted Matt on the arm and nodded, before he headed to join the others at the table, and Matt headed towards the house. As always, he felt grateful for his dad's easy acceptance of Matt in his life. Of course, his dad had known Matt since Matt was a boy, but it was the warm welcome Matt received in his new role of boyfriend that surprised Dean. Dean was sure it was Matt that drew this response from his dad and that he wouldn't have been so accepting of anyone else—not that he'd ever have a chance to find out. Matt was his one and only.

"Babe?" Matt asked as he entered the kitchen. "Is everything okay? You're taking a while."

Dean looked at the wonderful man standing in front of him and welcomed him into his arms before whispering into his ear, "Everything is just perfect."

And it was.

The End

Author Bio

Nic Starr lives in Sydney, Australia where she tries to squeeze as much into her busy life as possible. Balancing the demands of a corporate career with raising a family and writing can be challenging but she wouldn't give it up for the world.

Always a reader, the lure of m/m romance was strong and she devoured hundreds of wonderful m/m romance books before eventually realising she had some stories of her own that needed to be told!

When not writing or reading, she loves to spend time with her family—an understanding husband and two beautiful daughters—and is often found indulging in her love of cooking and planning her dream home in the country.

You can find Nic on Facebook, Twitter and her blog. She'd love it if you stopped by to say hi.

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WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING

By Gabbo de la Parra

Photo Description

A painting of a handsome man in semi profile, part human part machine, looking at one of his hands. His machine parts and clothes are done in gold, copper and brass tones with clouds resembling cogs in different sizes surrounding him. He wears a top hat adorned with goggles and two feathers, one of a pheasant and the other of a peacock. He's the embodiment of Steampunk imagery.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Hi. My name is Max. A few hundred years ago my ancestors had the bright idea to turn the barren rock this planet was into a garden. A group of scientists and technicians had a plan which would take generations to create a beautiful ecosystem. It was still just a rock in space back when my many times great-grandparents lost touch with the rest of the universe. I don't know why the supply ships stopped coming, was it a war? Our stories tell how the technicians faced a future in a hostile place with no hope of returning home. They did what humans always do; they survived and changed both themselves and their environment.

You may look at me and see something less than human. I look at myself and see a man. I have parents who love me, siblings and cousins who share my life. I have dreams for a future with a special man and maybe children of our own. So what difference does it make that I am as much technology as biology? Does that give these interlopers the right to come here claim our Eden as theirs? They say we are not men, I say we are and that we will fight for our home.

And, Author, there is one particular man among the invaders... I can see a future with him. I imagine a life together, and one day, perhaps, children with his beautiful eyes.

Dear Author, please, Help me—help us—find our happily ever after.

Sincerely,

Peggy

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: steampunk-ish, magic users, screwball space opera, not-what-it-seems, spacemen/aliens, switch/versatile

Content Warnings: robotic foreplay

Word Count: 31,463

A glossary of terms can be found at the end of the story

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WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING

By Gabbo de la Parra

*Your first comes from the man
Your second from your hands
After that your wand would be
From the trove of the land
Until your last solution comes
From your heart...*

~Alettan Nursery Rhyme

1. Creativity

“Lairdimax Trean Maitheas!”

Uh-oh

People only yelled your entire name when they were ready to berate you. His oldest cousin and mentor, Pasdeotrom Ameri, entered the laboratory chamber, swatting the orange fumes (that were supposed to be blue) like someone having a fight with a swarm of short-circuited trackers.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to take or add anything to the sodding formulas?”

Max swallowed hard. It wasn't his fault he had a creative mind. He was only fifteen, but he'd already finished the AASS (Aealae Artes & Science School) and was ready to enter Diplomacy Center. That was what his parents wanted—for him to be a diplomat. Max wanted to be a Master Developer, to create new artifacts to advance their race and dominate the magic that flowed throughout their planet and was the source of their energy.

Perhaps someday, he could find a way to travel to space and reconnect with the people of their ancestors. Although, he wasn't sure if he wanted to do that because it was important to understand one's past or just to slap the estranged fuckers for abandoning them. Shame that information had been destroyed two hundred years before, during a revolt. Well, nothing was perfect, right?

“Daydreaming again? I swear to Universe, I don't know how in the seven circles of Verju you finished top of your class and ahead by four years.”

Poor Verju, it wasn't his fault he died in the deepest mine of the planet.

“It's all in my genes,” Max unnecessarily answered. His mother always told him to inhale and exhale twice before answering and that not all questions needed a response; at least not the rhetorical ones.

“You're aware our mothers are sisters, right?”

“Yes. I operate under the assumption that you, at least, have some smarts in you due to that, and my creativity comes from Father's side.” Max slightly shrugged.

“You insufferable bugger. The only thing saving you from a beating is that you're my favorite cousin.”

“And that if I do well, your program will catch and more pupils will come to your hands, and their parents’ moneys to your chests.”

“This isn’t about profit. It’s about learning.” Trom shook his leonine mane. He was tall and broad; anyone would think he was a military man, not a Master Alchemist.

Max had the suspicion there were concoctions involved in his cousin’s girth since he didn’t have any mechanical enhancements like many men who wanted to be bigger and more menacing. Trom had gone the subtle way, the biological way. One could totally change a couple of components on a healing formula and turn it into a growth serum; you just needed to do it the right way and KABOOM, you became a mountain of muscles.

Trom snapped his fingers in Max’s face. “Hey, am I talking to myself here?”

“Oh. No. What were you saying?”

“Don’t add cyanide to my dispatching draught again or *you’re* gonna get dispatched next time.”

Yeah, like he could afford to kill a Maitheas.

Pain hit Max on his chest. It was Trom’s closed fist holding something. “Trago was running with this in its mouth. Pay attention where you *leave* your wand, you don’t need to lose another!”

Shit.

Five years later...

Max skidded to a halt in front of the giant, ominous doors. He wasn’t that late; he still had an entire standard minute to spare. The two man-statues guarding the doors looked at him reprovngly, their mouths tight, obviously forcing themselves to conceal the reprimand ready to flourish on their lips.

After four long terms, Max had finally done it. His Diplomat Certification awaited him behind these stupidly huge doors. He could have done it in three of the five normal years, but he and his big mouth went and told a teacher to *shut it and shove it* and gifted himself with a year of suspension. Good thing he didn’t smack the idiot—that would have meant expulsion, and the litany from his parents would have never ceased.

One mechanical arm (just a little too much nitroglycerin in that formula), two boyfriends (it all started fine then the guys smothered him), and eight wands (people needed to watch where they stepped, right?) later, he was ready to go on his own with his certification and all the diplomatic knowledge of the world in one suitcase and a leather-bound book full of formulas and device blueprints in another.

The council was sending him to Anatolia, one of the seven city-states of the planet and seemingly the furthest from their federal capital, Perselia. It didn't matter to him, the longer the distance the better.

Now, let's politely nod at the mean muggin', cardboard faces of the Granting Committee.

Well, that—if he moved his behind and entered the chamber. He straightened his morning jacket, fixed his top hat. He inhaled and exhaled (twice), stepping on the right place. The troglodyte doors slid open with a bored hiss.

Like everything in this place.

“You are late.”

That wasn't an abnormal greeting, not by a long shot.

“I apologize, your high—” Max cleared his throat, taking his hat off, “—Sir.”

The four men exchanged glances. The Head of the Granting Committee spoke. Although they were almost close to the ceiling of the chamber, his booming voice didn't need any amplification. “You are irreverent and a supreme pain in all our posteriors—”

Your flabby, hanging asses, yeah, I know.

“—but you are also brilliant, with a quick mind when it can focus on something long enough.” Bobbing heads from the others expressed their approval of the Head's words. “You are a promising young man, and we hope that your behavior as an adult grows parallel to your intellect. We know you will do great things for our beloved Alleta, helping us to deal with the turbulent currents of political dissention between the cities of this planet. Lairdimax Trean Maitheas, we hereby confer you the Diplomat Certification and assign you as chief assistant of Anatolia's governor. Behave and make us proud.”

To the left of the Head, the man with the least mean muggin' face uttered the Alletan farewell. "May there always be water to slake your thirst, shade to protect your eyes, and nourishment to maintain your body."

Those words spoke of a time when Aletta was a desolate rock full of hidden resources, and their ancestors struggled to make it a garden, abandoned by the people that brought them here but willing to survive and thrive. Words that always sent a chill down Max's spine. He would not let the city-states destroy each other and all they have accomplished as a race in the aftermath.

"I'll make this committee and Diplomacy Center proud. Thank you, my lords." Max bowed. When he righted his body, he grinned to the man who had recited the farewell.

Love you, Dad.

The Head of the Granting Committee cleared his throat, his eyes narrowing, "By the way. Please, no more pet machines."

Ouch.

And five more years later...

"Don't you look dapper?"

Max groaned. His beautiful mother, Auspeggireh Maitheas (Peggy to her closest ones) fussed over him.

"Oh, stop it. You're the youngest governor ever appointed, and all that before you even reached your twenty-fifth birthday."

"*Mom*, the appointment was two days ago, and my birthday is today. You can hardly say it was before I was twenty-five."

"Now, now, dates are dates, and the record would say you were twenty-four, it doesn't matter if you became older two days after." She dusted his shoulders. "All right, everybody is waiting for you. Come on. Don't be shy, Lord Governor."

All his loved ones were here amid politicians and outstanding citizens. Tanned and lanky Iontach, the oldest of his brothers, played with the ends of his handlebar mustache with one hand and grabbed his wife's waist with the other. Stout Fiore, second brother and a savvy entrepreneur, didn't have much luck with the ladies, but he didn't seem to care. The twins Sasta and Amhara, older

than Max by two standard years were incredible, strong defense teachers. He had endured a lot of *training* from them, but (in the end) it had been all worth it, he knew how to fight, especially dirty. His favorite cousin Meidhre, the woman every man fantasized about. His best friend Deas, the light to his darkness, blond like the sun and with a disarming smile that had made more than one girl lose her virtue. Even Trom was here, older but wide like a bull, still teaching Alchemy with great success.

Maith Maitheas, his father, hugged him. "So proud of you, son, youngest governor ever and haven't lost a wand in a standard year."

Max chuckled. It wasn't like wand-losing was a joke, but it happened to him a lot, and his family playfully reminded him of it (at nearly every opportunity they had). He patted his pocket to be sure it was there. Master Esaw had told him that the next time he needed a wand the core must be something *from his other half* because all other possibilities had been exhausted after twenty wands.

*So I better be careful with this one. I've already exhausted the **trove** of the planet.*

Hopefully, he wouldn't need a replacement. An Alletan without his wand to wield the magic emanating from their planet was worse than a pariah. In his case, his political position and the honor of his family would be irreparably damaged if he couldn't secure the Alletans' only vehicle to conduit this fabulous power of their world. Yes, there were some like him who could control it with their bare hands, but this ability was publicly shunned and secretly feared. Thus, he was doing his best to pay attention and not lose this one. The story of a woman dismembered by an enraged mob when they discovered she could do magic without her wand had been knocking on his brain door of late, perhaps because he was at the end of his rope. Although it happened so long ago, it wasn't worth the worry.

Well, he could always say he was in love with Luddi, his pet peacock, and use one of his feathers like last time.

And the magic will blow a raspberry in your face for being a ridiculous liar.

True. He couldn't just say that someone or something was *his other half*. The notion had to come from his heart, from his very essence for it to resonate with the magic and therefore the wand could become the perfect vehicle. Even as capable as Max was to control this power with exceptional success

barehanded, he couldn't be the ultimate conduit without that extension of his being a wand provided.

"Still here, Governor? You have another two hundred guests to mingle with." His father smacked him on the back, and the riotous laugh made several heads swivel their way.

Another heavy hand struck Max almost immediately, making the gears of his spine whir noisily in protest. Fiore pulled him sideways to his corpulent, mechanical chest and shook him gleefully, "Dear little brother, youngest governor. What about that, huh? I knew you were going to rise fast, but this is pleasantly unexpected." Turning Max to face him, Fiore did a flourish with his wand, and an outrageous gold necklace and medallion appeared below Max's collar, resting heavily over his sternum where his lifelight was concealed by shirt and waistcoat. "There. Happy birthday!"

It looked like something one would receive as an order of merit, truly gaudy and excessive, but that was Fiore for you. And now Max would have to wear the well-intended but not-fashionable-at-all gift through the night. "Why, thank you, brother. This is exactly what I needed to complement my ensemble. It's exquisite."

Liar, liar pants on fire a.k.a. diplomat without remorse.

"Perfect, isn't it?" Fiore clapped his hands like a kid who had just received a badge of honor.

His father eyed the necklace with a perfect mask of approval in place; the astonishment was just a pinprick on his dutifully schooled features. It took a diplomat to recognize the telltales of another. "One in a million," he offered, full of mirth.

It wasn't that they didn't love Fiore, they did, and he was a devoted son and brother. Precisely because of this, there was no reason to break his heart by telling him the gift was atrocious.

The twins hurried to them. "It's time." And both towed Max away from his father and brother, pulling him by the armpits and snorting at the sight of the flashy necklace.

"Ladies, a little more respect. I'm a governor now. We're not at a family affair."

"Oh shut up," growled Sasta in his ear. "You might be a big shot official, but we can still kick your ass—"

Amhara finished the sentence, “—privately and publicly.”

Max almost rolled his eyes. He did his best not to appear a burlap sack full of potatoes between his burly sisters. Their mechanical enhancements were *cosmetic*, not like Max's, which were all the products of his urge for experimentation and creation. Anyone would say that someone with such a heavy hand on the pacification of the animosity between the city-states (which is why Anatolia made him governor after his predecessor decided to retire) could not have time to experiment and create, but he needed more than politics in his life, and since men were proving to be more nuisance than gaiety, his imaginative efforts were his only solace.

“Hey,” one of his sisters jolted him, “Pay attention.”

They were in the center of the hall, and Max saw Peggy Maitheas graciously swing her wand, all the lights slowly dimming. Unos, his pet ball, floated into the hall with an enormous birthday cake on top of him. All his gears, recently polished for the occasion, twinkled thanks to the tiny candle flames.

Those assembled sang, “For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow...”

“STOP.” Inall Brix, Max's assistant, skidded to a halt, dangerously close to Unos and the cake. “Governor, this is an emergency!” He was out of breath and uncharacteristically disheveled; he had probably tried to find a solution for whatever the situation was on his own and couldn't. “A spaceship has just landed outside the city gates by the Yerma plains!” His hands rested on his knees as he heaved, searching for oxygen. “I sent a battalion, but you need to come.”

After a collective gasp, all eyes landed on Max. His sisters let go of him (they had been clutching him like he was going to run or something), and he straightened his jacket. With a quick flick of his wand, he made his hat appear and fixed it in place, slightly sideways as was his custom. Once again Fate was about to force him to use his only ability that wasn't a natural part of him—diplomacy. He strode toward Inall, scooped some icing as he passed beside the cake, tasting it (*mmm, really good*), and spoke aloud with his diplomat face firmly in place, “Let's do this.”

2. Rewards

Feathers like eyes

Metal and flesh

Unruly heart

Virtuous mage

“Imploding black holes!” Rezzu Ki Muselet grumbled. His father chuckled quietly as the priest transmitting the oracle’s message narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. “Forgive me, *Dre*.” He added quickly and quietly. “I appreciate your time and effort. Please bless me.”

“Go with the blessing of Meha, my child.”

Father and son bowed and left the chamber, walking out of the temple in a straight line and simply nodding politely to those they encounter.

“I’m going to end up with a machine covered in feathers!”

“A *virtuously magical* machine covered in feathers...” The amusement in his father’s tone was clear as the cloudless, pale green sky of Mireeh above them. “Your father also threw a fit when the oracle told him his. I’m not that bad, am I?”

Darien Wanao, the father in front of him, was human. Kekoa Muselet, his other father, was a Colviri prince of the blood, and they were perfect for each other. Rezzu could only hope he had such luck. “If you were better, you’d be a god, Father.”

“Don’t ever let DRE-Han Ki hear you say something like that.”

DRE-Han Ki was a nasty codger priest who needed to mind his own business. Rezzu nodded judiciously though. His father arched an eyebrow, probably reading his mind and smelling his deception. He grinned, “Never, Father.”

“Let that riddle out of your mind. Tomorrow is a great day for you, your first mission as captain. I’m so proud of you.”

Rezzu had heard the last phrase at least a thousand times throughout the last standard month. Yes, this was *his* first mission as captain after being first officer for almost five standard years, but it was also (and most importantly) the first Human-Colviri joint mission. They were going to a remote planet where

they hoped to discover signs of life. He had come to his position as captain through hard work, but the chances of something going wrong were always a possibility, especially in uncharted territory, like combining two races that get along well but had never had the opportunity to embark on a journey such as this together.

“Uncle Sule and Uncle Alaric aren’t coming, huh?”

“I’m sorry, Rezzu,” his father said in common language, because the Colviri would apologize but they were never sorry. Feeling sorry was an excuse to keep doing the same error. “They are tied in procedures with the Courts.”

“Well, I’ll see them when I get back.” He loved those two men. They were regents of Nova Gaia, a planet the Cygnus Federation had ruled until they lost a war with the Colviri and ceded it. His uncles were humans, as was half of the population of the blue sphere. It was one of the first places where the Colviri intermingled with other races, after being voluntarily isolated for eons without any interest regarding the galaxy.

“I know you’ll face this adventure with their blessings upon you.” His father squeezed his shoulder and shook him lightly. “Ready for some food?”

Five standard days later, Rezzu stood in an ornate chamber with high windows, looking at a darkening sky, his hands clasped behind his back. It was weird to not see the three moons of Nova Gaia or the rings of asteroids of Mireeh, his home planet. Only myriad stars shone above him.

Another man was with him, the governor of Anatolia, the closest city to the place where they had landed. Rezzu had to give it to this man; they were together for a drink after the governor had told everyone to fuck off with a pleasant and subtle demeanor because he was not going to be secretive about this encounter at the end of the many meetings of the day. Rezzu had yet to understand the purpose of this rendezvous though.

“Pan Rezzu,” Lairdimax Maitheas called him softly. “Your drink.” He had addressed Rezzu in the way Colviri addressed each other, using ‘Pan’ as a symbol of respect.

The mechanical arm and hand didn’t unnerve Rezzu; he had seen machine prosthesis before. It was the way those green eyes, so similar to the sky of Mireeh, studied him. Hidden behind caution and diplomacy was something Rezzu couldn’t name and didn’t dare try to understand. Both enigmas made him uncomfortable. He just wasn’t sure if it was a totally unpleasant kind of discomfort.

Instead of thanking the governor (Max, the governor had requested to be called) as he took the flute, Rezzu uttered the stupidest thing that had ever come out of his mouth. "You speak common language, but you have a funny accent." That was not just impolite but extremely childish. People were entitled to have accents, they made life richer and interesting.

More than offended, Max seemed amused. "No. *You* have a funny accent."

"Hey, my uncle Sule was the one who taught me, and he is human and was a military teacher." Rezzu didn't know how those details made a case for the purity of his common language. There was something about this half-machine man that constantly short-circuited his brain. Perhaps it was those lips. The governor had a cruel mouth. Cruel in its beauty and in all the desires it stirred in Rezzu with a simple smile. Desires that weren't appropriate, that weren't reasonable. A bad thing when dealing with new people, especially if you wanted them to become your allies.

Green scopes scrutinized his face. Max's head was slightly tilted to one side; he wasn't wearing his hat, and his hair was as dark as the coming night. "You said *my uncle* and *human* in the same breath. As much as the Colviri have human features and similar bodies, one look at any of you, and we know that if we ever shared a common ancestor it must have been at the beginning of time." There was no recrimination in his tone, just logical and dispassionate understanding.

"He's not my uncle by blood, but I love him all the same. My father *is* human though." Something no one here would guess at first sight, since Rezzu had the Colviri's natural lack of melanin in his hair and skin and the height, usually beyond seven feet; although the Alettans were uncharacteristically tall for humans, perhaps due to the enhancements they favored so much. Nevertheless, Rezzu had his human father's eyes, a vibrant hazel hue that was unnatural for his race, but that might not be that surprising on this planet.

"So your mother is Colviri." Max said it like a fact not a question.

"I have two fathers." Rezzu used the same matter-of-fact tone.

"We have artificial procreation too, nothing esoteric about it." Max almost shrugged but stopped himself. He raised his hand at face level and moved his brass fingers in a wavy motion, as if testing their flexibility. "We can't depend on Nature alone."

"Love can push Nature, pan Max." Rezzu murmured and took a swig of his drink. It was a strong and burning liquor. He shouldn't have more.

“Love can push many things,” Max offered inscrutably.

Rezzu needed to get out of this room before he said (or did) another stupid thing. “I think I’m ready for bed.”

Which could be taken in many different ways.

Max’s eyes misted, and he arched a manly dark eyebrow. “Me too...” He sobered up, instantly apologetic. “We should call it a night.”

“Yes, we must.” Rezzu settled his flute on a nearby table. “Good night.”

Rezzu Ki Muselet, captain of the *Oculus* and de facto ambassador of the Colviri, hurried toward the door without looking back.

I’m a mess.

Just his luck that the planet was actually inhabited and he had ended up representing his people without the extended diplomatic experience necessary to deal with a thriving society instead of the desolate, abandoned site they had expected.

His two escorts waited outside the room, eyeing suspiciously the two soldiers installed at the entrance while they kept watch from the opposite wall. The people of Aletta seemed friendly, but it was wise to keep one’s guard up. They walked him outside the Palace of Government and boarded their transport.

Rezzu should have braided his long hair that morning. Now it whirled disorderly about him in the warm wind of Anatolia’s outskirts as the transport sped toward their ship. Rezzu’s mind was a tumultuous reflection of the chaos around his head—admonitions and cravings tossed and turned, fighting and embracing. He was here on a peace mission, not to lust after some politician, no matter how hot that politician was. By Meha, he was a soldier; the subtleties of diplomacy escaped him, and the governor of Anatolia *had disturbed* him from the moment they laid eyes on each other, at what the Alletans called the Yerma Plains, the previous day. True, they hadn’t come to invade the planet, and precisely because of this—to avoid unnecessary panic among the Alettans, the queen decided not to send another ship with seasoned representatives (upon discovering how advanced the planet was) but to exploit Rezzu’s military wherewithal and summarily turn him into the poster boy for the Colviri.

Maybe he was just horny, and that was why Max’s beauty bewildered him.

My mistake for only focusing on my career and leaving the needs of my body to hazard.

Apparently, what he needed was physical release to be able to focus on a sensible course of action, and it was solely in his hands. As captain he was determined to keep his hands off the crew, but he wasn't sure if he would be able to keep the same resolution concerning a certain man with starless night hair, eyes like the sky of home, and a sultry, cruel mouth.

3. Awareness

"You shouldn't be doing this." Max's best friend in the whole world, Deas, had his reprimand face on.

"And what am I doing exactly?"

"You think I haven't seen how you look at that Colviri."

"What? Are you crazy? They probably want to invade us and are just assessing our defenses and power." He just said this to deflect Deas, but so far the Colviri hadn't been able to explain quite clearly why they came to Aletta.

My diplomat gut tells me it is not an annexation.

Whatever it was, it had a subtle aroma of shame, and that was what made it hard for them to come straight forward with their intentions. Their own remorse held them back—but why?

Deas arched an eyebrow, which meant, *yeah right*.

"Besides, you are well aware I think men are a waste of time. Everything is nice when it begins and then goes to the toilet because it gets possessive and clingy and smothering."

Although in his heart of hearts, Max hoped to find the right man and fall in love and live happily ever after with a bunch of mini geniuses like him for progeny.

'Verse, not even the twins have this kind of girly dreams. Well, there's nothing girly about those two anyway.

"I still don't approve if you're planning on doing something reckless." Deas crossed his arms over his chest and huffed.

All right, there was something seriously wrong here because usually the one doing the huffing was Max. "There's something else. What's going on?"

"Have you seen how they look at us? At our enhancements? Like we're less human because we have robotic parts."

"Really?" If this was true, Max needed to pay more attention. People feared what they didn't understand, and what you feared you began to hate and soon you'd be wanting to destroy it. And Deas would know, his company was the one catering to the visitors, and he had more spies than Max everywhere. "It's

not our fault that our ancestors had to enhance themselves to survive. It's our tradition to replace and enhance body parts with technology."

"True. But you haven't detected the interlopers' discomfort because you only have eyes for that Captain."

"Their ambassador." Max pointed out.

"Whatever he is. I mean, I've noticed this dislike toward us more in the humans with them, but it's all the same. They are together." Deas' face darkened.

"Then I was right when I advised everyone to keep their magic to themselves. If they seem afraid of the way we look, imagine their distress in learning we wield supernatural forces in our everyday lives."

"If they stay here long enough, they'll find out," Deas said with a scathing note in his usually smoky voice.

"We'll ease them into it. You always need an ace up your sleeve." Max grinned.

Unos floated about them, playing soft music. Max stroked him, and his tubes changed colors happily. If he hadn't been using his sound reproduction system to entertain them, he would have clicked and chittered and purred in delight before thanking Max. It would be a nice improvement to change the frontal gears for bigger ones so they looked more like eyes. Unos was a ball, but that didn't mean he couldn't have a nice face, you know—like a metallic, chubby friend.

"I swear to Universe, Max. How could you stay in meetings for so many hours when you cannot even concentrate on a simple conversation?"

Max gave a slight shrug. "You know we have stenographers to record things, right?"

"That doesn't mean your mind can be wandering while others talk."

"You're absolutely correct. I'm going to invite Ambassador Muselet to The One Thousand Ball and wring the truth out of him as we dance."

"You have got to be shitting me!"

"Of course not. The other cities have given me free rein over our dealings with the visitors. What better way to engage them than in a ball. It would be a formal welcome for them. Yes! It's a brilliant idea. I have to send the haberdasher to him to furnish a proper outfit. This is exciting."

"I don't trust these aliens." Deas grumbled, sounding exactly like a very pissed child, his blue eyes flashing with disapproval.

The music stopped. "Governor, a calling from Captain Muselet has been redirected to me."

Deas' eyebrow hiked up a few millimeters.

"Hush," Max mouthed to his friend. "Let him through, Unos."

The Colviri ambassador's holographic body appeared on top of Unos. Even in miniature, it was imposing, powerful, and did things it shouldn't be doing to Max's pulse. He didn't want a man messing with his peace, but he surely wouldn't mind messing with the ambassador's wicked body for a spell.

"Hello, Max." The Colviri captain noticed Deas. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"You didn't. This is my friend Teremideas Walker."

"Nice to meet you." Rezzu bowed slightly.

"The pleasure is all mine." Deas had his polite face on and acknowledged the captain with an inclination of his head and a gallant (and utterly false) smile.

Since Max knew all the inward faces Deas was making, he went business-like. "How can I help you, Ambassador?"

"Can we talk?"

"Of course, Ambassador. My office, in twenty standard minutes?"

Rezzu glanced at Deas before speaking. "We could use a less formal setting."

"Very well, West Gardens, same time." Max smiled, Rezzu's hesitation was endearing.

"Thank you." And with an elegant bow the hologram dissolved.

"I don't like it," Deas growled, going to his feet.

"Sweet 'verse. If I didn't know better I'd think you have something stuck up your butt gears."

Deas sputtered, "What? You know I don't..."

“Shhhh.” Max stood up and patted Deas’s cheek. “I know your pretty behind is all flesh. Why don’t you go and have some fun with it, instead of worrying about me?”

“You’re insufferable sometimes.”

“That I’ve been told.”

Twenty-five standard minutes later...

A bird flew onto a high branch. It must be a bird because it had feathers like the doves Rezzu had seen on Nova Gaia. They didn’t have birds on Mireeh. It was a blue, green and orange thing with a long tail and a fancy crown. He asked Max what it was.

“It’s a peacock. Want to see him closer?”

“Sure.” What else could he say?

“Luddi!” Max had his hands around his mouth to make the sound go further. “Come here, boy!”

“Is he a pet?”

“Yes. He’s very smart.” And to prove it, the bird gracefully flew from his branch and landed in front of them. “Well, done, Luddi. This is my friend Rezzu.” Max put his hand over Rezzu’s shoulder. Lightning traveled through his arm, but Rezzu remained outwardly impassive. “Give him a show, big boy,” Max cooed.

Luddi shook, similar to a man loosening his shoulders before a race. His long tail rose and spread like a fan. It was one of the most beautiful things Rezzu had ever seen. The colors, the forms, all were regal and impressive. Luddi started to strut, a performer on stage. And then Rezzu realized with a shock that Luddi’s tail feathers resembled eyes.

Feathers like eyes.

Nah. Sweet Lady of the Shields, help me focus.

After a moment, Max stepped close to the beautiful bird. “He wouldn’t let anyone else do this.” He took a feather from the tail and offered the jewel-like marvel to Rezzu. “Would you try some hats? If you find one that you like, we can furnish it with this.”

“For The One Thousand Ball?”

“Well, yes. You can’t have the perfect outfit without the perfect hat.”

Rezzu shouldn’t have been enjoying Max’s smile so much. Everything in this man was delightful, even the way his hat rested a little sideways over his dark locks. “I’ve never worn a hat before, and we usually don’t wear so many pieces at once.”

“You don’t go around naked, do you?” But the way Max eyed him said he’d like the idea of Rezzu roaming around unclothed very much.

And something in Rezzu wanted to please him very much too. Maybe he was getting sick from the lack of mirium in the air. It was a lame excuse. Nova Gaia didn’t have mirium in its atmosphere and Rezzu was always fine there. It has to be another thing; he just couldn’t name it—yet. It couldn’t still be horniness after all the attention his hands had given to his cock. “No, we don’t.” He looked for a topic that didn’t involve thinking of the governor undressed too. “Tell me more about this ball. What does it celebrate?”

“It’s a commemoration. The One Thousand are those who were left stranded here, founders of our culture. This planet was a desert, and with sweat, blood, and tears they built a future for themselves and their children. We are proud of our heritage, of those miners, technicians, scientists. You might still see a lot of arid zones, but what we’ve conquered we made into heavenly gardens.”

It was true, the grass was emerald green, luscious trees, sparkling flowers. Tall, graceful, stone buildings and ample squares adorned their city. Rezzu wondered about their energy sources. He hadn’t seen panels for it to be solar; nor visible blades, slats or sails pointing to wind force. There were no gas emissions. The technology might seem to some outmoded, but there was something nostalgic about it, perhaps hinting at a time when things were simpler, more in tune with their surroundings. He shook his head and set the evasive energy aside; it wasn’t relevant in this precise moment.

Rezzu would say the weather was somewhat stuffy to be wearing so many clothes though. His uniform was insulated, so he only felt it in his face and hands, but, still, he would rather be shirtless like he could in the nice weather of Mireeh. Although on Nova Gaia, people had the same layer-upon-layer dress code going on.

Out of nowhere, Max produced seeds and gave them to Rezzu, “Here. He’ll let you feed him if you are with me.”

Max must be really quick with his hands because Rezzu didn't see him get those seeds from his pocket. Nah, the governor's presence just made him nervous, and he was blowing simple things out of proportion. They have prestidigitators both in Mireeh and Nova Gaia, sleight of hand wasn't that an extraordinary thing. It just took him by surprise.

Was the governor waiting for Rezzu to comment on it?

For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, Rezzu decided it was better to not mention it. It had been so casual, it didn't seem to be intentional. Usually when people had that kind of skill, they bragged about it.

"Don't be afraid, Ambassador. He won't bite." Max was smiling, using the kind of smile that made Rezzu want to run and never stop, even before knowing what he was running from.

"Hey, Luddi, want some of these?" Rezzu asked as naturally as his conflicting nerves allowed his voice to come out, extending his hand toward the bird.

The peacock looked at him quizzically for a heartbeat or two, his head sideways, as if he was taking the measure of Rezzu. He apparently decided Rezzu wasn't dangerous (or that he could take Rezzu down if needed) and moved confidently to pick from his hand.

Rezzu had mentally braced himself for the pain of the sharp looking beak, but the action was surprisingly smooth, and accomplished without a single puncture. A movement made him look from Luddi to Max, and he found the governor appraising him greedily. The strange sensation spiraling inside him wasn't completely unwelcome.

Your pet won't bite me, but what about you, Governor?

4. Inherent

With the ball in full swing, and after all the appropriate rounds of introduction and mingling, Max finally had Rezzu Ki Muselet to himself, at least for a while until some plump old lady requested him for a dance. He needed to get the ambassador away from the party for a spell.

No. Not that kind of spell.

“I haven’t had the opportunity to show you the Palace of Government properly with one thing and another. Would you care for a tour? I can see the party is a little overwhelming for you.”

Rezzu sipped his Calvados. “You said this brandy is made from apples?”

“Yes, we don’t have grapes in Aletta, but we love our liquors. So we improvised.” Max smiled. In Aletta, they would make liquors out of rocks if they could. One thing magic couldn’t do was transform minerals into wine; the chemistry was just not right.

“It’s delicious.” Rezzu almost moaned after a bigger pull. “Let’s have that tour.”

Empty glasses found the tray of a passing helper, and Max took fresh drinks for them both. He gave a last look at the revelers below them. Couples twirled, jewels sparkled, and the Colviri among them were not necessarily the biggest people in the room (with so many members of the Alettan community brutally enhanced), but they stood out by their long, alabaster hair and their refusal to wear hats. Rezzu was the only one who had accepted the challenge, and he didn’t force his people to follow his lead. The humans among his party were mostly from a planet called Nova Gaia, and their customs and wardrobe were uncannily similar; thus they blended easily (at least physically) with the Alettans. Max hadn’t seen the discomfort Deas mentioned, but they were at a party; drink and food always softened recalcitrant hearts for a while.

They moved away from the balcony. Max led the way, still in awe of how dapper Rezzu looked in his brocade tailcoat, navy blue waistcoat, cravat and trousers, and velvet top hat. “Please follow me.”

Luddi’s feather had influenced the decision for the paisley design and tones of Rezzu’s coat, and the blues and greens made his single white braid shimmer like the long tail of an ivory stallion. The darkness of the hat made his sun-like

eyes more radiant, more intriguing. For someone who claimed never to have worn a hat before, he was carrying it with flying colors. In contrast, Max wore red and black brocade with burgundy waistcoat and cravat, and black trousers.

"I haven't complimented you on your outfit. The burgundy brings out the color of your eyes." Rezzu smiled shyly.

"You're most gracious, pan Rezzu." The right thing to do would be to comment on Rezzu's appearance too, but Max chose a different road. "I hope I'm not imposing, but I'd love to wear one of your uniforms. I haven't been in a uniform in a long time."

"You'll look magnificent."

"I'm not as big as you, Ambassador."

"But you're bigger than most humans in my crew. I'll see that you receive one uniform tomorrow." Rezzu grinned and winked. "Then we can get together to see how it fits."

"A brilliant idea."

They were supposed to be touring the palace, but they only had eyes for each other. The sound of music was becoming fainter and fainter, the distant reminder that there was a ball in progress. Other couples moved amid the marble and stone corridors, decorated with blue and silver rugs, notables' paintings, delicate vases, and ornate sconces. A playful idea came to Max, as he realized where they were heading. "Let me show you the Weapon's Room."

"That would be nice." Rezzu settled the drink he had already finished on the tray of a smiling helper.

Max opened the door, hoping nobody was already there. The ball was approaching that moment where people would start looking for places to indulge. He wasn't planning exactly that, but—he needed Rezzu all alone, against his better judgment. He patted his coat to check for his wand; he'd used a reducing enchantment to make it fit in the tiny pocket because if he'd left it somewhere else it was good-bye, and he couldn't afford that.

The room was empty of revelers. On the walls and in the display cases were a collection of souvenirs from a time when every mineral on the planet had been forged into a sword or an axe or any other ancient weapon with wicked cutting edges to test its capabilities. Among the founders were several individuals who had learned the ancient art of metal forging and passed it on;

thus, in every generation someone had created some decorative and unnecessary combat whatnot.

Moving straight toward the liquor cabinet, Max asked, "Calvados?"

"Isn't it dangerous to have spirits in a room full of sharp objects?"

"Do you know it is not polite to answer a question with another?" Coming from Max the sole idea was ridiculous; he was the most questioning person in Anatolia, if not Aletta.

Rezzu seemed pleasantly buzzed but answered with an arched eyebrow and a disarming smile. "Isn't that a question?"

"Touché."

The ambassador chuckled, waving his finger at Max, "I know that word."

"I'm glad you do, pan Rezzu." Max put the glass with two measures of brandy in Rezzu's hand. The program wasn't to get the Colviri captain drunk, but it was too tempting seeing the slight coloring emerging on his high cheeks. He followed the sensual movement of the covered Adam's apple as Rezzu took a healthy gulp.

Those unnatural eyes were heavy-lidded and uncannily trained on Max. "You're a very handsome man." Rezzu put his free hand over his chest. "I don't mean to be disrespectful. I just want to let you know what I think."

"I applaud frankness, Ambassador." Max raised his glass in a salute and took a sip. He moved away from Rezzu toward a wall full of elaborate rapiers and knives. The Colviri followed him.

"We're alone. You can call me Rezzu." He stopped a few inches from Max but loomed all the same. "Would you tell me what you think of me?"

"I don't think anything... Rezzu." Max moved closer and stared into those maddening eyes. "You haven't done anything to make me think yet." He noticed how Rezzu swallowed hard.

"You must, at least, have an opinion." Rezzu had his lips a hairsbreadth from Max's.

Movement caught his eye, and Max sidled to investigate, leaving Rezzu in an awkward position, tilted over a founder's bust—almost kissing it. He knew he was being obnoxious to the extreme, and, internally, he wanted to undress Rezzu like he hadn't wanted anything in a long time. But, if he truly sought to

unveil the things he needed to learn from this man the only way was to play hard to get and push him to reveal his secrets in an effort to win Max over.

Through the gilded mirror, Max saw Inall, his assistant, right beside another man (one he didn't recognize), both on their knees, worshipping the abundantly leaking cock of a Colviri officer, perched on the edge of a desk.

"Annauk and Dominik," Rezzu murmured beside Max.

"The human is from your crew?"

"The one without, what do you call them, enhancements? Dominik." Rezzu had left his drink somewhere and had both hands on either side of the mirror, utterly... something—Max didn't know if Rezzu was shocked by the discovery or impressed by the men's sucking skills.

Inall had shoulder length, fiery red hair and blue eyes, while Dominik's curly, sandy-blond hair looked lovely about his ears with those big, brown eyes. Like all Colviri, Annauk's hair was white (he was noteworthy by wearing it in short spikes. Something Max hadn't seen before), and his eyes were closed, enraptured as he was in the others' ministrations, slowly threading his hands in both sets of locks. The one thing visible, though, was his unruly pubic hair; it shone like the fur of a feral cat, and must be utterly fragrant by the way Dominik and Inall kept nuzzling it every time they went down the thick shaft in perfect synchrony, one on each side.

Rezzu loosened his cravat. "Can they see us? They steal glances our way."

"They only see their own reflection. On that side, this is a full length mirror."

"Oh." Rezzu closed his eyes and tipped his head back as Max's mechanical hand settled on his shoulder. "It's hot here, isn't it?"

"Yes," Max whispered and helped Rezzu out of his tailcoat, caressing muscles in a completely unnecessary way for the action.

One moment later, both coats rested on the floor on top of each other, possibly mimicking the road their owners would follow if Max didn't control the urgency rapidly filling him.

By now, the roles in the other room had reversed. However, Annauk wasn't sucking cocks but taking care of willing holes, after positioning both men over the desk on all fours. Max couldn't see their faces, and yet, by the way their

bodies bucked and they pushed into the Colviri's face and digits, they were enjoying themselves greatly.

Max aimed his covered erection sideways to Rezzu's upper leg, and (without questioning himself) unbuttoned the strained placard of the ambassador. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Extremely," Rezzu moaned as he, perhaps unconsciously, centered himself over Max's bulge and pushed, seeking friction.

Unfaltering hands freed Rezzu's erection. Good thing those trousers were dark because the ambassador's cock was a broken faucet. Max wondered if all Colviri men seeped as much after seeing the flood Annauk was putting forward. Wickedly, Max traced his drenched fingers over Rezzu's lips. Thanks to the magic of the planet and their technology, his robotic hand (resting on the Colviri's naked hip) sensed the tremor that seized Rezzu and culminated in a breathless moan. He gathered more liquid and tasted it, and his own moan was equal in ardor and sound to Rezzu's.

His forehead rested on a broad shoulder; Max was following a path he shouldn't even be considering, but the command fired at his taste buds by the exquisite flavor was stronger than him. He stroked the solid roundness of Rezzu's ass using one hand, and procured more juices with the other for lubrication. Something primal and possessive guided him, and Rezzu was a fluid mass, pliant and accepting.

Metal met flesh because Max needed to enter Rezzu with his part that was not human—that was artificial but as intrinsic to him as his own skin. In an absolute act of aggressive domination, he coiled the long white braid and pulled down, hissing in that kissable ear, "Otherworldly. That's what I think you are."

And Rezzu groaned and pushed urgently into the metallic finger breaching him. He tried to reach behind, but Max growled, "Hands on the wall."

In the other room, Annauk was on his back, sucking Dominik, who loomed over him with a piston-like rhythm in tandem with Inall's penetration of his exposed hole. By virtue of their own need to watch themselves, the three lovers kept a very clear visual of all their actions for Rezzu and Max.

"Do you know how inappropriate this is?"

"I have an idea, but I'm enjoying myself too much to stop. Do you want me to stop?"

“Sweet goddess, not at all.”

“Good.”

Rezzu stared at the men but undulated and impaled himself on Max's digit. Max had found his own tempo, stroking Rezzu's cock and fucking him with his middle finger, almost as if following Inall's lead but not completely. His own cock screamed for release, but Max knew that if he risked it and liberated it, he'd lose the last shred of control he had over the thing growing inside him that was unruly and illogical and unnamed. He shouldn't be doing this; more than undiplomatic it was almost barbaric, and if he went further and let himself entirely inside Rezzu—the battle would be lost forever against that nameless enemy, getting stronger inside him.

“*Kecoswe nurguvaek...*” Rezzu sighed breathlessly. Stretched in an impossible arch, he rested the back of his head on Max's shoulder and pleaded, “Let me touch you, please.” This time his voice came out husky and needy, weakening Max's resolution.

“No. This is your moment. Mine will come another day.”

Dominik had finished his turn at Annauk's hole, and now both humans were chest on the desk as the Colviri officer prepped them for his own round of penetration. Redheaded Inall was the first to receive Annauk's length, his head backwards thanks to a massive hand pulling his hair. Dominik kissed Inall's exposed throat, moving upward until they were lip-to-lip and swayed by the violent wave of Annauk's thrusts. Annauk kept Dominik's hole busy, using his free hand (was it really free as deep as it was inside the other man?) and making them a complete circuit with their bodies all secured in the ultimate connection.

Rezzu and Annauk came together, separated by a wall but with the same devastating finality; one with a robotic finger inside him, the other deep in the body of another man. Rezzu went lax, flush against Max's chest, for a moment that was too short to be natural, and then, as if guided by a sudden realization, roughly pushed Max away from him, breaking their link.

“*Ketoza Uvolse,*” Rezzu spat, hastily arranging his cock, pulling his trousers up and gathering his tailcoat with a yank.

Shocked, Max was only able to utter a halfhearted, “What?”

The beautiful face was a mixture of anger and shame as Rezzu reached the door, and, before opening it, he turned to Max, “Forgive me. I got carried away.”

The door closed with a bang. The explosion made Max react. "No. Wait." He was almost out when he remembered his own coat, and with a huff went to pick it up. He hurried through the now crowded corridors, trying his best not to knock people down and holding down his hat.

At the palace entrance, Max saw Rezzu's braid flapping in the air as he escaped in one of the Colviri transports. His hand went to his wand to stop the vehicle. Max remembered he shouldn't be doing magic in front of the Colviri, but it was for nothing. His wand wasn't in his pocket.

Shit.

Max ran back to the Weapon's Room just to find it already occupied. He cleared his throat, "Excuse me."

The man and woman turned his way ready to tell off whoever it was. "Oh, Governor Maitheas." Both tried to put their clothes together. They stood beside the two-way mirror, probably watching other people as well.

"Sorry to interrupt you. I just came to look for something I lost. It'll be just a moment." One glance was enough to find his wand—in many little pieces. He bent as to pick something up and conjured a pocket watch, showing it off to the other two and straightening himself. "Here it is," Max said happily. "My mother will kill me if I lose her gift."

The couple laughed with him. Max turned around and singsonged, "Carry on." More laughter bubbled as he closed the door.

Maybe if I hadn't reduced it, it would have survived.

Fragments of the metal shaft and gears and the filament of core that had been Luddi's feather sat on his palm, minute and impossible to repair.

Well, Governor. You're officially the unbeatable wand-losing champion of Aletta.

Max was in big trouble if the citizens discovered he didn't have a wand.

His only core option left was to find *his other half*, a seemingly insurmountable feat when he didn't even have a boyfriend. All right, he was a diplomat, he knew how to fake it. He'd find a way; there must be an alternative that didn't involve putting his heart out there to be conquered. He wasn't against it; this wasn't just the right moment for all that. He was not going to rush falling in love simply to get a new wand. No way.

Still, amid the turbulent whirlpool of ideas and schemes in front of him, the image of Rezzu Ki Muselet stood tall and strong as if he was the eye of a hurricane, calm and steady but with troubled eyes.

Forgive me, Rezzu. It was all my fault.

5. Unadorned

"I have no answer for that." Keda Enoa Ki Muselet, future queen of Mireeh and Rezzu's sister, shook her head. "If you hadn't run, you wouldn't have all these questions eating you."

"So, you'd have stayed to face the man after he had his finger up your ass when you came in his hand?"

Keda Enoa seemed to consider this, tapping her forefinger over her chin. A trait she had picked up from their father, Kekoa Muselet.

Rezzu rolled his eyes. "Are you serious? You have to think about it?"

"Well, for starters, I wouldn't have put myself in that situation."

His sister was insufferable sometimes, but she had a point there. That didn't mean he wouldn't have shaken her if she were physically in front of him.

"Besides, you are an adult. It's not like you can't have sex with a willing man. What's so special about this governor?"

"I-I am not supposed to do something like that. I-I haven't..."

Her eyes went wild, "Brother, you are not a virgin, are you?" Her puzzled face was unbearable. "I thought you were knocking boots with that technician on the *Logandi*!" She was flailing her arms as she walked about her chambers, moving in and out of the screen. "I'm NOT a virgin. How can it be possible that you're one?!"

"Sister!"

"What?" She stopped her frantic pacing and turned to the screen, catching his astonishment. "Oh, hush. Father said it was natural. How do you know if you like something if you don't experience it, huh?" She moved closer, flattening her hands on the console, her face occupying almost the entire screen. "Kalhya is so fucking dreamy. Tell me you fucked him, brother. Tell me you did!"

"We... never... actually..."

"Oh, Sweet Meha, what a waste! If I had a cock I'd be putting it in every hole available. WHY AM I NOT A MAN!!!!?"

"Would you calm down? This isn't about you."

Keda Enoa sobered up. "You are right. What you need to do is stop being a wuss and act normal. It wasn't a big deal, you two just went with the flow. If I'd seen three hot guys doing it, I'd have totally gotten carried away too."

"The Alettans think we are here to invade them." Rezzu wasn't a wuss. The whole thing had been just a political mistake. He needed a way to clear the air, and his sister wasn't helping. She was the political strategist, not him.

"But that's not the case, so what's your point?"

Rezzu dithered and did not answer.

"OH NO, you like-*like* him. You like this governor, and that's why you're so freaked out!" She jumped and giggled, clapping her hands. "I knew it was something else. You have faced all kinds of dangerous stuff without batting an eye, and this is what's gonna make you go all wimpy? I knew it. I knew it."

"Would you stop being obnoxious for a whole standard minute and help me here with what's really important?"

"And that is...?"

"How do I go about telling him the truth of our mission on his planet?"

In a blink, she was the wise older sister and future queen he needed. "The only way it should be done—complete and without adornments."

"Thank you."

"You're most certainly welcome, Captain." Keda Enoa uttered, almost aloof. Then with a wicked grin, she giggled. "Now I have to go and tell Father you like-*like* a boy!" And she left the screen empty in a flutter of teal and pink.

Rezzu pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "I'm not gonna kill her. I am *not* going to kill her." He was not a regicide; although, technically, she wasn't queen yet.

The Colviri normally lived for more than two thousand standard years. At twenty-six and twenty-five, they were just mere children, even if their bodies and minds were of adults. Rezzu should cut his sister some slack; he had more pressing matters to attend to.

The gorgeous governor of Anatolia emerged in his mind's eye, and Rezzu shuddered. Was liking this man really affecting his ability to assess the situation? His first mission as a captain, and he felt he was failing like a total rookie.

“Captain?” Dominik Czech, his first officer, startled Rezzu.

“Yes.”

“The uniform you requested for Governor Maitheas is ready, sir,” the floating voice announced.

A flash of Annauk Ki Illeh and Dominik with the redhead left Rezzu immobile for a second. He wondered if Dominik had his boots under Annauk’s bunker before this mission. No, it couldn’t be. This was the first mission with both races sharing a ship. It was none of his business, anyway. “Please, send a messenger with it to Anatolia’s Palace of Government.”

“At once, Captain.”

All right, Rezzu was a big boy. He was captain of the *Oculus* slash ambassador for the Colviri on Aletta. He knew how to handle many scenarios. Of course, zero percent of those scenarios involved him dealing with a politician who had recently had his artificial finger so deep in Rezzu’s ass the sheer memory sent shivers up his spine. That wasn’t the way to go about this.

Think Rezzu. Think.

He snapped his fingers. The uniform would be his guiding light. Max would have to acknowledge the receipt of it in some way. Rezzu would let Max’s behavior determine the path to follow and act accordingly. Here he was drowning in his own nonsense, and maybe, if Meha was merciful, Max had simply chalked it all up to a drunken mishap.

That idea, far from settling him, made him feel like a ginormous pile of veku crap. Rezzu needed something to distract him until Max contacted him. He activated his communicator. “Commader Czech.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Find me the five biggest, meanest, most brutish crew members and send them to platform nine. I want some hand-to-hand combat practice. Anyone but you and Annauk Ki Illeh.”

“Sir?”

“Dominik, I saw you with Annauk and that redhead last night. I’m gonna need a long time to erase that memory and be able to have you sweating around me again.”

“Captain, I-We...”

“Not a big deal, commander. What you do with your free time is your business. Just find me some people I can get physical with.”

That didn't sound right.

“I'll find you some beasts, sir.” The amusement was poorly disguised in Dominik's tone.

“You do that, commander.”

Three standard hours later, Rezzu had a swollen eye, and every muscle in his body screamed with exhaustion. His eye was nothing in comparison to what he did to the two women and three men who were *practicing* with him. He entered his quarters, ready for a shower and found a white envelope waiting for him on his mini desk. It only had one word outside, in exquisite common language calligraphy: *Rezzu*.

Trying his best not to turn the crisp paper inside into confetti, he read the note.

Thank you. It fits brilliantly. If you don't have a previous engagement, I'd love to invite you to dinner tonight, an informal affair just between us. I think we both will look very nice in our uniforms. Yours, Max.

Rezzu was more at a loss than before. He sank onto the bed in a haze, but two words kept replaying in his head over and over; a sultry whisper in Governor Maitheas's husky voice—*Yours, Max*.

6. Offering

The Colviri uniforms were essentially made to protect the body of the user, not for show. A blend of *elastica* (an expansive fiber) and an alloy of three micro minerals provided a perfect fitting for every body type and a shield that could withstand most short-range attacks. During combat, it was paired with a helmet and gloves to protect the areas the uniform didn't cover. Regulation boots had sheaths where one could carry a knife or other weapon.

For official ceremonies, rank was shown by arraying three colored cords around the shoulders from right to left, whereas in action the color would be in a band (made of the same blend as the uniform) on the right upper arm. The suit expanded to be donned in an upward fashion, starting by one's feet and accommodating to every contour of the body without the use of additional fastenings.

Besides protection against assault, the uniform also protected against weather conditions, whether warm or cold, keeping the body at a regular temperature to function properly by absorbing sweat or providing heat. It included the option to copy any color of its surroundings for camouflage purposes if activated. This feature was often used for personal reasons, as was Rezzu's case tonight, to change the silvery gray of the uniform into a more celebratory outfit. He had chosen a light blue shade that was very similar to the midday sky of Aletta.

This decision was the only one he had been able to make without a thousand doubts. Rezzu wanted to look his best tonight, but beyond that he was in deep turmoil, unsure of what to expect once he was facing Max.

The first punch in the guts was the person waiting for him at the entrance of the Palace of Government. Dominik and Annauk's redheaded companion from the previous night welcomed him with a bright smile, identifying himself as Max's assistant, Inall Brix. Now Rezzu recognized the man, always hovering around Max but in such an unobtrusive way as to be almost part of the environment, almost indiscernible.

It's a mere coincidence.

Although, Rezzu couldn't shake the feeling it had been a carefully orchestrated maneuver designed to unhinge him. There was no such thing as

coincidence after all. Everything happened for a reason. He decided to face this encounter in the same way he'd engage in a military operation.

As the redhead guided him, Rezzu took a surreptitious deep breath and armed himself with courage. True, he wasn't facing an enemy (no open hostilities between the Colviri and the Alettans), but it was a situation seriously out of his control and his comfort zone. Yes, he had liked other men before. Well, never a human, even though his father was one. The thing was, there was something in Governor Maitheas that Rezzu hadn't encountered before, and, by the simple fact that he couldn't name or completely understand this obscure quality, he was not capable of setting a decisive course of action.

After winding their way through the palace, Rezzu and his guide stopped before great wooden doors flanked—not by soldiers but by two helpers in lively colors. Now he felt stupid having the two almost-bully crew members behind him. The helpers pulled the doors open, and Rezzu received another strike. Max stood on the far end of the room close to an enormous window, his hands clasped behind his back, looking outside. He did not wear his usual hat; it would have been silly since he was wearing the Colviri uniform, but he had discovered the camouflage feature and was decked in greenish blue very similar to his pet peacock's feathers. The visible part of his metal neck glinted coyly in the bright light of the room, enhanced by the darkness of the suit.

“Governor, your guest is here.”

Max turned around to beam at Rezzu with disarming charm. Rezzu heard the doors close behind him as Inall exited the room. Once more he was alone with the governor, but the odds were different. The tension in the air charged the moment with an intensity that didn't have anything to do with the politics of planets or the plans of conflicting forces. It was the, for now, subtle energy of two males in need of one another, the aura of an incoming storm, the clandestine stretch of the volcano before erupting.

Rezzu had to be strong, remain in control; it wouldn't be wise to be pliant matter in the hands of the governor again. This time it should be—stay behind your lines or be the aggressor.

“I'm truly glad you accepted my invitation, Captain.” Max took Rezzu's hand between both of his, and shook it.

“Back to formalities, I see.”

A grin flourished on Max's distracting face. “It shouldn't be so, right?”

“It’s certainly a little late for that.”

His hand was released, and Max pointed at the table. “Let’s eat, and we can have a nice conversation afterward.”

“Thank you.”

They sat on opposite sides of a cozy table. A handsome copper, low vase, fashioned after flames, with a fragrant candle was in the center instead of flowers. The crisp, white tablecloth had russet borders.

Helpers came and went with rich and aromatic dishes.

Max poured Rezzu another glass of a soft, fuzzy liquor made of figs. “I hope everything is to your satisfaction.”

“Each course has been delicious. Most people usually start from the lightest to the spiciest, but this journey was simply unexpected.”

“Oh, but we’d rather start hard to end up soft and glowing.”

Rezzu almost snorted his drink. “Th-that’s a great philosophy.”

“We try to apply it to all things. A first harsh impact lets you know what you’re facing and eases you into kinder options.”

“Wouldn’t that be a show of force?”

“Not if you do it the right way.”

A helper brought dessert, and Rezzu took advantage of the interruption to avoid issuing a retort. The sorbet was orange, pink, and yellow in a swirl of creamy delight, garnished with a single dark green lemon leaf.

“This is a family recipe. It’s what I’ve been waiting all night for you to try.”

The intention of saying something witty vanished with the sudden explosion seizing his taste buds. The concoction was so good, it left Rezzu speechless and nearly aroused. A moan inadvertently rose. He flinched, gazing upon Max, who watched him with a predatory gleam in his pale green eyes that was frankly disturbing and did nothing to quench the arousal the dessert had brought forth.

“Amazing,” Rezzu stated, out of words.

“The secret is passion fruit, collected at midnight under a full moon.”

“Sounds like something you might use for a potion.” The Colviri associated magic with Meha, their goddess, but it wasn’t unheard of common folk with unnatural abilities to know how to brew concoctions.

The wolfish grin was mesmerizing. “Perhaps, a *love* potion.”

Heat enveloped Rezzu. Max didn't need magic to have him in the palm of his hand; he only needed to ask, and Rezzu would be the most obedient pet. Caution flew out the window, and he blurted out, “You have enough attributes to conquer anything you want without supernatural assistance.”

Max inclined his head agreeably. “An extra hand is never unwelcome.” He put both hands over the table and added, albeit hesitantly. “I've thought a lot about what happened last night.”

“You have?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“And we have a problem.”

“Please don't apologize.”

“That is not my intention. Remorse is a thing I don't suffer easily.” Still, Max looked contrite. “I'm nothing, if not fair. There's only one way for us to be even and let that episode go, so we could find a way to enter into a fair friendship and guide our planets to mutual benefit.”

A very odd sensation grabbed Rezzu by the balls. Part of him blindly hoped for this to go the way his cock was clamoring for. The other was absolutely sure he needed to stand up and run as if chased by the plague. “W-what do you propose?”

“Isn't it obvious?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“You must finger me until I come.” The tone was matter-of-fact, and the narrowed gaze felt like a knife, slicing through Rezzu's defenses.

“You can't be serious.” But as much as reasoning and intellect were beyond offended by the idea, the material part of him, the animal, primal part of him was absolutely pleased and made his cock perk.

“I am deadly serious. However, I'm going to let you think about it 'til you finish your dessert.” The delicate silver spoon in Max's hand began moving again with elegant efficiency, and each tidbit disappearing into that provocative, cruel mouth was pure torture.

Neither spoke until the dessert had been completely consumed, although, it had been a slow dance to see who could eat it slower, but enjoying it all the same. Rezzu had to suppress the moans every mouthful tried to wrench from inside him as he retained a monolithic exterior. The offering had been shocking, and, despite his inward turmoil, he was not going to let Max have the upper hand, even if Rezzu's own hand would be the one doing the invasion.

But, was it really an invasion when your opponent was blatantly letting you in? Couldn't it be just a very well-devised lure to trap you and then force you to relent, to spill the secrets you were not ready to reveal? What would Keda do? No. His sister, the strategist, wasn't the best guide in this moment. She wouldn't simply finger Max; she would choke him with her imaginary cock while finger blasting him, and her *kirsuber* on top would be to fuck him on his back with four fingers inside his mouth to keep the choking theme up. Those images didn't help. On the contrary, they deflated his already weak resolution to refuse the fingering offer while inflaming lower parts.

"Oh just finger him and stop being a wuss." His sister's sardonic voice taunted him. *"What's the worst that could happen, that you enjoy it too much and come with him? Yeah, I bet he'd love that. To be drenched in your cum, brother."*

Rezzu hoped his wince had been imperceptible, but as he settled his eyes on Max, the arched eyebrow told him otherwise.

The girl helper took away their dessert plates and left them after Max's, "That would be all, Leena. Thank you."

If Rezzu caught the complete meaning of the words, there would be no interruptions until Max summoned someone directly.

"Have you reached a decision?" Max spoke, getting to his feet and pulling the neck of his uniform with a finger, in the exact way to take it off. By the time he was at arm's length of Rezzu's face he had the flaccid arms of the suit hanging about his hips. The fine mat of hair covering his chest shone in various hues of brown, red, and yellow. His nipples were rosy medallions crowned with tiny suckable mounds. The same polished brass of his artificial neck, arm and hand covered his ribs and diaphragm, a two- or three-inch grommet encircled a glowing silvery blue light sitting low between his pecs. Rezzu saw the veins bulging in Max's flesh arm, and the idea of a thick vein running the length of Max's shaft made his mouth water—and sealed his fate.

“I-I did.” He was young, very green by the longevity of his people, and his voice came out full of inexperience and fear, more than it should have been. Still, a wicked part of him added, “But these are not the same circumstances. I feel like I’m taking advantage of you.”

An eyebrow hiked up on Max’s brow, accompanied by an expression, even more wicked than whatever had made Rezzu utter those words, coming alive on his face. “You mean we need to call three other men to have sex where we can watch as you finger me?”

“NO.” Rezzu sprang, and ended up looming over Max, their faces mere inches apart. “That’s not what I meant.” Although, he frankly didn’t know what he had meant.

“Well, then.” Max turned, letting Rezzu see the expanse of his shoulders, the way his exposed spine made of intricate brass gears and dots of that silvery blue light curved invitingly as he lowered the uniform and exposed his round, muscular glutes. He climbed onto the table, snuffing the candle in its copper vase off with a soft blow that had him in such a vulnerable position, it made Rezzu shiver. He winked, lowering his chest more and spreading his legs as wide as the suit around his thighs permitted. “Yours to do as you please.”

Rezzu didn’t know whether to sob like a puny child or howl like a beast in heat. Max’s skin was so perfect, it seemed a crime to mar it with a single touch. Hesitantly, he moved closer, and the predator, the monster inside, won. He did what any animal would once it had reached its prey; he sniffed, he inhaled, and the aroma was all teasing—all manly, and with the urge of this primal instinct he sank his teeth into a luscious cheek.

The sound that came out of Max was a whiplash, and the beast became frenetic, frantically grabbing, spreading, mauling. And the rougher his mouth and hands were, the more he understood the grunts and growls emerging from the governor; they were commands to conquer, to ravish, to destroy.

7. Embrace

The first time his hand grasped the governor's throat, he was surprised by the warmth of the metal. He didn't know why he'd thought the artificial parts of the man would be cold. The heat emanating from the body pressed against his was absolute proof that the man was only cold when he decided to be that way, by his actions, by the manner in which his pale green eyes could dominate you if that was his intention.

But now those eyes were shut and the cruel mouth was open exhaling a long moan of pleasure and submission, "Please."

That unnamed thing that had been dormant inside Rezzu while Max had fingered him the previous night growled, "Say it." Two fingers kept their slow piston-like rhythm into the sweet orifice. Max didn't answer, just squeezed the digits invading him, sending bolts that fathered goose bumps and made Rezzu's cock jerk.

Every cell of Rezzu's body demanded him to be properly sheathed inside the governor. Fingers were not enough. Nonetheless, Rezzu still had a tendril of control over his animal urges. Max had offered him the opportunity to finger him to level the playing field; what he didn't put on the table (figuratively since he was actually on all fours over a table) was the option to allow Rezzu to fuck him. Nevertheless, that was exactly what the inner beast demanded, forgetting that Colviri seed spilled inside a human would change his DNA. Yes, it would cause a human to be stronger and live longer. That's how his human father would be able to live as long as his Colviri father, and that was a good thing, wasn't it?

But did Rezzu have the right to alter Max's life like that without his knowledge? Just by the fact that if Max said the words, Rezzu's cock would be so deep inside him in a nanosecond that the Universe wouldn't have time to adjust to the shift in their matter?

Rezzu couldn't think straight, but he fought the beast effectively enough to conclude he couldn't dump all this biological info on Max while he was in this vulnerable position. This wasn't the time for that. He waited a few moments, and no coherent sound came out of Max. He kissed the square shoulder softly, lifted his weight and moved to his feet, leaving just his pumping fingers as connection, looking for a reaction.

And the reaction came swiftly.

Something closer to a growl than to a grunt emerged as Max reached between his legs to grab Rezzu's cock with his robotic hand. The burning metal was a disconcerting new experience. Perhaps under other circumstances he would have been afraid for his manhood, but in the heat of the moment, the only message reaching his clouded brain was *Max is stroking my cock*.

The Colviri by nature effused floods of precum to use as lubricant for penetration, and Rezzu had been using it to ease his fingers' way into Max, but now it was the perfect substance helping those brass digits to glide over his shaft with the exact amount of grasp and corkscrew motion to drive Rezzu blindly and summarily to the edge.

Thus, understanding Max's action as tacit permission, Rezzu took hold of the governor's cock and milked it for all he was worth. They became a well-oiled mechanism, its gears stroking, pumping, entering. Rezzu's sole intention now was to bring Max to climax, to see him tremble with the explosion, and savor it; even if he wouldn't be able to see that glorious face when it happened. Maybe this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but their positions were too well-orchestrated to attempt any change, not in this moment, not tonight.

His own orgasm neared, and Rezzu redoubled his efforts, both his hands in absolute synchrony, pulling and pushing, stabbing and stroking. Max moved the hand supporting his torso upward and used it to draw one ass cheek further apart, seeking (by the rising volume of his moans) a fuller and deeper penetration desperately, while the other was a blur in its frenetic maneuvers to wrench the culmination from Rezzu.

"So close, so fucking close, Rezzu, please." The voice was broken and breathless, and it tugged at Rezzu's volatile, primal urges.

Another finger found its way in, and Max cried as Rezzu nursed his little pleasure nub with precise and fast strokes. Rezzu tilted his head slightly, and Max's new position (his head resting sideways over the table) allowed him to see the handsome face contorted in a delight-torture mask. The first contraction of secret muscles gripped Rezzu's fingers, and jets of semen sped, splashing over Rezzu's cock and triggering his own climax, perplexing and shattering.

But something that didn't have anything to do with the volcanos erupting from both of them happened. Ornate vases rose from their pedestals, the paintings on the walls rattled, the long, heavy curtains oscillated as if inflicted by an invisible force, and a sound like an enraged wind circled them.

Rezzu saw these things through the orgasm-induced haze, and, before he had time to fully grasp the disturbance in the room, vases crashed on the floor, paintings unhinged themselves from the walls, curtains were torn apart, and with a final howl all went silent. Just their weak breathing intruded on the oppressing silence. Rezzu was used to supernatural manifestations, after all Kekoa Muselet, his father, was a high priest of Meha (after he had been guardian of their ancestors planet for many centuries), and her rites were anything but immobile. The thing was—he usually knew what was originating the commotion.

His eyes went to Max, and Max flinched. His flinch didn't look like it was caused by the removal of Rezzu's fingers from his well-used pucker but as the flinch of someone caught in something they shouldn't be doing. "What just happened?" Rezzu casually cleaned his hands with the tablecloth; it was ruined anyway.

Trying to find a more dignified position than his ass in the air, Max stood up, pulled his uniform up to his waist and sat at the edge of the table. "I know you need an explanation. Just let me make a call first, and then I'll do something better than talk, I'll show you."

A standard hour later, Max was in his usual ensemble of boots, trousers, waistcoat, shirt, cravat, and his slightly tilted hat. A messenger had brought Rezzu a clean uniform to wear. They headed toward a part of Anatolia Rezzu hadn't visit before, where the streets were narrower and the buildings seemed not just older but strangely toppling onto each other. Above them, stars shone timidly—more ashamed than afraid of illuminating the situation.

"I appreciate your patience, Rezzu." Max seemed nervous, something that disturbed Rezzu greatly. The governor was normally so confident—this new facet was unnerving.

"As long as an explanation comes at the end, I am very patient." His words brought a faintly reddish hue to Max's perfect cheeks.

Now he's embarrassed.

The carriage stopped in front of an establishment that looked like the lovechild of a chemist's and a repair shop. The similitudes with Nova Gaia helped Rezzu to not feel extremely disoriented in this seemingly old-fashioned environment.

A slim old man with thin, gray hair, gathered with a knotted silk ribbon on the base of his neck, welcomed them after the door, paneled with see-through glass, closed behind them accompanied by the happy ring of a minute bell.

The apothecary (Rezzu didn't know what else to call the gentleman) wore glasses with several lenses on each side. He moved them to the top of his head as he shook Max's hand first and then Rezzu's.

"Oh, yes, the Colviri ambassador." His name was Esaw Apteekerune. "But everyone just calls me Master Esaw, never bothered with Mister Apteekerune." He giggled easily.

"Master Esaw, would you help me with the thing we spoke about?"

"Of course, Governor. It would be my pleasure." He moved to lock the shop's door. These obviously weren't normal hours for him. "Please follow me." He took them to the back. The idea of a repair shop became stronger as they entered a space so crowded with all kinds of gears and metal scraps it seemed that everything was precariously hanging—ready to fall on their heads.

Among the disorder, dozens of glass jars emerged, their contents were indistinguishable tendrils in many colors suspended in transparent solutions. Rezzu moved closer to one jar and realized that the fragile little thing floated in... nothing; no solution, no liquid, or gas of any kind. Was it some type of gravitational force? In such little spaces, it didn't make any sense.

"Ambassador Muselet, if you'd be so kind. How many days have you been on the planet?"

How many days indeed? The standard hours didn't exactly correlate with Aletta's rotation. He was mentally doing the equation when Max put a hand on his arm and answered Master Esaw. "The sun has set eleven times since they arrived."

That would be around fifteen standard days. It truly seemed longer.

"I guess that is enough, considering he's an adult."

Rezzu wanted to say he was very young by the usual longevity of his people, but the comment seemed childish. He simply smiled. In his face it felt more like a grimace, but he was sure it was a smile.

Master Esaw opened a big crystal box with several compartments. Each compartment had a tray with at least a dozen slim cylinders made of different metals and with unknown symbols etched in low relief. Flutes came to mind,

but they were entirely too narrow and didn't seem to have any holes. The nine trays were arranged about the table after the box had been moved to a different counter. The old apothecary cleared his throat, clapped his hands once and then rubbed them, not as if washing them but as if he were rubbing a stick to make a fire. Rezzu had seen his uncle Sule do this while camping on one of the heavily forested moons of Mireeh.

"REZ-zu-ki-MU-sE-let," Master Esaw intoned with weird affectation. He stopped his rubbing and moved his hands over the trays, palms down and using circular flourishes. From the farthest tray, an argentine tube rose and moved as if guided by a magnetic force toward Master Esaw's waiting hand. "Excellent." He moved his glasses back to his nose and adjusted several lenses. "Alettan silver and river stone. Very light. Very nice," he murmured, more to himself than to them, and handed the instrument to Rezzu.

A soft, almost inaudible clicking emanated from the tube. The piece was sturdy and the weight seemed just right to Rezzu's hand. He drew it to his ear and the ticking was similar to a clock but not quite the same. It had a truly hypnotic rhythm, and for some inexplicable reason this little, almost imperceptible sound made Rezzu very happy, almost euphoric.

"Ambassador, if you please, point that way." Master Esaw redirected Rezzu's hand away from them. "And think *water*."

Before Rezzu could come up with any appropriate reasoning to question the request, he thought 'water' and a jet of liquid spurted from the tip of the tube. The idea of making a mess shifted his thoughts to something to gather the water, and a bucket appeared out of thin air before any liquid was spilled. He let the tube in his hand go, and it melodically clattered as it reached the floor. The bucket full of water was floating slowly downward, and Rezzu realized that Master Esaw was using a darker but similar tube to direct it.

Rezzu turned to look at Max, crossing his arms and not really understanding what was happening. "What is this?"

Max inclined his head sideways and smiled. "The magic of Aletta has just embraced you, choosing a wand for you."

8. Price

“Am I screwed or what?”

Unos circled the bench where he sat. The lusciousness and beauty of the West Garden seemed to make fun of him. The bright sky, the fluffy clouds, the fragrance of the flowers, all conspired to make him feel like a stinking pile of shit.

“Oh, Max. What can I do to help you?” Unos stopped in front of him.

“No response from him?” *Him* was Rezzu, who had decided to ignore Max after he left Master Esaw’s wand shop five standard days ago. They had been together in this garden, and that didn’t help his mood either.

“I have not received any communications from Captain Muselet at all.”

Rezzu had abandoned his wand that night, and now it floated above Max’s palm. His usual silver lining approach to things attempted to cheer him up, pointing out the fact that thanks to Rezzu, Max had a quasi-surrogate wand he could use publicly in case people wondered whether he had broken another already or not.

One could use someone else’s wand for emergencies but not for long since each one was linked to its owner by its components and the essence of the person. Max didn’t mention to Master Esaw when he called to request a wand for Rezzu that he had lost his. The wandmaster wasn’t a tattler, but there was no point in putting out there that another wand of his had gone to smithereens, especially when Max would not be able to procure a new one right away.

To make matters worse (because hey, wand-losing wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to a governor), the other six cities had decided the honeymoon period with the Colviri had been long enough and demanded to know their actual plans regarding Aletta. Were they here to conquer them, to help them, to annihilate them? Max rolled his eyes. If the Colviri wanted to start a war, it would have happened already, right? He had been so caught up in his own emotional caca regarding Rezzu, he hadn’t had the time to act like the big shot in charge that he was and ask straight-faced what was the Colviri’s deal.

But of course, his cock, who had never had an opinion before on political matters, had to interfere and sidetrack him during The One Thousand Ball. He

made blasted Rezzu drink a little more than necessary just to have him buzzed enough to give him the answers he needed. But no, he had to be waylaid by how good Rezzu looked in his tailcoats, how broad his shoulders were, how mesmerizingly his eyes shone as they devoured Max more openly with each glass of Calvados.

I should have yanked the info out of him when I had my finger up his ass.

And naturally, to add insult to injury, his brilliant idea of procuring a wand for Rezzu had blown up in his face as if it were just another one of his reckless experiments. It was his mistake for thinking that Rezzu was prepared, not just to accept that the planet made the inhabitants conduits of its magic but to be willing to assimilate such a leap of faith and work with it without any training. Well, Rezzu hadn't given him time to explain anything; he'd just stormed out of the Wand Shop. But what else could Max have done? Without his own wand to focus the power, the magic had gone haywire, exposing itself as they climaxed.

Unos was making some truly silly, dejected sounds, unable to find a way to help Max. They were so pathetic even Luddi had come to find out what was going on. "Unos, play some music." Anything to stop him.

Luddi jumped onto the bench and rested his head on Max's lap. "Oh Sweet 'verse, you too?"

"I've never seen a peacock do that. Well, nobody is used to seeing you look like such a sad sack."

"Meidhre!" In other circumstances he would have stood up to greet her, but Luddi didn't seem interested in moving his head from Max's lap. He grimaced, pointing at the bird, and shrugged.

His cousin waved her hand, dismissing the fact. She traced a finger over Unos, who played the Enolia Symphony, a one hundred year old airy composition made to honor one of the seven city-states.

Max stared at his cousin. Any other person wearing such bright tones of orange and yellow would look like a lunatic, but Meidhre... everyone would agree that the sun was making love to her.

"So, what's going on? What's all this gloominess? It's not like you, Max."

"I did something I shouldn't have done."

She put her hands on her hips and cocked her elegantly coifed head. "And what's new about that? Your success is based on your uncanny ability to do the

wrong thing to the best end." She was more than correct, but right now Max felt absolutely out of abilities.

"I know, I just..."

"Problems with the cities?"

Max shook his head. Technically the cities were about to be a problem, but they weren't the main issue.

Meidhre singsonged, tilting her body toward him, "Boy problems?"

Max snorted, "Seriously, coz? When have I ever had boy problems? They are not problems, they are noo-san-ces."

"Oh, sweetie. It's boy problems. You have that I-like-a-boy-and-he-doesn't-like-me-back face. Who is he?"

"It's not that he doesn't like me. I messed up."

"Aha!" She pointed at him. "Am I an expert or what?"

"You are a boy. That's what you are, a raging nuisance."

"Keep saying that I'm a boy, and I'm going to show you my boy *bits*."

Max didn't say "Eww" but his face did more than scream it. Meidhre giggled with all the girly-ness she was capable of, and that was a lot. She addressed Luddi, "Hey, boy. C'mere, pretty boy."

Luddi perked up. If there was an attention-whore in Aletta—that was his pet peacock. Meidhre moved backward, calling Luddi; he jumped from the bench and follow her. "Show me. Who's the pretty birdie?" She was using that voice people use with little babies and mini dogs, and it was annoying as fuck. Luddi spread his tail and started strutting for Meidhre. "Oh my gosh, so pretty." She clapped and gushed like the spectacle was the best thing since the discovery of magic. After the (surely) longest two standard minutes in the galaxy, she sobered up, stood straight and pointed at Max, doing circles with the tip of her finger. "You, leave all that shitty mood behind and come with me."

Geesh, she sounds like the twins. Do I need to be scared?

Max hurriedly followed Meidhre, who walked resolutely toward the Palace of Government. They reached the marble stairs connecting the garden to the building when Unos announced. "I have a message from Inall Brix."

"Proceed."

Inall's fidgeting hologram appeared, "Governor, representatives from Garulia, Benvelia, Enolia, Criavilia and the capital are here to see you."

"They can't just appear like that. It's against protocol."

"Well," Inall visibly dithered, "they said that when the security of the planet is in jeopardy the protocol is void, null, toilet water."

"I can't believe they just compared the protocol, the one directive that guides our society, to toilet water." His cousin giggled beside him. It was outrageous.

"As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure they meant *used* toilet water." Inall grimaced sheepishly.

Cursing inwardly, Max huffed, "All right, gather them in the conference chamber. I'll be there in a spell." He turned to face Meidhre. "Sorry, coz." Before Inall's image disappeared, he remembered. "Wait. You didn't mention Vimilia. No representative?"

The hologram's cheeks darkened. "Bertoldo Whinen said he had *more* interesting things to do while in Anatolia than to argue with its governor since at the end he'll find out what the heck was happening, one way or another, and left for the shopping quarter."

"He's right, five against one is already a gangbang," Meidhre commented with a grimace.

"I could sit you in that chamber as an advisor so you can participate in that gangbang, darling."

"Not my type of gangbang, sweetie."

Mine either.

Meidhre kissed both his cheeks. "Saved by the beasts." She giggled musically. "You deal with them, and I'll deal with *you* later."

"Do I need to be scared?"

"Not if you're a good boy."

"You need to go."

She blew a kiss and glided away.

Max entered the palace en route to the conference chamber with Unos trailing behind him. At the chamber's doors, he adjusted his hat, straightened

his cravat and pulled down his coat. Taking a deep breath, he opened the doors and found the representatives seated, eating finger food and drinking from crystal flutes. "Gentlemen." Max stood, facing them with his hands behind his back. They had already broken protocol so he might as well.

"Lord Governor." Behof Leven from Criavilia went to his feet, tiny little feet holding a blimp figure, currently veering toward Max. The fabric covering his body could easily father clothing for a whole family. Excess had a very round face. "You need to tell us what's going on with the alien force." The other four bobbed their heads without stopping their face-stuffing.

"It was my understanding that your governors had given Anatolia full control of the situation."

Tassio Palú from the capital, Perselia, audibly swallowed. "They did, but a report hasn't come forward, and the people of the cities are worried. We have no information to ease their concerns, and that's making our leaders look bad." Tassio was a tall, handsome man, but his expression at the moment made him seem a broken statue.

"They have been here close to a standard month. It's illogical that you still have no inkling to their purpose," Garulia's Hebba Lain stated irritably. His acid face contorted but never stopped chewing.

Twenty standard days are not a standard month.

Max rolled his eyes mentally. "Your lack of information to pass is hardly a reason for this meeting." Max walked toward the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. The helpers had retreated as soon as he entered the chamber so they could talk privately. Their conversation was being recorded by the Palace's main security system, but that was a different matter.

Makia Vole stood up abruptly, setting his flute aside. "Benvelia is moving her troops to the Yerma Plains to assist Anatolia. The other cities are doing the same." His handlebar mustache was ready to jump from his face in his agitation.

To refuse them was practically a declaration of war, but their intervention could start one with the Colviri. "You realize they only have one ship here. No other is in the vicinity of our planet." Max sipped his drink with feigned calm. "How do you think a show of force will appear to them?"

"We don't care. We want answers, and sometimes one needs to be a bully to get them." Tassio shrugged. The others did their head-bobbing, agreeing.

Max wanted to raise his voice, but he summoned control. He would show these idiots why the people of Anatolia had elected him to be their governor. “This is very undiplomatic. Hostile negotiations are never a solution. There’s always one party resenting them afterward. We don’t even know how powerful they are.”

Behof had finally towed his considerable frame to Max’s proximity and put a bejeweled chubby hand on Max’s shoulder. “That’s for you to find out, Governor. You have seventy-two standard hours. After that, we take control of the situation.”

The other six governors had sent this flock of morons to intimidate him. Disliking him wasn’t enough; they had wiped their asses with Aletta’s protocol, which clearly stated that any global decision had to be a joint decision. This was one of those moments when his own wand would have been truly handy to transmogrify the representatives into hairy crawlies and send them back to their masters in gift baskets.

Am I screwed or what?

9. Believing

Rezzu's father sighed. "No. He did not."

"Yes, he lied to me."

"He didn't lie, Rezzu. It's not like you asked him if he had magical abilities and he said no. What are you afraid of?" Concern was not a nice visage on Kekoa Muselet's face. Rezzu usually discussed these matters with his other father, but Darien Wanao was stuck in a meeting of the security council of Mireeh.

"I don't know." He was clutching desperately to the fact that Max had withheld information regarding the inhabitants of the planet's capacity for magic to keep his own feelings stashed in the shame drawer.

"I cannot help you, if you don't know what kind of help you need."

"Captain?" Dominik Czech's voice floated behind him.

"This better be important."

"The Alettans are assembling a military force outside Anatolia."

"I'll get back to you, Father."

"May Meha guard you, son."

"Thank you. I'll be in touch."

That was the difference between his two fathers' approaches to things. Darien would have been all concerned about what the Alettans were doing and spoken words of caution. Kekoa would simply let him be; he knew that if Rezzu needed help, he'd ask for it. The first thing he'd learned at Academy was to set his pride aside and accept the advice and wisdom of others when he didn't have his own answer. Many people had lost their lives for being stubborn. Max Maitheas was really doing a number on Rezzu's behavior, and that needed to stop.

"Can we talk, sir?" Dominik sounded hesitant.

"Of course, come to my quarters."

Four standard minutes later, his first officer faced him with an anguished countenance. "As your friend, Rezzu, I'm begging you. Talk to him."

“He put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“His assistant, Inall, told me.”

“So, you have kept in touch with him.” Rezzu put his hands up. “I apologize. It’s none of my business. And it is none of *your* business what’s going on between the governor and me.”

“At this point, it’s beyond whatever personal conflict you two have. We didn’t come here to start a war. We came to offer them our help.”

“They’ve fared perfectly well without any help.”

“I’m aware of that, but we have our orders, sir.”

“Now you’re talking as second in command, not my friend.”

“If I need to go there, I will. Sir.”

Fine. It was time to forget what Rezzu wanted (although he wasn’t exactly sure of what Rezzu wanted) and start acting like a Colviri captain and de facto ambassador on this planet. Max was their connection to Aletta, and he needed to behave like an adult, not a conflicted child.

“Let’s go to the bridge. This needs to be dealt with as a matter between two planets, not between two men.”

Even if a space storm rages inside my stomach every time I see him.

Dominik smiled. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We might still be attacked, and I am authorized to defend us, if it comes to that.”

A sorry nod was all Dominik could manage. They exited his quarters and walked swiftly to the bridge. As they entered, after everyone’s salute, Rezzu asked, “What’s the situation?”

“They have land and air vehicles heavily armed according to our sensors, nothing really capable of damaging our shields, sir. But there is something else our instruments cannot quantify. They have shields made of a force we are not able to identify, and thus we don’t know how to penetrate it.”

Magic.

His crew needed to know what they were facing. “Open shipwide communications.”

“Ready, sir.”

“This is your captain. Brothers and sisters of the *Oculus*, it has come to our knowledge that the Alettans have the power to wield magic.” He let that sink in for a moment. A collective gasp was the reaction in the bridge. Some Nova Gaians performed complicated hand movements to ward off evil, and the Colviri, who were used to the magic of their goddess, only looked in Rezzu’s direction with wide eyes. “We do not know if they’re planning to use it as a weapon against us, but it is my intention to find out as soon as I finish this communication. May Meha guard us all.” He nodded, and the shipwide line was closed.

“This is the variable that may cost us our lives, sir.” Dominik murmured at his right. He didn’t question how Rezzu knew about the magic, but it was probable that he himself already knew thanks to his proximity to Max’s assistant. It wasn’t important now.

“Then let’s find out the rest of the equation, commander.” Rezzu turned one more time to the communications officer and said, “Please place a call to the governor of Anatolia.”

“Aye, Captain.”

In less than a standard minute, Max appeared on the giant screen. “Captain Muselet.” he inclined his head slightly, but didn’t say anything else.

It was Rezzu who needed to start the match. The many standard days without seeing Max had enhanced all Rezzu’s idyllic ideas, and the aloof face but intent eyes made his knees weaken, assuring him his memory was pathetic. Max was ten times more stunning than he remembered, dressed all in black, which also hardened his features. “Governor, do we have a problem?”

“We actually do.” Max didn’t say this apologetically. It sounded more like a very unwelcome burden. “The other cities want answers. Answers they seem to think are more easily obtained by force than intelligence.”

“They will not accomplish anything by attacking us.”

“That I know. I’m still the mediator between our planets but not for long. If they don’t get the responses they expect in the next sixty standard hours, they will do as they see fit.”

“Do you agree with this?” Rezzu needed to learn Max’s position before acting.

“I do not. Having a battle with an indeterminate force at the doors of my city is not how I envisioned *our* encounter to proceed.”

Rezzu understood. Max wasn't talking just about the battle preparations of his people. "Are you willing to meet?" Rezzu's voice came out firm even though everything inside him was in absolute turmoil. He had denied Max so many times in the past few days, it was an absurd but still a real possibility that Max would refuse him just to get even, since he believed in leveling the playing field and all that. He held his breath.

Max seemed to consider the meeting for several heartbeats. "I'm willing..." he paused, arching an eyebrow, "but we'll do it in neutral territory."

"And where is this, Governor?"

"The air, of course," Max smiled, "Ambassador."

Dominik cleared his throat and said under his breath, "I don't like it, sir."

Patting Dominik's upper back, Rezzu said to Max, "How many?" He felt Dominik stiffen.

"You bring four. I bring four."

"You provide the locale?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you, Governor. How long do you need?"

"A standard hour would be more than enough."

"You were prepared."

"Always, *Rezzu*. Always." Max's image easily dissolved, and the screen showed the plains where the Alettan forces were converging.

"He called you by your name, sir."

"He did, and I know why."

"Really?"

No matter their confusion and feelings toward each other, they both would defend their people. And in Max's case, it wasn't the Alettans in general but the people of Anatolia. Rezzu spoke softly but confidently. "He wasn't alone, and he is on our side. Let's get ready to play."

10. Floating

The Colviri aircraft did an outstanding maneuver, turning sideways on its axis, and shot at the warkite. The protective shield sifted the ray, turning it into vapor. Another warkite came from below and aimed a couple of thermo missiles at the invading aircraft. The missiles exploded in the periphery of the Colviri vehicle without causing any damage, its own protections keeping it safe. They flew like this for several standard minutes, doing loops, chasing, zigzagging; four against four. Rays turning into vapor, missiles exploding harmlessly, a mock battle that only served the purpose of allowing both forces to blow off some steam.

“So, this is your people being hard first?” Rezzu asked, eyes glued to the dance outside the blimp; a choreography that should have been macabre but did not cost any lives since both vehicles were remotely controlled.

“I thought you weren’t paying attention that night.”

Rezzu gave Max a sideways glance. “I’m deeply offended.” The voice had sounded stern but with a hint of mischief in it that had Max’s cock stirring.

“They were using invisibility spells. They could have invaded my city easily, letting me react when it was already too late to do something without a massacre.”

“They coerced you then.” Rezzu shook his head.

“The relationship between the city-states has always been fragile. I became governor because I helped to change the cloak-and-dagger style of diplomacy into a barefaced, direct approach. Of course, the Old Guard wasn’t thrilled by it, and that earned me a few enemies.”

“*Fusdulatex*,” Rezzu murmured under his breath.

Max chuckled; the word sounded like a curse. He continued. “But I have faith that in time, as more weasels retire or die, things will change. They could use your presence to forge my downfall, but I am confident you are here to give me the answers I need. They would be my weapons against their intentions.”

Before Rezzu could say anything, one of the Colviri aircrafts attempted to crash itself into a warkite. It disjoined instead of exploding, letting the other pass through it like a knife through butter and becoming two identical (if

smaller) warkites. There was a roaring cheer from the ground. Max made a mental note to congratulate and decorate the controller of that warkite for his mastery. Max would have vanished the warkite; this was not just remarkable but creative. A bit of showing off too, but that was part of the mock battle. He sipped his tea and uncrossed his legs, then looked at Inall, who stood beside him. "A medal."

Inall took a tablet from his coat's pocket. "Noted, sir. Sergeant Verity Jaye from Vimilia."

Then the girl would get two medals since Max was positive Bertoldo Whinen would not let an opportunity like this to boast the prowess of his people to pass by.

"That was impressive." Rezzu set his teacup on the small table between them. "For how long are we planning to extend this?" The tone wasn't exactly of annoyance, but Max could not truly identify it.

"Inall, why don't you take Miss Ukwosu and give her a tour of the blimp? When you're done, you two stay in the control room until summoned."

The tall Colviri woman arched an eyebrow. She searched her captain's eyes. "*Vudacus Muselet, kefo dulovo vellodde.*"

"It's all right, Ukwosu," Rezzu told her in common language. "*Govekor dosallepe,*" he added.

"I know that last word. It's redheaded. I hope he didn't order her to kill me," Inall whispered in Max's ear.

"That would defeat the whole purpose of this exercise, Inall. Do not worry." Max patted his assistant's hand.

Man and woman left the parlor, the door closing with a soft click. Max went to his feet and made the short distance between them and the ornate windows easily. He appreciated the acrobatics of the controllers and the flashes of light from explosions and rays for a couple of heartbeats. He turned around, leaning on the windowsill and crossing his arms over his chest. "Alone at last."

Rezzu had taken his teacup for another drink; he froze midmovement at Max's words. The teacup returned to the table, and Rezzu stood up. He stretched his neck, tilting his head first to the right then to the left, both movements accompanied by muffled cracks. He moved like a giant predator, and the black of his uniform emphasized this impression. Cracking his knuckles

as he reached Max, he rested his hands on the windowsill, caging him. "I'm sure you'll find a way to make it interesting."

Their lips were a hairsbreadth away, but it was Rezzu's eyes that mesmerized Max. His actions had seemed determined, beyond confident, but those two suns didn't shine like they usually did. Something was guarded, and it deflated some of Max's ardor. The ambassador's closeness was a toxin, a thing he should avoid at all cost, alas his wayward body was overtaking his thought process. Clutching that last sliver of control like a lifeline, he put his hand on Rezzu's cheek. "You can say it. Whatever it is, we will deal with it together."

The handsome face leaned into his touch, and Rezzu sighed. "I don't know how to act around you. I tell myself I need to be professional and be a captain and do my duty to my planet. Nevertheless, the moment I'm in front of you all I want to do is grab you, squeeze you, eat you alive. It's pure madness, and I don't want to be a madman." A flame burst in those strange eyes. "This is not a spell, right? This attraction, this craziness it's just you, your voice, your eyes, the way you move, nothing else."

Softly, Max shook his head. "I haven't done anything. I promise you I'll never use magic to control you." He arched an eyebrow and added (because his mouth didn't know when to stop as usual), moving his free hand over his length, "I have all this to do that."

The chuckle lifted and (at the same time) squeezed something in Max's chest, like being buffeted by a harsh wind, dreading it and loving it in the same breath.

Whoops and cheers from below the blimp made them look outside. The two smaller warkites had sandwiched one Colviri aircraft, forcing it toward the ground, using their magic shields as leverage. Max swiveled within Rezzu's arms with a deafening, "NO." He wrenched both warkites from the Colviri and willed it to make a one-eighty back to the sky.

Rezzu squeezed him from behind. "You know there's no one inside the ship."

Max felt stupid. "I forgot." He rested his forehead on the glass. "You don't know how to act around me? Hah. I'm so distracted by you I end up doing shit like that."

"Is that a bad thing?"

“It’s not a good one so far.”

Two Colviri crafts had managed to accomplish the same sandwich maneuver, but, instead of guiding the warkite to the empty space between the two forces, they were aiming for the Alettans on the ground. That would fuck things beyond reparation.

“*Dulok oneh ubbukeh eulu!*” Rezzu shouted as he dislodged from Max. “*Dominik eulu!*”

The three ships changed course and, at a safe distance from the Alettan army, spliced.

“Do we call it a tie?” Max grimaced, a little aroused by Rezzu’s panting and his hand on his ear, still pressing the linkdev; it made his bicep bulge tantalizingly.

“You do that,” Rezzu hissed, “I’m going to find out who came up with that fantastic idea.” He did an about-face and zigzagged through chaises and low tables away from Max.

Ugh, I wouldn’t want to be in those boots right now.

Max had never been a fan of the tiny linking devices one used inserted in the ear, but he pressed his own linkdev to contact the Alettan forces on the ground. “Commander Mar, game over. It’s a tie.”

“Was that to be the result from the beginning, Governor?” Mar didn’t sound amused. Max could totally see her frowning. She didn’t wait for his answer. “What do I tell the representatives?”

“They will have their answers by nightfall.”

“I’ll let them know, Governor.”

“Good,” he said, closing the link. Rezzu was yelling in Colviri. Max couldn’t understand a word, but he was sure ninety percent of what was coming out of Rezzu’s delicious mouth were outrageous expletives. Rezzu wasn’t aware that the crash would have not caused any casualties (they had enough trained people to deflect such maneuvers within their ranks), but the intention behind it would have damaged any hope of appeasing the cities.

“To the brig, both of them!” Rezzu had spoken in common language, surely for Max’s benefit. Whoever was on the other end said something, and Rezzu replied, “I’ll get back to you later.” He turned around, and his expression

changed from open hostility to sudden calm as he laid eyes on Max. He released the linkdev and spread his hands. "Please have a seat."

It was odd to be offered a seat on his own blimp, but Max didn't argue. The battle sounds had died, and now the only thing disturbing the silence between them was the quiet hum of the engines. Rezzu put a hand up, silently asking Max to wait until he was ready to start.

Forefinger and thumb pinched the bridge of Rezzu's nose for a moment; then he took a deep breath, lifting his face to address Max. "More than thirty standard years ago, a dust plague decimated the population of Nova Gaia. As people were dying, there were all kinds of accidents and many places ended up in ruins. Long after that, we're talking years here, a rescue mission finally came to take the survivors to another planet. One of my fathers, Darien Wanao, at the time Muselet, was the captain of the mission on behalf of the Cygnus Federation.

"Previous to that, he had met my other father Kekoa Muselet, then Wanao, on the planet of my ancestors and discovered that they were mates. *Yes, as in destined to be together.* But this was not to happen because the federation had her sights on Colvis, Kekoa's planet, and thus they were separated, add to this the fact that the Colviri regularly live more than two thousand standard years, so the situation seemed very grim. As the Nova Gaian rescue mission progressed, the vessels were attacked, and Darien and my two uncles, Sule and Alaric, escaped in a pod. Due to technical issues they ended up far from the other survivors, but Kekoa always had people following Darien, and these men took my father and uncles to Mireeh, my home planet. Mireeh is protected by natural defenses—instruments would read it as a black hole, and for many eons the Colviri lived without paying attention to the rest of the galaxy. Darien didn't know he had Kekoa's tracker in him, but the federation had discovered it and didn't say anything, waiting to use it against Kekoa."

Max was confused. It was an interesting story, but he didn't see what any of it had to do with Aletta.

"To make a really long story short, the Cygnus Federation lost the following war, but Colvis was destroyed and, in reparation, Nova Gaia was ceded to the Colviri. My uncles became regents of the planet and started its reconstruction. Recently, records of an ancient, unauthorized expedition off planet, surfaced as an old building was demolished. The recs spoke of a greedy Nova Gaian entrepreneur who had sent scouts and found a planet so rich in resources it was

a businessman's wet dream. He didn't alert the adequate agencies but used his own funds to establish a *one-thousand-worker* extraction colony on the planet. Little by little any Nova Gaian involved with the expedition was bribed or killed, and soon the existence of the colony became unknown. According to the docs found, he solely controlled every aspect of the enterprise—dispatch, reception, everything. The man became one of the richest men of Nova Gaia. It's not clear how or why, but years later he lost all his money and committed suicide, taking with him his knowledge.”

“That's why we were abandoned—he died.” Max covered his mouth with his hand. The greed of one single man had condemned his people to live separated and forgotten.

“Yes.” Rezzu moved and knelt between Max's legs. “Our mission was to find out what happened to the people that bastard left stranded here. We didn't have too much hope after four hundred years of separation, but you survived and thrived.” He caressed Max's cheek softly. “I should have told you this as soon as we landed, but I wasn't prepared. I'm a soldier. This diplomatic interaction mess was dumped in my lap without warning.”

The sumptuous room disappeared. Max felt suspended in midair, frighteningly floating toward a whirlpool of contradicting emotions: the blessed closure of knowing and the revulsion that knowledge brought. A truly dark seed had begotten the fate of his planet. That's why they had never been able to be completely at peace with each other; greed and all the sickness it carried were the cornerstones of their destiny.

Hands shook him by the arms. “Come back to me, Max.” Rezzu's voice latched at him, pulling him from the abyss of shame drowning him. “It's the past, let it go. Let it go.”

The two suns were wide like plates, strangely beautiful and uplifting. Max focused on them, to float upward, to be rescued. As he surfaced he threw his arms around Rezzu's neck, holding fast for dear life. He sobbed, “Thank you, thank you.”

Rezzu pried Max from his neck.

And the universe siphoned into one single space.

That tiny place where their lips touched.

11. Essence

Since he was the offended party, the six representatives had come to see him—on his ship. They had marveled about the *Oculus*, and expressed (albeit each one in their own way) how deeply sorry the cities were for mistrusting the Colviri's intentions and a thousand more inane apologies. Rezzu had replicated the records that brought the Colviri to Aletta, so they all left with the information to do with it as they saw fit.

Max sat at the far end of the circular sofa, once they moved from Rezzu's formal office to his quarters. He had taken his coat and hat off and loosened his cravat. "I thought they would never leave."

"I'm glad you stayed."

"I just hope they don't start shooting each other's blimps on their way back. I don't know who incited the army assembly, but they will not lose time to start blaming one another."

"Let's pray for the best." Rezzu moved closer to Max; his uniform was suddenly hot and he was twitchy all over. "I have had a question nagging me long before I set foot on Aletta." He took two deep breaths and continued. "Why didn't your people try to find their way back once communications and support were interrupted?"

"I don't have a concrete answer for that. My theory is that they either thought something really wrong happened back on Nova Gaia, thus there was no point in going back, or had discovered the magic of the planet already and didn't want to lose it."

"So if you leave the planet, it's gone?"

"That's the conclusion of most scholars. I mean no one has left the planet ever. There hadn't been a way to prove it."

Then Rezzu would not be able to ask Max to come with him. How would he romance this man? How would he make Max fall in love with him? They knew they wanted each other, but that wasn't enough. He wanted a love like his parents'.

Those pale green eyes that made him feel demented (and at home in the same breath) stared at him. "Speaking of magic. Will you accept your wand back?" Max drew a tiny cylinder from his pocket and it enlarged in his palm.

Rezzu narrowed his eyes and joked, "Do I really need it? I've seen you do magic without one, like four times." Now he was sure that the seeds Max had given him for Luddi, that far away day, had been summoned magically.

"Oh, that." Max looked like he had been caught withholding information again. "Not everybody can wield magic without a wand."

"But you don't have one."

"I don't have one, at the moment. I lost it."

"Well, keep mine, until you get a new one."

"It's not that easy. Yours will never work completely right for me because it resonates with you, with your essence. Your name brought it to life. After your first wand, other considerations have to be taken to create one for you."

"Sweet Lady of the Shields! How many wands have you lost?"

"Twenty-one," came out in a little voice, almost imperceptible if you weren't expecting an answer.

Rezzu considered this information for a moment. He ran a hand down his face and sighed. "All right, mine has river stone in it. What would you need, a piece of this ship? I'm sure none of its parts are made from materials that could be found in Aletta. We have some plants too."

Max shook his head. He reminded Rezzu of a child fighting not to take a bitter medicine. "None of it will work."

Setting the wand in Max's hand aside, Rezzu stroked Max's trembling fingers. "How can I help you? Tell me."

"No, Rezzu. What I need for my new wand might mean that I'd not be able to see you again. I'll fake it till I'm able to sort it out. Luckily, I had a ban on people showing their magic around the Colviri. There's no point for that now, and soon I will be forced to do something using a wand. But you know what? I'm a big boy—I'll find a way."

"You told me, less than five standard hours ago, when you didn't know what was troubling me, that whatever it was we could deal with it together. What's the difference now?"

"The difference is," Max growled, and with each word his tone rose and became angrier, "for my next wand the core must be something from *my other*

half!" He stood up and flailed his arms. "What if what I'm feeling is wrong, what if it's all an illusion, and you are not what my heart keeps struggling to accept?"

Rezzu appreciated how perfect Max looked surrounded by his things—in his quarters; his emerald trousers, golden waistcoat, and cream shirt a beautiful contrast with the dark tones of his furniture. He stood up and caught up with Max, turning him by the shoulders to face him. "Let's make love."

"What?"

"Yes, let's make love and be inside each other at least once. Then we could go to Master Esaw, and if I'm not your other half, I'll go quietly with your memory in my body to last me a lifetime."

"No. No." Max tried to shrug Rezzu off. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm afraid to find out."

"I learned a long time ago that if I didn't have answers, I needed to be open to the wisdom of others." Rezzu kissed Max's furrowed brow. "Wouldn't it be worse if we stayed close to each other for weeks or months and then find out we are not meant to be together? Wouldn't that break our hearts irreparably? As we are now, we could have this moment of happiness and cherish it afterward if we must part ways, and still be able to heal and accept others in our lives." Although, Rezzu knew he was already very much broken for love if he couldn't be around Max. It was a certainty he didn't like, but one he'd fearlessly deal with if the time came to that. He loosened Max's cravat completely and let the soft fabric slowly find its way to the floor, lightly swinging as it went downward. "Please."

Max closed his eyes and tipped his head backward, his lips slightly parted, perhaps struggling to accept Rezzu's offer, perhaps finding the courage to refuse. The robotic neck sparkled for an instant in the bright light of the room with the movement, and Rezzu kissed it. Warm metal welcomed his lips, and a moan escaped Max. Rezzu unbuttoned the silk waistcoat, his mouth still gliding over the metallic surface, and Max's hands went to Rezzu's shoulders, gripping as if to claw resolution and strength out of them.

Then Rezzu remembered what his sperm would do to Max's DNA. This was the thing that could forbid them to be together right now, but he needed to come clean. Perhaps spinning it like a good thing would be the best approach. He took Max's face between his hands and caressed lightly colored cheeks in circular motions. "There's one thing you should know about the Colviri."

Green skies stared at Rezzu.

“Our life span is a lot longer than humans, more than two thousand standard years.” Rezzu murmured softly. He let the information sink in.

As Rezzu had foreseen, Max grasped the implications of the information fast. “So even if we’re meant to be together it would be briefly. How can your human father stand it?”

“My human father will live as long as any Colviri.”

“How?” A spark of hope burst in Max’s eyes.

“Our life cells affect human DNA, transforming it till it becomes Colviri DNA.”

“Well, I guess transfusions are not a big deal.” Max sounded relieved.

Rezzu shook his head. “It’s not blood.”

The green skies widened in surprise. “Oh. You meant sperm.”

“I want you inside me as much as I want to be inside you. But once I’ve come in you I might be adding a couple of hundred years to your life span and making you stronger than a regular human.”

A wicked expression flourished on Max’s face. His hands rested on Rezzu’s waist. He smirked, “All that with a single dose?”

“Who said we were going to stop at one?”

“True.” Max closed his eyes and opened his lips slightly again, but this time inviting Rezzu.

After a brutal kiss, the governor’s waistcoat followed his cravat. Rezzu pulled Max’s shirt out of his trousers with the same slow upward motions his lips were following before over the masculine chin. The sound erupting from Max was a disturbing hybrid between a growl and a groan, but it brought the confirmation Rezzu was desperately expecting.

“I’ll take my chances.” Max hooked a finger on the neck of Rezzu’s uniform and pulled—his eyes like blazes and his cruel mouth in a firm grin that was sheer determination, pure exhilaration.

After that, it became a battle to see who got the other naked first. Limbs entwined and mouths snarled. Rezzu found an iota of control to emerge from the unleashed, straggly passion drowning his midnight bed, four heartbeats after

he'd discovered a magnificent peacock feather tattoo winding up Max's left calf. "Commander Czech."

Max froze, his teeth latched to one of Rezzu's nipples. It was as if Rezzu had stopped in mid action a video of a wild animal as it devoured its prey.

"Captain?"

"I do not wish to be disturbed. If the ground opens below us, *you* take care of it."

"Aye, Captain. No one will disturb you until you contact us again."

His rosy nipple was still between white teeth, and the flash in those sky green eyes and the almost feral grin were astonishingly beautiful. Rezzu chuckled, "As you were, Governor."

The mechanical hand pinched his other nipple, and the combined effect of teeth and brass had Rezzu writhing in undiluted fire. His own hands found flesh and metal, to grab, to knead, to destroy, and it was in that solar instant when Max's lips trailed down his abdomen to kiss his cock, the full weight of his prophecy dawned on him.

Feathers like eyes

Metal and flesh

Unruly heart

Virtuous mage

It all clicked in, and Rezzu thought of stopping, of telling Max this confirmation, the discovery, but molten pleasure enveloped his cock. A solid throat closed around its tip, and a metal finger sought his mouth, and Rezzu sucked on the brass and the heat, lost and found.

Seconds became minutes and minutes became eons as Max bobbed over Rezzu's cock. Rezzu could not take his eyes away from the magic, from the devastating beauty of those lips wrapped around his length. The green skies opened and closed intermittently, as if unable to decide whether to stay shut and savor the thickness, the texture, or stay wide and enjoy the vision of Rezzu's own lips wrapped around Max's finger.

With a mischievous, arched eyebrow, Max slowly pulled off Rezzu's cock. "You taste so good, I could keep like this forever. But I want more." And before Rezzu could grasp what was happening, Max had used his incredible

force to grab him by the legs, turning him around and burying his face between Rezzu's ass cheeks.

His last few coherent thoughts fled Rezzu's mind as the million sensations concentrating on his cock a heartbeat earlier spread over his body as tiny constant electric shocks, speeding away from his burning hole. And the attack was so delicious, so powerful, he lifted his body to stand on all fours and push and counterattack, seeking a deeper connection, his long braid almost strangling him due to the abrupt motion. "Oh fuck yes, that hole is yours."

A chuckle reverberated through Rezzu's cheeks like the ripples of a happy stone skimming its favorite lake, and Rezzu shuddered. He wanted to be disarmed, razed, shattered. The demolishing power of Max's intent had him crawling until there was no more room to advance, and little by little his upper body ended up touching his cabin wall, the cold surface silently calming the sweltering currents running through him. His sideways face and clammy hands were flush against the hard cooling surface when something like a wind moved about him, and Rezzu felt his braid go up as if handled by invisible deft fingers, becoming undone.

Rezzu groaned and roared and begged to be destroyed while his snowy hair cascaded over his shoulders and down, down till it covered his butt and Max's face—falling leaves saying good-bye to their tree. He didn't know if it was magic or the brutal strength of Max's enhancements and passion but he was lifted, his ankles used as leverage, and his body bent, folding him into an upended fetal position, his darkest treasure exposed and willing at the mercy of teeth and tongue.

His head spun, his vision blurred, and he fought to record every speck of stimulation bombarding him like a meteor rain. He was ready to succumb, to explode, to become smithereens when the same unseen fingers that had unbraided his hair circled around his balls and shaft, an invisible cock ring holding his climax at bay. This turned his attention to the steady trickle of precum running down his dick and testicles. He was sure it was dripping over Max's chest, and the image made him tremble with renewed spasms of crushing ardor.

"Not yet," floated a growl from below. "Not until you're inside me."

Max's grip on his ankles vanished, but Rezzu remained suspended in that undignified but maddeningly erotic position. A flat tongue languorously swept over his ready-to-be-annihilated hole, continued in a straight upward motion,

between his cheeks, over his coccyx, and traced the line of his spine, his hair parting equal to a curtain revealing a stage. At the same time, real hands caressed the back of his thighs, cupping his ass and spreading it, until the now familiar and welcome presence of a brass finger entered his well-worked entrance. It was a smooth breach; it had some kind of lubrication, and (since Rezzu knew Max's mouth was busy somewhere else) the knowledge that it was his own fluids aiding the assault, made Rezzu swear fervently.

The man who ruled not only Anatolia but with each passing heartbeat more and more of Rezzu's body and mind kissed the base of Rezzu's neck, then whispered with a grave, hungry tone. "You're going to fuck me... hard... until no other name can escape my lips... until you flood me with your seed... until I'm nothing but a squirming mass belonging only to you." Each word punctuated by the brass piston moving languidly but relentlessly far below—where their bodies connected, where their frontiers dissolved.

Rezzu didn't trust his voice and jerkily nodded, but true to his essence, true to everything he had shown Rezzu until that moment, Max uttered a low hiss, "Say it."

"I-I'm going to fuck you."

"Say it like you mean it."

And the beast inside Rezzu, who had been prowling quietly, leashed by his intention of letting Max take control, broke its chains and sprang, recognizing his other half and roared deafeningly, "I'M GOING TO FUCK YOU UNTIL YOU'RE MINE FOREVER."

Everything holding Rezzu in place snapped, and (before his feet were able to touch the bed) he swiveled.

The beast pounced.

Max's raucous laughter was a thousand times better than any cry of fear.

12. Transmutation

He was blind. He needed his sight back because all the sensations stroking, attacking, torturing each of his cells were too much, too many to not see and enjoy their origin. He fought with the blindness; the blindness that came from the pleasure, from the heat. No other man's touch had ever turned him into this blind pile of happiness. Then Max remembered.

The only thing he needed to do to be back in the light was to open his eyes, to find that shred of control to command his body to obey, but it was hard. He was wrapped in a tangle of his own limbs, of other hands, another mouth conquering him, giving him pleasure beyond anything he had known before. And still the final act of submission had yet to occur. And that burning center, amid all the sweltering devastation, wanted to be mauled, overwhelmed, ripped apart.

He knew the lips around his cock, he knew the fingers kneading his frame, but he wanted more. He wanted, no, he needed this other cock that had been in his own mouth to enter him, from a different angle, with a more demanding intention.

A sole particle of control, perhaps the child of a single unperturbed and still-working neuron, swam up from the abyss his brain had become to find his coherent voice (because the only things escaping him were the guttural noises of a rutting animal), and Max cried out almost like a single word, "C'MON, REZZU. FUCK ME ALREADY."

And laughter was what made him finally open his eyes; to look at those smiling features, to lose himself in those bright yellow suns that watched him with adoration, to appreciate the swollen lips hovering above his face. The deep voice of Rezzu Ki Muselet stroked Max inside and out, "Is that an order, Governor?"

Max didn't know which one he liked better, the submissive ambassador or the mischievous captain. Both were so distinctive, two different faces of the same invaluable coin. He was irremediably attracted to these incongruent facets equally, and he was determined to savor them infinitely. He growled, "Yes, it is." And his hole added, "Severe punishment is coming your way if you don't fuck me soon."

Rezzu gave him a quick peck. “Aye, aye, sir.” He moved backward and lifted Max’s legs, positioning both ankles together over one of his shoulders, angling Max slightly sideways.

The wet head of Rezzu’s cock teased Max’s hole, lateral swipes, circular swipes, up and down swipes. Each stroke breached him a little, and he pushed and thrashed and moaned, the firm hold of Rezzu over his legs limiting his actions and greatly pissing him off.

The grin was maddening and endearing. Max opened his mouth to curse Rezzu out, and the words transformed before they could leave him into a long breathless groan. Rezzu was inching his way in, pulling Max’s hip toward him, his head tipped back, his hiss infuriatingly erotic.

White, silky hairs caressed Max’s entrance; the rock wall of Rezzu’s sweaty chest dampened the back of his thighs, and the fullness of the thick Colviri cock made Max feel complete—irrevocably happy and ready to be redeemed.

“Please, please, move,” Max begged, his head tossing.

But the solid mountain stayed immobile, aside from the measured rise and fall of his breathing. After a moment that seemed suspended in time where their eyes drilled each other, Rezzu asked with a smirk, “You sure you want this?”

What kind of question was that when he was to the hilt inside Max? “Fuck yes. Do I have to say it in Colviri?”

The hold of Rezzu over Max’s hip had relaxed a little, making the cock slide minimally out of his stretched hole, and Rezzu gave a hard tug to regain all his terrain back. “That would be something.”

“You fucker.”

“Your fucker.” And with those two slow uttered words the battering began.

Each thrust was agony and bliss and stars. Rezzu undulated. Rezzu gyrated. The hand not holding his legs roamed Max’s torso and arms. Fingers veered to trace Max’s lips, and he kissed them, silently asking to suck them, to taste them. Rezzu obliged, and soon Max’s tongue was busy circling and gliding as he copied his lover’s movements below.

His climax steadily approached, Rezzu’s piston bringing it about with resolute passion. His legs were parted, now each resting over one shoulder, and Rezzu licked the feather tattoo over Max’s calf, his tongue flat as if trying to encompass the entire expanse at once. With his gaze hawk-like upon Max, he

murmured, “Feathers like eyes.” He folded Max over, never ceasing his ramming, his tongue finding Max’s neck sliding upward until it reached his ear, “Metal and flesh.”

Lips softly met, a whispered brush, and Rezzu straightened himself, both hands around Max’s ankles, powerful and beautiful as Max imagined that ancient man, Samson, must have looked between the columns of his enemies’ temple. More lower stabs, and Rezzu’s right hand slithered down, leaving a trail of fire in its wake until it rested over Max’s chest, “Unruly heart.” He smiled, and Max wanted to sob, to let tears of happiness run freely.

The hand over his frantic heart continued its journey, caressing its way toward his cock and closing around it, impossibly delicate and seemingly afraid of scaring a cornered animal. And with perfect synchrony, Rezzu pumped and plunged. The magic flowed from Max’s every pore, and its emerging force made Rezzu’s long translucent hair drift like an underwater creature, the myriad tendrils of a marvelous gift.

Those blazing eyes were exploding supernovas. Rezzu inclined his head as if conceding a point, agreeing with an unknown revelation. “Virtuous mage.” From afar, the words seemed coherent to Max, like something long forgotten and brought to the front of his mind by a sudden revelation. A curse, a blessing—a prophecy that was ready to become real, that needed to come forth.

Rezzu’s grip on Max’s cock became painful, the penetration erratic. Once, twice, thrice, and he screamed, “Mine.”

Every jet ignited, sparked, and the sensation of the flood burst Max’s orgasm, his own cry the echo of Rezzu’s, “Mine.” And they floated and spun and forgot where they were, surrounded by light, pierced by heaven, entwined forever.

They descended, spongy clouds touching the mountain’s summit, and Rezzu carefully slid out and climbed him, impaling himself on Max’s unyielding cock. He rocked and squeezed and kissed Max, oblivious to their recent completion. Nevertheless, the magic was there with them, nurturing and titillating, rousing their bodies back to an immediate peak.

“We belong together.” Rezzu’s words were not a plea but a confirmation as he grabbed Max’s face with both hands and devoured him with mouth and hole.

Amid the assault Max agreed, “I know.” And another climax neared, impossibly higher and astonishingly brighter than the previous.

Will it always be like this?

And his brain, and his heart, and his testicles gave him the answer in a furious eruption that had him howling and heaving, animal and man—individual and yet utterly united to the being coming with him.

Some of Rezzu's cum had landed on Max's chin, and his captain, his ambassador licked it playfully. "Good thing I told them to stay put because we sounded like a massacre."

"Yeah. There should be blood spatters all over the walls."

They looked at each other for a fraction of a heartbeat—and cracked up like a couple of looneys on their way to be institutionalized.

Two standard hours later...

After showering and eating (sex always made Max hungry but in the aftermath of the Rezzu Experience he'd been frankly famished), his carriage was en route to Merchant Street. Contrary to the first time, this time Rezzu wasn't nervous or upset, and he took time to ask Max about the craftsmanship and features of their transport before they climbed on. His fingers had traced the etched relief of the sleek metal alloy used for the body, and he had marveled as Max opened the hood located on the side to show him the complex mechanism with its gears and pistons.

"I still don't understand magic as fuel."

This was the part where any other Alettan would flick his wand to start the ignition. This wasn't the first time he didn't have his wand so it didn't faze him. He explained first. "See those tubes there? They contain modified water. Magic heats them to create the steam to put the engine in motion. The gas doesn't escape but returns to the tubes, thus maintaining a constant cycle as long as you have the vehicle in use."

"Amazing," Rezzu murmured.

"With bigger engines, like those of a blimp for example, we add coal dust to the modified water to make the steam stronger due to the volatile heavy molecules, making it easier to propel bigger gears." He concentrated, and the liquid instantly bubbled and evaporated, the machine purring eagerly.

His driver, perched on the high seat in front of the carriage, guffawed, "Lord Governor, you shouldn't be doing that, you almost gave this old man a heart attack."

“So sorry, Byron. I was showing the mechanism to my...” Max dithered for a moment. He wanted to use a deeply meaningful word, but he wasn’t sure if he had that right yet. “...to the ambassador.”

Rezzu smiled, noticing his quick bout of discomfort. “We’ll find an appropriate term for each other soon enough.”

“Oh, don’t mind me, sir. I’m just a whiny old nag.”

Max inclined his head, acknowledging Rezzu’s comment and called to Byron, “Oh stop it, you have many years ahead of you. Now please take us to Master Esaw’s.”

“Lost another wand, Governor?”

“No,” Max offered easily, “We’re getting one for the ambassador.”

“I guess we can do magic in front of them now then...”

“Indeed. And we don’t want to be late for our appointment.”

“I’ll get you there in a jiffy, m’lord.”

“Thank you.” Max rolled his eyes, out of Rezzu’s sight, as he entered the carriage behind those broad shoulders.

They sat, facing each other, and Rezzu said the following words with a seriousness Max had only seen during their first encounter, “Did it ever occur to you that you keep losing your wand because you don’t really need one? Why force yourself to use something external when your own body is the perfect conductor?”

That was something to consider. None of them said another word until they arrived at their destination.

The thin, smiling wandmaster greeted them outside his shop with open arms, his multi-lensed spectacles on top of his graying head. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Lord Governor, please come in, come in.” The bow of his navy blue ribbon was bigger than usual, and Max had to suppress childish urge to giggle imagining it flying away—pulling tiny Master Esaw to the sky with silk flappy wings.

They went straight to the back where the master put the wands together. “So what did you bring from the elusive other half?” the steady voice asked without preamble, eyeing Rezzu as if seeing him for the first time and truly appreciating his beauty.

Max cleared his throat, but it was Rezzu who answered after stopping him with a raised hand. He pulled several hairs from the top of his head. "If you need more just let me know."

"Oh, magnificent," cooed Esaw. "This is more than enough, Ambassador." He proffered a slim glass vial, and Rezzu deposited his hairs in it. "So luminescent," marveled the wandmaker, bringing his spectacles down and adjusting lenses to examine the hairs more deeply. He closed the tube with a cork and rummaged through several boxes, drawing three unfinished wands from different shelves.

"This is exciting." Rezzu reminded Max of a little boy learning how his favorite candy was made.

The three wands were placed on a table. Max had been through this process before, so he focused on not calling one wand but on letting the magic flow freely to allow one to rise on its own to him. With Rezzu's expectant eyes on him, he slowly waved his hand over the open cylinders; he let the happiness rushing through his veins after being in Rezzu's arms to be the summoner of his next wand, the last one he would ever use, if the idea fluttering in his head came to fruition. However, it wasn't the time to diverge to future plans, he needed his essence calling out to the magic.

One or two standard minutes passed, and the left one levitated gracefully toward his hand. Max gave it to Master Esaw.

"How interesting?" Commented the old man as he inspected it.

"Something wrong?"

"No, not really. It's Alettan silver, though. The magic had never chosen this material for you before. It had always fluctuated between a three-colored gold alloy and rose iron. Something must have changed in you recently."

The fire was not only on his cheeks. His entire body was ablaze. How undiplomatic of him to be embarrassed in this moment, and the twinkle in Rezzu's solar eyes didn't help a bit.

"Very well, m'lords. Please make yourselves comfortable in the waiting room. The next phase is not for mortal eyes..." Master Esaw chuckled cheekily. His wife materialized as if she had been just waiting for this moment all along. "Please follow me, Lord Governor, Lord Ambassador."

"Alettan silver, huh?" Rezzu almost singsonged, and pushed Max with his shoulder.

“How odd, right?”

“Yeah, I wonder what has changed...”

Rezzu's fake air of wishful trepidation was absolutely annoying.

And Max loved every second of it.

13. Blossoms

Midnight orchids bloomed in Rezzu's hair. He snickered, "Really, flowers?"

"I'd have you know those are very masculine flowers, dark and sensual."

Two standard days ago, Max had conjured a giant mirror above the massive bed from somewhere else in the palace. Rezzu saw his reflection, and the deep purple orchids sprinkled about his widespread hair reminded him of blossoms floating over a lake.

"You shouldn't have done that. They might have cheered someone else in whatever garden you plucked them from." Rezzu shook his head without heat.

"They'd have ended up in some forgotten vase anyway. And they are *cheering me up*."

Rezzu had learned that things weren't created out of thin air; you needed to know where they were to bring them up. He thought of something his father had given him on his twentieth birthday, and that, luckily for him, wasn't all the way back on Mireeh. He stretched his hand and took his wand, giving it a flick.

"Sweet 'verse, Rezzu, this is magnificent!" Max tilted his torso backward to appreciate the burgundy corundum crystals necklace Rezzu had placed on him. The movement made his naked bottom rub deliciously over Rezzu's rapidly interested cock.

The minute gems encased in the dense gold of Vartian, one of the twenty-seven moons of Mireeh, contrasted beautifully with the brass of Max's neck and his perfect, tanned skin. They smiled at each other in the mirror.

"I give you flowers, and you give me jewelry."

"Flowers are nature's most perfect jewels. They are so special they don't even last forever; thus you enjoy them more because they are finite. They become the essence of a special moment."

"If I'd know you had such a poetic vein, I'd have fallen quicker," Max whispered, covering Rezzu's chest with his own and kissing him; the weight of the necklace over Rezzu's Adam's apple fathered goose bumps.

"No, you wouldn't. Diplomats are egotistical, hardcore narcissists," Rezzu ventured full of mirth.

“Oh, I’m gonna show you how egotistical I can be.” The arched eyebrow signaled the start of a challenge.

“Are you now? Ohhh...” Pearly teeth latched on Rezzu’s nipple as the warm pleasure of Max’s robotic hand trailed down his flank, over his hip and grasped both cocks in a metallic cocoon.

“Uh-huh.”

“So damn selfish...” Rezzu sighed while Max changed position to stretch his body along Rezzu’s without stopping the rhythmic stroking of their united shafts.

Max let the nipple rest for a heartbeat. “Yeah, it’s not even funny. I know...” He didn’t return to the swollen nub though. He changed course and traced Rezzu’s abs with his tongue, releasing their now hard-as-steel-columns cocks.

“More selfishness, please.”

Four licks. “Is that an order?”

“Ahhh, I don’t think I’m capable of ordering you around.” Rezzu squirmed.

His cock head was swallowed for only an instant, a swirling tongue making him see stars. “Glad you’re aware of your limitations.” This time his cock was devoured completely; Max’s lips grazed Rezzu’s balls. A happy hum vibrated through his manhood. A hot throat closed around his glans.

Rezzu was getting ready to emit another incongruent quip when a brass finger found his hole. He hissed encouragingly, “Egoist.”

Emerging again from the deep fellation, Max summarized, “I wish I could bottle the way you taste.” He licked his inflamed lips.

It wasn’t the words but the joyful tone that made Rezzu tremble, each body part turning ablaze, each cell surging toward a drowning climax. He wanted to fight. He needed this to last longer, but in little time Max had learned how to play him, discovered the complicated password to break him—to make him scream and writhe.

Max moved in that easy and quick way of his (that always left Rezzu breathless) and sat on his haunches; he pulled Rezzu to his lap by the hip and grabbed his cock, the invading finger unstoppable. Hand and digit became a well-oiled machine, pumping and stroking, piercing and twisting.

Dark orchids rose and started to swirl in an incomprehensible pattern amid his drifting hair while his body tossed helplessly. The million horses galloping to his center collided, and his orgasm gushed free, violent and perfect, accompanied by a long, strained howl in the form of Max's name.

Long seconds later, his breathing decided to come back, and Rezzu opened his eyes. Max licked each one of his fingers, sending chills down Rezzu's spine. The apologetic grin was unconvincing. "I was supposed to use that as lubricant... Well, here's more." He scooped the semen along Rezzu's torso, and flesh replaced brass, wrenching a hissing moan from him. "I'm going to fuck you so hard, the constellations will guide you home," Max commented happily as fingers coated Rezzu's insides, hungrily preparing him.

By now, Rezzu was used to the magic taking care of his exhaustion. His body was alert and ready, raring to go again; this time expanded and full thanks to Max's cock.

A wicked grin coincided with the first nudge, and it became wider as Max inched his way in, using Rezzu's hips as levers, turning him into a squirming mass of delight, fluid and bright. Pubic hair grazed his hole; Rezzu squeezed, and Max groaned, tilting his head backward, the metal of his neck exploding with blinding rays. He pulled out a little and slid back inside, and with each following heartbeat the speed and the force increased until it was just drilling and rocking, pleasure and sparks.

Rezzu's primal-self surged, eager to join the fracas, and he pushed, wanting to receive more, to take more. With his legs circled firmly around Max's waist, Rezzu did a defensive maneuver and turned the governor around in three quick movements. Max ended up on his back with Rezzu riding ferociously. Max let out a string of profanities and finished with, "I thought I was the one doing the fucking."

And I was letting you.

But that thing that was all animal (all starving instinct) thought otherwise, and Rezzu dismounted and moved forward, shoving his rocky, dripping cock into Max's mouth. He saw the green skies roll back. His own eyes wanting to do the same, but they stayed glued to the image, mesmerized by the raw beauty of Max's cheeks hollowing to suck (tasting him, welcoming him). He guided his cock with one hand and stroked the one behind using the other. He would return to it soon because the tide grew, and that explosion was meant to happen with him impaled, each jet conquering him.

Max pouted as Rezzu's cock left his mouth, but the pout became a pleasure "O" as Rezzu easily glided down his incandescent shaft. Two rolls, one squeeze... "OHHH REZZU."

"Fuck yesssss!" Thick ropes flew into Rezzu, out of Rezzu, and they rose and swirled, holding fast onto each other, laughing and letting the magic have its way with them.

As they descended, crushing orchids and still chuckling, Unos entered the bedroom and announced, "Max, Deas is here to see you."

"Seems like I'm finally meeting your best friend in person."

"Good thing you already learned how to braid your hair magically 'cause you're a mess."

"It's all your fault, you selfish ass."

"My ass wasn't even in this battle."

"And I'm going to take care of that." Rezzu swatted Max's chin with his close fist softly. "Trust me."

"We can tell Deas to come back."

"No." Rezzu tapped his finger over the silvery blue light between Max's pecs, encircled in a brass grommet. "Friend first, ass-mauling after."

Max scrunched his face and crossed his arms in a perfect imitation of a five-year-old denied candy. "You're no fun."

Pushing Max out of the bed, Rezzu spanked him. "I'll give you lots of fun later."

"Yay."

14. Hope

They entered the sitting room arm in arm and laughing.

“Oh.” Deas’s disapproval face surged so fast and retreated at the same speed, it left Max dizzy. He moved to his feet slowly and inclined his head. “Governor, Ambassador.”

Max disentangled from Rezzu and hugged his friend, whispering in his ear, “You need to stop that, you bitch.”

Their embrace became stiff. “I don’t like him,” Deas stated between his teeth.

“I’m going to beat you to a pulp.” Max pushed Deas at arm’s distance, without releasing him. “He makes me happy. Be fucking happy for me,” he growled.

Deas seemed deflated for a moment, then filled up again. “I don’t approve.”

“Blasting meteors! Do you hear yourself? Give me just one reason why this is so hard for you.”

“Ahem,” Rezzu cleared his throat. “May I intervene, Max?”

With a nod, Max let go of Deas, who stood frozen but wasn’t trying to disguise his discomfort. He could have been a good diplomat, because, when he wanted to, he could fake it like the best of them. That wasn’t the case now though.

“I’ve seen this before. I’ve seen it in my sister’s face and in others when they think someone they love is making a mistake.” Rezzu walked slowly toward Deas, a rescuer approaching a skittish, beaten animal. He took Deas hands in both of his, looking into those deep, blue eyes. “I promise you I’ll give the last drop of my blood to make Lairdimax Trean Maitheas the happiest man in the known universe. This is my solemn vow, please accept it.”

For a heartbeat, Max thought Rezzu would kneel, but he didn’t. That would have been just too much, and he would have had to punch Deas really hard for being obnoxious and forcing Rezzu to do such a thing.

Looking from Rezzu to Max several times, Deas finally grunted, “All right. I’m going to promise you something too. If I ever see my friend shed just one, hear me well, just one tear that is not from happiness, you’ll know pain.”

Rezzu assented with a crisp nod and pulled Deas into a crushing hug that left the other flailing to escape his grip. He let go and gave Deas a hard smack on the back. "Good thing Maith likes me. I wouldn't be able to face two raging fathers."

Deas elbowed Rezzu, who folded down—guffawing riotously.

A dispute resolved with a well-aimed elbow. How typical of their friendship. Max joined in their laughter, and they all sat. "Are you bringing me good news, now that the sour ones are gone?"

"I am." Deas sobered up. "In the seven cities people are embracing the fact that we're descendants of Nova Gaia positively. Even the Nova Gaians among Rezzu's crew are changing their attitude toward our enhancements and magic. I personally think it is because they're embarrassed one of their own pushed us to become what we are. Shame is a very powerful incentive to change people's minds."

"Maybe I need to shame your ass into not being such a jerk to my future husband," Max offered from the corner of his mouth.

Both men looked as if struck by lightning.

"Oops. Right. I haven't asked you yet." Max snickered. He was the one who went to his knee in front of a flabbergasted Rezzu, conjuring the ring that had been sitting in his vault for the past two weeks, waiting for the right moment. "You said you'll make me the happiest man in the known universe, so this is the next logical step. Would you marry me Rezzu Ki Muselet?"

Deas had one hand over his mouth, his eyes liquid. With the other he nudged Rezzu after several heartbeats in silence. "Hey."

That seemed to bring Rezzu back from whatever petrified land he had been. He stood up, his head bobbing, and he grabbed Max by the waist, holding him up above him and twirling them both and crying, "Yes. Yes. Yes. A thousand times yes!"

Amid his flying in circles, Max saw Deas dabbing his eyes with a maroon handkerchief.

Aww, the big, old softie.

Ten standard days later, Max stood beside Rezzu as a ginormous Colviri vessel alighted over the Yerma Plains. It was a monstrosity, four times bigger than the behemoth that brought his husband-to-be—what seemed a many eons

ago occurrence. He was sweating and shivering, and, in other circumstances, he would have thought he was coming down with some exotic disease. Nevertheless, he knew it was pure unadulterated nerves. He, who had been able to thwart the snake pit of his planet's diplomacy, was a flickering leaf buffeted by a storm at the prospect of meeting Rezzu's family.

"Is that an earthquake?" Rezzu chuckled.

"Shut up. You had my family in your pocket from day one. This isn't fair."

"Ahh, you'll be fine. They won't eat you until after the ceremony as the tradition demands."

"I'm *so* telling Deas."

Humungous stairs descended, and the Alettan Guard advanced to take their position, creating a corridor toward where Rezzu, Max, and the Welcome Committee (formed by delegations of all the city-states) stood. From the ship, Colviri soldiers marched noisily and merged in the spaces left by the Alettans to mingle in a dual guard of honor. Two imposing men appeared first. They wore Colviri uniforms but didn't have the three cords denoting military ranks. One had flaming red hair, cascading in soft curls, held back by minute braids over his temples. He had Rezzu's eyes. Or Rezzu had his, since the redheaded man was clearly older.

The other man had the white Colviri hair, long and glossy, but there was something about him that was brutal and enticing at the same time, like a fabulous beast who had decided to be nice to you for its own particular reasons. They parted to help a girl with the stairs. She was at least a head shorter than them, still tall by normal human standards. Beautiful and formidable, her resemblance to Rezzu was uncanny. She didn't wear a uniform but a dress that was layers upon layers of dreamily fluid material, like translucent gauze that delicately moved, swayed by its own ethereal breeze. If she were Alettan, Max would have said she was using magic to create that effect.

She walked between the two men, and no one could deny she was their daughter. Even her hair seemed to be a mixture of fire and snow. Her smile was sunny and disarming, and she bestowed it upon all with equal relish. Behind them, two dark-haired humans dressed in morning coats, one of deep green and the other of dark, handsome blue surrounded by four younger versions of them, two boys and two girls (all regal, similar to princes and princesses of fable), followed the guests' procession.

Max couldn't pay more attention to the other people descending because the striking, tall red-haired human had just stopped in front of him and offered his hand.

"My father Darien," Rezzu voiced. They shook hands. "My father Kekoa." More handshaking. "And this beautiful lady is my sister Keda Enoa, future queen of Mireeh."

Before Max could take her hand to kiss it, the sister jumped at him and hugged him, shaking him and leaving him breathless. "*Tisvo Meha!* He is soooo cute, Rezzu!"

"*Keda, Max kovon acu londalul,*" cooed Darien in Colviri, then remembered where he was and added in common language. "You don't want your brother to become a widower before he's a husband."

Why didn't I take Rezzu on his offer of that learning helmet? I need to speak Colviri a.s.a.p.

Keda Enoa let Max go but pinched his cheek "Then he wouldn't be a widower in the first place, right?" She pulled one of the fable princess girls as their group had gotten closer. "This is my cousin Lia." She made them shake hands quickly. "Come on, let's see the hot politicians!" She towed her cousin, and behind her a retinue scurried to keep pace with them.

Max was still trying to stop his spinning head but focused enough to say, "Your sister is going to be queen, but you're not a prince?"

Kekoa patted Max's shoulder. "It's a long story. We'll discuss it over dinner. I'm surprised Rezzu hadn't bragged about it."

"He's not the bragging type," said the man with the dark blue morning coat.

"My uncle, Sule Aquinas, regent of Nova Gaia," introduced Rezzu. "And my other uncle, Alaric Sarong, co-regent of the planet." He pointed at the other man, who smiled cheekily as he shook Max's hand.

"Among other things." Alaric's eyes shone brightly. Then he pulled his remaining kids to present them. "Well, you met Lia. This is my oldest, Sulric." The grey-eyed adolescent had the same mischievous bright smile. "Eala," he addressed the girl with green eyes. "And Ronas, the yongest." The boy took Max's hand with a shy grin and almost watery blue eyes. "We'll move so you can meet the rest of the family." And they took off as the Welcome Committee closed in on them with much bowing and effusiveness.

Darien extended his hand to introduce the three men approaching, a burly redhead between two Colviri. "My brother Ben and his two husbands, Tyke and Sun." The massive trio said their hellos and carried on to allow Rezzu's rowdy Academy friends to introduce themselves, amid wolf whistles and cat calls. There were eleven (six men and five women) but seemed like a hundred.

Two priests in outfits that resembled more armor than religious clothes were next. Aletta didn't have an official religion, everyone was allowed to believe whatever they wanted as long as they didn't force others to believe the same, and thus there were no official temples, and union ceremonies (if wanted) were officiated by the oldest member of the uniting families. Legal documentation of the union was signed before a judge by appointment. Max was happy to give Rezzu a wedding ceremony under the Colviri rites. To him, the definitions of miracle and faith were manifested every time he looked into those solar eyes.

With the Colviri, it was really difficult to assess age, thus the two priests could be either forty or four hundred. What made them prominent above everything else was their shaved heads. Both were unknown to Rezzu, so they introduced themselves: Dre-Teemu Kelai and Dre-Doste Maken. They patted Rezzu and Max's hands in the way venerable old men would and moved amid the Welcome Committee toward the transports waiting for the entire party to take them to the Palace of Government.

"That's about it," summarized Kekoa. "If anyone wanted to take out the two planets this would be the perfect occasion." He snickered.

"Father," said Rezzu almost but not quite embarrassed.

Max didn't say anything but he understood the sentiment. They walked to the carriages. He saw Keda Enoa and Lia giggling coquettishly with two young representatives from Perselia and Vimilia in their carriage. He was sure the future queen would be delighted to learn that one of the cities had part of her name in its name, if she didn't know already.

Anatolia had been festooned to receive her off-planet guests, and people were on the streets waving flags and welcoming banners or throwing flowers from windows and balconies. The Nova Gaians and Colviri waved from their carriage windows happily in return. Max's parents awaited them at the palace entrance to meet the in-laws.

"See, that wasn't so bad?" Rezzu pushed Max with his shoulder, during a quiet moment after all the representatives had left and only the wedding party remained in an impromptu informal gathering.

Both families had bonded easily. Max looked around. Peggy Maitheas showed a complicated pass with her wand to Darien and Kekoa under the loving gaze of her husband. The twins, Sasta and Amhara had two Academy friends by their necks in identical headlocks to the applause of that raucous group. Iontach was certainly discussing interplanetary trade with Alaric and Sule, holding Festa, his wife, by the waist as usual, and his handlebar mustache undulating happily as he spoke. The Nova Gaian fable princesses, Keda Enoa, and his cousin Meidhre chirped and giggled like a bunch of colorful, tiny birds, surely talking boys. Deas, the regents' boys, Trom, and Rezzu's uncle Ben and his husbands had formed a circle and were discussing only-universe-knew-what because there were sparks and balls of light emanating from their area. The big surprise was Fiore, who was in a corner with two Colviri from the Academy group, a man and a woman. They were giving him enticing looks and touching his face and hair in a very let's-go-and-do-the-nasty manner.

Max snorted, apparently his brother's luck had come from a different planet, just as his. Rezzu stared at him quizzically. He hadn't answered Rezzu's previous comment, so he pointed at Fiore and agreed. "No. Not bad at all."

15. Beginnings

Finally, their wedding night.

After the proposal (first with one thing and another and later when they had set a date), they agreed to not have sex to make this night more special. Thus, Max was having a big case of blue-turning-purplish balls after twenty standard days of abstinence. Seeing Rezzu move around the room (his long hair the only thing covering that insanely hot body), taking flames from candles with his wand and making them float to create a seductive atmosphere was disgustingly atrocious torture. Amid his sexual suffering, he had to admit Rezzu had become very adept at handling the magic of the planet; he was extremely grateful that this newfound ability had influenced positively in his husband's agreement for them to stay on Aletta. Not that his confirmation as official ambassador hadn't helped to seal the deal.

"Love, do you like it?" Rezzu turned his entire body to look at Max, leaving his wand on top of a darkwood chest of drawers. His massive Colviri cock was hard and ready and dripping.

Of course I like it!

Oh, he's talking about the lights...

"I do." Max extended his hand, inviting Rezzu to their bed.

The floating flames illuminated Rezzu's hard planes, casting delicious shadows and highlighting rocky muscles and supple ivory skin. A wicked grin flourished on striking features; Rezzu shook his head. "I have a better idea." Rezzu moved toward the window. The panes were closed to guard from the cold breeze but the curtains were drawn. He knelt, and the myriad stars shone shyly over the dark sky, framing beautifully his glowing hair. He opened his arms. "Come here, husband of mine." And his husky voice tugged at Max's nipples and balls and cock but primordially at his heart.

Almost in a trance, Max crawled from the bed and forced his brain to organize moving parts to reach Rezzu. Currents of lust mixed with happiness and appreciation zapped his body as one foot moved in front of the other, his need jutting forward, a steel obelisk guiding that short and dizzying journey.

Big hands welcomed his hips with trailing, whispering fingers. Rezzu kissed the tip of his cock, electric shocks speeding through Max's shaft to ignite goose

bumps all over his body. A groan that was groveling plea mated with urgent order escaped him. His knees decided to tremble, and Max steadied his crumbling body by resting his hands on broad shoulders. The velvety heat tide advancing over his manhood made his hole twitch—burning with anticipation, brimming with expectation.

Deft digits spread his cheeks in tandem with a skillful throat closing around his glans. Eyes shut to focus on the pleasure, Max threw his head back. A sliver of consciousness reminded him not to put extreme pressure on his clutching of Rezzu's shoulders to avoid damaging him with his brass hand. But it was hard, truly hard not to let his control be loosened and just flow—led by the potent, swirling sensations, flying in and out of him.

Max warred with his neurons to produce words, "If... you keep doing this... I'm going to... come... and-and I *seriously* want you... to fuck me."

Rezzu shook his head, surely chuckling, still full of Max's cock in his mouth, pulling like a dog fighting with a stubborn piece of meat. Happy sounds ascended from Max's crotch area, and he had to bring his head forward to see what was happening. Their eyes met; there was nothing but wicked amusement in Rezzu's.

Slowly, deliberately, Rezzu let Max's cock slide from his lips. He straightened his body, his mouth over Max's skin trailing his progress upward. Max shivered. A kiss on Max's neck signaled the end of Rezzu's progression. Firm hands moved him to face the window, and Rezzu placed himself behind him, their shapes flush—their relievos becoming one.

The warmth of Rezzu's body seeped into Max's, and he whined when that comfort disappeared. It was rapidly replaced by rained pecks, quick and furtive, that made him jump and snicker. The soft assault continued downward until teeth replaced lips over Max's ass cheeks, immediately followed by Rezzu's face buried between those same cheeks.

"Oh my..."

"Hold the windowsill," was the only warning before Rezzu lifted him, positioning Max's thighs over his shoulders in a bizarre mockery of a wheelbarrow race.

Max yelped. "What are you doing?" He laughed, gripping the sill for dear life. Then he understood as Rezzu's face was again between his cheeks, the pressure of two fingers (probably forefinger and thumb by the ghost of other

digits in the periphery) exposed his hole, giving better access to his husband's ministrations. His cock was pulled down and stroked, basically milked, and Max felt embarrassed and excited, both sentiments taunting and tickling each other equal to merry lovers having a roll in the literal hay.

His forehead found the cold pane with a muffled thud. Max moaned and squirmed. Rezzu rimmed him relentlessly and used his own precum to help with the handling of Max's cock. The action was surreal and weird and flawless, and nothing (truly nothing) would have been able to prepare Max for the absurdity, for the perfectness of it all.

A few minutes of tongue, teeth, and lips over his hole, and, suddenly, before he could assimilate the fast and precise maneuver turning his world upside down, Max was in Rezzu's arms, facing him—folded like a hand fan, his knees grazing his nipples, his back flush against the window. "Whoa, a little warning next time!" He guffawed and punched Rezzu on the shoulder, "It's Wedding Night, not Acrobatic Deluge at the circus!"

"You don't like it?" Rezzu grinned, his eyes mere slits as he pushed forward rhythmically, his cock teasing Max's pucker.

"Like it? I fucking love it! Give me a nudge or something next time, that's all. Now put that dick in me and make me see real stars..." Max tried to launch his ass forward to meet Rezzu's glans, but he was pinned to the limit.

Rezzu arched an eyebrow, his expression becoming wicked by the second. "What is that phrase in common language? Your wish is my command?"

"You can say it in *analog progression* if you want, just FUCK ME ALREADY."

The swift penetration was blinding. Inch after inch entered like a blazing sword, and Max's cry was delicious pain, exquisite torture, wonderful acceptance. Rezzu found his tempo quickly, releasing some of the pressure over Max's body. Never one to be outdone, his dormant inner acrobat lowered his hands to the sill and pushed his body forward. Rezzu allowed it, and soon they were imitating a pendulum, their shapes swinging and clashing methodically, kindling a mad fire that would soon consume them on the altar of their honeymoon.

Max could use magic to help him stay afloat—in that precarious little balance between his strong grip on the windowsill and the place where his body was connected to Rezzu's, but all he wanted and needed were those solid hands

grasping his hips, steering him, owning him, taking them to their climax with the determination of a conqueror ready to finish the siege of a fabulous city full of riches.

“You’re going to fuck me,” Rezzu blurted as his motions became erratic.

“W-What?” The fog surrounding Max’s senses made it hard to understand Rezzu’s words.

“You’re... going... to... fuck... me... arghhhhhh.” And Rezzu came with a final stab, gushing inside Max, his grip painful and delirious, his head thrown back in a long howl of desperate pleasure.

Out of his control, Max’s own jets flew as if shoved out by Rezzu’s explosion inside him. His cock hadn’t been touched since he was facing Rezzu, and the potency of this no-hands orgasm was absurd, simply overwhelming. Rope after rope covered his metallic abs, his chest, some even landed on his chin and lips. “That was...” He panted. “I have no words.”

Still hard inside Max, Rezzu leaned forward to lick semen from his chin, heaving slightly. He murmured softly. “We don’t need words to know.” He slid out of Max and helped him regain his feet. “Now it’s my turn to see real stars... and perhaps some comets.”

His sweet ambassador had come to play, and Max knew exactly how to make this side of Rezzu feel at home. The magic was there, toe-to-toe with them, and in no time their bodies would be reenergized and raring to go.

Max took Rezzu’s face with both hands and gave him a long languid kiss, an agreement, a promise of stars and comets and supernovas. Rezzu rested his cheek on the mechanical palm when their kiss ended, his eyes hooded, endearing. Max let his hands trail down slowly, almost tentatively to lead Rezzu backward by his waist toward their forgotten bed, their steps easy over thick rugs.

Rezzu lay on his back, his legs spread in an inviting, upward arch on the edge of their plush playground. Max knelt to be close to the pink treasure that winked as if aware of its future, or perhaps calling it to come faster. He rubbed his brass thumb over the delicate puckered skin, and Rezzu moaned encouragingly, both their cocks solid like ancient monoliths.

Every particle of his being screamed, “Pierce. Conquer. Take.” But his heart, separate and still ruling, decided to go slow, to relish every second and

make it last. He wet his thumb and leisurely breached the unguarded threshold. Rezzu was practically addicted to his brass fingers, and his delight was audible and extremely arousing.

A few standard minutes of the wetting-and-thumbing operation, and Rezzu was demanding (in clipped tones) to be fucked or else. Max snicker-snorted, "I need time to recuperate."

Rezzu pushed his head from where it tossed over the midnight covers, eyes narrowed and blazing. "Such a bad liar... a disgrace to diplomacy all over the galaxy."

Max spanked one of those delicious pale cheeks. "You know what the punishment for insulting a diplomat is on this planet?"

Long, white tresses swayed in slow motion as Rezzu confirmed his lack of knowledge.

"Denial of fucking," Max stated casually as he moved away from the bed.

"You wouldn't."

"I could."

A suffering groan emerged from Rezzu, "*Ufel*, darling, you wouldn't leave your husband un-fucked on his wedding night..."

His best diplomatically aloof face surged forward without thinking. "It's an absolute possibility, *Ambassador*, especially if you're calling me a bad liar." But with the last two words he simply couldn't hold it any longer and started laughing as he stroked his cock. He returned to the bed and rubbed his leaking head on that willing orifice. "You want this?" he asked twice. Rezzu nodded furiously. "Yours then." And with a single thrust (just like Rezzu had done with him) he went all the way in. Scorching flesh engulfed his burning shaft.

The second course of their only-universe-knew-how-many-plates wedding feast began.

Months later...

STEPPED ON YOUR WAND? DOG ATE IT? CONFUSED?

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL WANDLESS TEST.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL WANDMAKERS ASSOCIATION.

Rezzu chuckled as the enormous lettering sluggishly and continuously scrolled over the golden blimp. "I think it is genius."

"Do you really?"

"Of course. What could make the people more at ease than the wandmakers promoting wandless magic wielding knowledge?"

"I wasn't sure if I could convince them. That's why I didn't tell you about it."

"We're not supposed to have secrets between us." Rezzu wagged his forefinger at Max. "But I'm going to chalk this one to governmental duties, so it's moot." He took his cup and sipped the fragrant herbal tea. They sat in a cafe in Villu Square, facing the statue of Villu Bettencourt, who was the first to analyze the properties of the planet's magic and found the way to master it, opening the way for it to become their most precious energy. Each day at six in the morning, a different citizen came and enchanted seven colorful orbs representing the city-states to make them swirl around the statue in a magnificent imitation of a planetary system.

"A little mystery never hurt," Max offered after he put down his own cup.

"You only get mysterious when you are up to something you shouldn't be doing," Rezzu commented casually, his eyes on the people sauntering about the square: nannies with children in strollers, couples of all ages hand in hand, old ladies walking their miniature dogs. Colviri and Alettans mingled easily. It was interesting how the Colviri settled on Aletta had influenced so much in the fashion sense of the planet, and the rigidity of the waistcoat-coat combo was progressively disappearing; something that hadn't happened on Nova Gaia even after more than two standard decades. His gaze kept wandering back to the little kids though. Today was a special day for them; they had an appointment at Conception Center.

"*Annaxuffo onviteto Meha*, Am I transparent or what? I don't know how I survive diplomacy." Max patted Rezzu's hand and grinned. "Shall we?"

Max was only transparent to Rezzu, and that was because they were united by a bond that was lost to words. Rezzu beamed at his husband; Max had learned Colviri and now and then peppered their common language conversation with some imaginative phrase. "It's a short distance. We can enjoy the weather while we walk there."

“Brilliant idea.” Max made a walking signal with two fingers at their driver, strategically located on an opposite corner with other carriages. Byron tipped his hat in acknowledgement. “Come on.” They went to their feet, and greeted people as they strolled toward The One Thousand Plaza, a short block away.

It was a beautiful morning with a balmy breeze and an almost cloudless sky. They admired the tall, handsome buildings along the way, their uncanny resemblance with the Belle Époque Architecture of Nova Gaia a silent reminder of their newly discovered heritage.

Puppies wrestling in a pet shop window halted them for several standard minutes. Max’s melodious laughter never failed to arouse something that was vulnerable and lethal inside Rezzu; two sides of a marvelous feeling, fueled by love and happiness.

Rezzu hoped their first child had Max’s pale green eyes: the color of the sky of the home he left for the place where he belonged.

Max, apparently able to read the meaning of the adoration on Rezzu’s face, blurted, “By Meha, I’m ordering all *my* swimmers to make our child have *your* eyes.” He drew his wand and waved it toward his crotch.

They never stopped laughing until they reached their destination.

The End

Glossary

Colviri words always have the strongest accent on the first syllable.

Dre: The title of a Colviri priest, the equivalent of Padre or Father.

Rezzu: It doesn't have a literal translation from the Colviri, but it's something similar to 'equal parts'.

Annauk: It's the equivalent of the name Brian in Colviri.

Kecoswe nurguvaek: It means *I'm beyond salvation*.

Ketoza Uvolse: It means *I shouldn't have done it*.

Kirsuber: Icelandic—cherry

Fusdulatex : similar to sons of bitches. (The X sound at the end means it's plural.)

Ukwosu: It's the equivalent of the name Angelique in Colviri.

Vudacus Muselet, kefo duloovo vellodde: It means *Captain Muselet, I don't think it is appropriate*.

Govekor dosallepe: It means *go with the redhead*.

Dulok oneh ubbukeh eulu!: It means *stop those ships now!*

Tisvo Meha!: It means *Sweet Meha!*

Keda, Max kovon acu londalul: It means *Enoa, Max needs to breathe*.

Annaxuffo onviteto Meha: It means *Meha's bright shield*

Ufel: It means *love* (a term of endearment in the way one might say baby).

Author Bio

Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.

Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.

Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.

His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) will come to your e-reading devices in Summer 2014 and The Pompeiian Horse in Autumn 2014.

Contact & Media Info

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WATCHING ELIJAH FALL

By Amy Spector

Photo Description

A man looks out from a black-and-white photograph. He is beautiful and shirtless, with a stubble-covered jaw and a hint of what might be a smile. He rests his hand lightly against his chin and cheek. He has clear pale eyes under heavy brows. Lips slightly parted, he studies the one behind the camera with an intimate gaze.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I signed up for this class to get my friends off my back. They've been bugging me to get out and try something new ever since my ex left me—right after cleaning out our joint checking account and half our belongings. Nothing says we're through like a negative balance and missing flat screen...

So I signed up for this photography class thinking I'd learn a few new tricks behind the lens. I wasn't planning on finding this man. He's gorgeous, smart, and so damn sexy I can't concentrate in class. Did I forget to mention he's the teacher? How the hell am I supposed to pay attention to exposures when all I want to do is run my hands over every inch of his taut body?

***The speaker here is a non-traditional student. The class can be taken at a university or community center he just has to be a bit older than the average college student (mid-twenties). Please, give these guys a HEA or at least a HFN. Other than that have fun!*

Sincerely,

Meredith

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: photography, loss of spouse, non-MC infidelity, comfort/healing, no sex, grief

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I also wanted to thank Aaron, who, even when personal tragedy struck and precious writing weeks lost, wouldn't let me quit.

This story is dedicated to E. I'd like to think we will meet again in a different life. But for now, your absence is felt keenly.

WATCHING ELIJAH FALL

By Amy Spector

Chapter 1

I would have sworn I had only just drifted to sleep when my cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. I squeezed my eyes shut tight, easily convincing myself it was a wrong number, relaxing once it quieted. When it vibrated again, I groaned and worked to untangle myself from the sheets in the middle of the bed.

After four months, I had finally started to migrate over to Jason's side. I couldn't help but think that it was a good sign.

As I reached for the phone, I silently prayed it wasn't my mother, or worse yet, work. I might have been able to use the money, but what I needed was a few more hours sleep and, God willing, a short line for coffee when I did finally decide to get up.

I groaned when I saw the screen.

"Hello?" I answered, trying hard to keep the irritation out of my voice, but failing miserably.

"Don't get pissy with me, Mr. Pierce. Where the hell are you? I've been waiting for nearly thirty minutes."

Shit.

"Sorry Nicholas, Jason called me late last night, and I'm so tired I must have turned my alarm off in my sleep."

"Why the fuck would Jason be calling you?"

I let out a tired sigh. "I think it's his new hobby or something."

Nicholas was quiet for several moments before finally telling me to get my butt down to the diner.

"But I'm so tired." I knew I sounded whiny.

"Jacob, sweetheart, it's eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning for God's sake. I've waited longer for you than someone whose pants I want into." I could practically hear Nicholas roll his eyes. "Shimmy your fine ass into a pair of jeans and get down to the diner. We really do need to talk."

If I hadn't already been aware of my best friend's love of the dramatic, it would have sounded ominous.

“Fine. Give me fifteen minutes,” I told him.

“I’m willing to give you thirty,” he said before hanging up.

I decided to grab a quick shower, keeping it cool enough to help wake me up but warm enough to not be uncomfortable. One of the few changes I had made when Jason left, besides canceling his subscription to People and vowing to hit the gym more days during the week than not, was to crop my dark hair short, which made for a quicker morning routine. If I skipped shaving, I would be able to make it in less than twenty-five minutes without even pulling my Jeep out of the garage.

By the time I walked into the diner, I noticed that Robert and Evan had joined the corner booth, and I considered turning right back around. It felt more like I was walking into my own intervention than meeting friends for breakfast. When everyone at the corner booth grew quiet at my approach, I suspected I was more than half-right.

I slipped in, giving Nicholas a kiss on the cheek, the others an apologetic smile.

It didn’t surprise me that it was Robert who spoke first.

“So Nicholas says that Jason has been calling you.”

Of course Nicholas had.

“Yeah,” I said, shrugging, “a couple of times in the last few weeks.”

It had been six times in two months.

I heard Nicholas make an angry noise in the back of his throat.

“You don’t want to get back together with him.” It wasn’t a question. It was always so obvious that Robert was used to everyone listening to him.

“Of course not.” I spoke a little too loudly, and I felt myself blush as people in other booths glanced in our direction. “Last time I lost my television and ended up twenty-eight dollars and seventy-six cents short in my checking,” I said, far quieter this time. “I’d probably lose a kidney a second go around.”

I hadn’t meant to sound so bitter; I was just really, really tired. Jason had gotten into the habit of calling and giving me a drunken recount of all the ways I had fallen short in the boyfriend department. If he had wanted me to fear ever getting my toes wet in the dating pool again, it was working.

I was saved momentarily from the conversation when our waitress approached to take everyone's order. The others had already ordered drinks, having been there waiting for me for almost an hour, and had obviously made the decision to forgo breakfast for lunch, all ordering burgers and fries, except for Evan who ordered grilled cheese.

I thought, rather unkindly, that grilled cheese seemed fitting being that it couldn't have been too long ago since Evan had been ordering from the kids' menu. I felt instantly bad for the thought.

Evan had come into our group only three months back when he had started dating Robert. I had been friends with Robert for what seemed like forever, and there was no argument that he was a good-looking guy, even better looking now at thirty-one than he had been at twenty-five. But Evan was a very young-looking twenty-one, all big eyes and unruly black hair, and it seemed like such an odd pairing. Though you'd have to be blind not to see how much they adored each other.

Perhaps, at the moment, I was a little jealous.

Feeling guilty, I asked the waitress for the same thing Evan was having, and he gave me a shy smile, one I had no doubt won over Robert the moment he had seen it, then continued watching me in the quiet way he had that I found unnerving.

After a few minutes, it was Nicholas who spoke. "You need a hobby, like drag or something." I sometimes found it hard to follow my best friend's train of thought. "Maybe you could take a cooking class."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" The confused look on my face had Nicholas barking out a laugh.

"Since that dick of a boyfriend left, it's like you've been some kind of automaton."

I couldn't hold back my grin. "Automaton? Really?"

Nicholas flipped me off. "You know what I mean. A person can't just go to work and go home to bed and do nothing in between. You need to do something for yourself. And grabbing a meal or two a week with your friends does not count," he added quickly when he no doubt suspected I was about to argue.

I went to the gym too, but I didn't bother to say that. I knew he was right. Since the breakup, I had definitely withdrawn, rarely doing anything that broke from my daily routine. I hadn't even hit a club but once, a night three weeks after the breakup, when the thought of my own company seemed unbearable. At twenty-eight, I was starting to feel too old for that sort of thing. Perhaps if every decent gay bar in town hadn't been so close to the university, the crowds wouldn't have always been so predominantly young.

"I don't know that cooking is my thing," I told him.

"Cooking should be everyone's thing," Robert said, exchanging a glance with Evan. This was obviously not a new conversation with them.

"They're going to be starting photography classes at the Cultural Arts Center," Evan said, his eyes down, running a finger through a ring of condensation left from his glass. When everyone quieted, looking at him, he looked up, quickly pulling a folded flier from his back pocket and handing it across the table to me. "I thought you might be interested."

Robert shot Evan an odd look, and Nicholas just shook his head. "That's already what Jacob does all day long, honey."

That was true enough. I worked in the art department of a marketing firm and spent much of my day shooting product—shampoo, shoes, things that resembled food but were in no way edible—so that it would look good through the lens. The remainder of my day was spent in front of a computer, perfecting what I'd taken. I was starting to lose my passion.

"That's all digital," Evan said, dismissing the concern with a wave of his hand. "These are art classes. Real darkroom stuff."

I looked at the flier then, liking the idea but not totally sure. I had spent a lot of time in darkrooms in college, and even some in high school but, it had been long enough ago that I wasn't sure how much I remembered and wasn't sure I wanted to make the commitment.

"Maybe, I guess." It was the best I could do.

"I don't know," Nicholas said, "I've always heard those chemicals can make you sterile."

"Well cooking classes could make me fat," I countered. The look those words got out of Nicholas had the whole table laughing.

Much to my relief, once the food was served, the topic of conversation moved away from my shell of an existence and on to other things: Nicholas complained about how slow the art museum gift shop counter had become with students gone for summer. Robert talked, about the short piece of fiction he was working on for some magazine or other. Evan, as always, said very little but seemed content just to cuddle close to Robert's side, occasionally running his perfectly smooth cheek against the other man's shoulder. It was nice to watch, if a little depressing.

When we finally stepped out into the early afternoon sunshine, making our promises to meet up later in the week, Evan drew me aside to ask if I thought I might actually take one of the offered classes and seemed pleased with my answer. The instructor was apparently a widowed friend. He declined my suggestion that perhaps we find one that we could take together—it seemed only polite to ask—but said he was looking forward to hearing what I thought.

Surprisingly, he hugged me before we all went our separate ways, and I thought, begrudgingly, that I might have had a better understanding as to why Robert was so taken with him.

As I headed back to my apartment to grab a few hours of the sleep I had lost the night before, I changed my mind, deciding to do a little shopping instead. The weather seemed too nice to waste and, for once in a long time, I felt like taking advantage of it.

Chapter 2

On Sunday, I was feeling better than I had in weeks. While debating whether I needed to bite the bullet and go visit my mom, my cell phone rang. When a quick glance told me it was Nicholas, I silently thanked God for an excuse to put my mother off another week.

“Hey, Nick. What’s up?” I answered, rubbing a towel over my hair.

Nicholas let out an exaggerated sigh. “They had a docent call off, and they need me to cover for her.”

I already knew where this was going.

“I’d be glad to give you a ride,” I told him before he could ask, dropping my towel and starting to rifle through my dresser for something to wear. Nicholas’s car was at the mechanic, again, for God knew what, and he wasn’t expecting to have it back until Tuesday.

“You are a life saver. See you in ten?” he asked, and as much as he tried to hide it, I could hear his excitement through the phone. It was a job he had coveted for more than three years.

“Ten,” I confirmed before ending the call.

I quickly pulled on a pair of old jeans and slipped into my favorite shirt, a soft cotton tee, now faded to a blue that all the women at work said matched my eyes. It was comfortable and just starting to fit snug enough in the chest and arms to make me feel proud of all the work I had been putting in with the weights.

Fuck you, Jason.

After pulling on my socks and my worn brown leather shoes, I grabbed my keys and wallet and headed for the door. Nicholas had always hated the way I dressed. Said I looked like I didn’t really care, though he claimed a well-tailored jacket would go a long way to cleansing me of my fashion sins. I figured today he would be too thankful for the ride to give me much grief about it.

I had met Nicholas my second year at CCAD, the local art college. He was a freshman and regularly modeled for my Friday morning figure drawing class. He wasn’t a nude model—those were all hired from outside the school—but a

student working to help pay his tuition. I had modeled my freshman year as well and had hated it. I'd been thrilled the following year when I'd managed to pull a position working a couple of hours a week in the bursar's office.

I was a photography major with no real interest in drawing and even less aptitude for it, but it was required, so there I was. Three whole hours. Every week. Nicholas was the highlight.

While everyone liked that he could sit still for what seemed like forever and, after a break, was somehow able to magically return to the exact same position, what I loved was that when he did take a break, he would wander around the room, looking at everyone's work, chatting happily with the girls and flirting shamelessly with the guys. He was entertaining as hell. Several inches shorter than my own six foot, with blond hair, gold-brown eyes, and pretty, pink lips, he wasn't half bad to look at either, if a little full of himself.

When, after already having sat for my class on more than one occasion, he walked over to peek at my work for the first time, I wanted to groan.

"You're not very good, are you?" he asked quietly, an almost apologetic look on his face.

I studied my easel a few moments. The too short limbs. The slightly elongated torso. The proportion from forehead to nose, nose to lips, lips to chin. None of them quite right.

"I think perhaps the model was in a horrible train wreck," I whispered back. "It's rather tragic. He would have been quite lovely otherwise."

Nicholas had let out a delighted laugh, all heads turning our way.

We had eaten lunch in the cafeteria after that and had become fast friends.

We had never dated. Nicholas was attracted to big men with even bigger muscles. I preferred my men to come with far less drama. Nicholas would never be that. And me? Well, I was tall, but not outrageously so, and while I had always been in shape, my muscles were not the hulking kind my friend preferred, more the kind developed from playing soccer and being active as a rule. And I was happy with just the companionship after the isolation of having grown up gay in rural Ohio, before moving north to Columbus.

When I pulled up to the apartment that we had shared (before I had moved out to "shack up", as my mother had put it, with Jason) Nicholas was already waiting outside.

“God, thanks so much,” he said, climbing into the passenger seat. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

“Not really. I just was thinking of driving down to see my mom.”

Nicholas grimaced. “Well, good luck with that.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“If you can put it off for another couple of weeks, I’ll go with you.” The offer was more than appreciated.

It wasn’t that my mother and I didn’t get along—we did, more and more as I got older—but my mother had had me young. Sixteen years old to the seventeen years of a father I had never met. It always seemed that, though we aged at the same rate, as I got older our age gap grew smaller. She seemed far younger to me now at twenty-eight than she had when I was eighteen. The real problem was that she had never much cared for Jason, nor him for her. Neither afraid to vocalize it when it was just me and them. And even when I told myself that, with a little time, they would learn to love each other, time just seemed to concrete their opinions of one another.

When the two of us decided to move in together, she had not been happy.

So, when Jason and I had parted ways, I just hadn’t wanted to face her. I was still too fragile and heartsore from the breakup, and I hadn’t been up to facing someone who wouldn’t have been able to hide that they were more than a little pleased.

I had avoided her calls for months.

From the one conversation I had been unable to dodge, she knew Jason and I had broken up. She knew he had moved out of the apartment we had shared. But she didn’t know the details. She didn’t know that he had packed his things on an unseasonably warm February morning. That he had wrapped the delicate, cobalt blue, depression glass vase I had given him on our first anniversary in a newspaper sports section he had pilfered from the neighbor’s recycling bin. She didn’t know that as he gathered the rest of his belongings in our small apartment, I had walked down the street to the diner, trying hard not to think about the kid I had kicked out of my own bed not twenty minutes before.

She didn’t know that she had been right.

Even though I knew less than two hours would have found me sitting outside my mother’s house in Jackson, I grabbed onto Nicholas’s offer, and we

made loose plans for the last week of June. It would be nice to have Nicholas to hide behind. Him, she liked, if only for the fact that he wasn't Jason.

With my Sunday now free, after dropping him off, I decided to hit the gym early. I found it hysterical that both Robert and Nicholas, of all people, thought my new gym obsession was verging on unhealthy. That Nicholas, in particular, was *concerned* about the six pounds I had lost, the ones I was so proud of, actually made me laugh. And Robert? The man could have easily bench pressed his boyfriend. But with melancholy still nipping at my heels, I couldn't agree. I had yet to skip a workout. And, anytime my mind would flash to the twenty year old with the six-pack that Jason had felt was worth throwing away a two-year relationship on, I would find myself there, running on the treadmill, not a half-hour later.

Well, maybe there was a little bit of unhealthy going on.

Of course, my mom wasn't the only one who didn't know all the dirty details of our breakup. I had merely told everyone that Jason had left me, that it was over and I didn't want to discuss it. Much to my surprise, no one had pushed. I did truly feel I was over my ex, but I still found the whole situation humiliating. I was hard pressed not to think of Jason's infidelity as a reflection on my own shortcomings.

That evening, I pulled out the photography class flier that Evan had given me. For the first time, I wondered if my persistent dislike of Evan had more to do with Jason's boy-toy than with Evan himself. Evan had never done anything worse than be young and pretty, and I felt a shot of guilt at being such a hard sell when it came to accepting him into our little group. No one had ever said anything, but it was hard for me to imagine it had gone unnoticed, to Evan at the very least.

I thought for a moment about calling him. I knew an apology was in order. But instead, I vowed to buy him lunch and make my apologies in person.

I ended up signing up for a surprisingly expensive Monday night, beginner darkroom refresher course, opting to pay even more for darkroom and studio access on Wednesday and Friday nights. I had little else going on at the moment anyway, and I felt a small jolt of excitement when it was all said and done.

My week sped by after that. The office was swamped, so I worked a lot of extra hours and still managed to grab dinner with Nicholas on Wednesday.

Much to his horror, I confessed to having been asked and declining a date with the new sales rep from one of the printing vendors used by my firm, when he had asked about the man who he knew had been flirting with me for weeks.

He couldn't seem to understand that my decline was not me hiding away from the world, too afraid I'd be hurt again. But it really wasn't. Okay, maybe there was a bit of that. I knew that putting myself out there would be a risk, but it was a risk I felt I would be more than willing to take when I found the right person.

The fact that I claimed to be looking for something specific, when I couldn't put that *something* into words, did not help my case.

As I had left dinner that night, refusing to believe that Nicholas's hypothesis could be correct, I also wondered at what it was that I was really holding out for and whether I would ever truly find it.

Chapter 3

By the time I entered the Arts Center for my first photography class the following Monday, I had spent a small fortune. Even opting for a used manual Nikon SLR camera, once I added in two lenses, a dozen rolls of 100 speed film and a plain leather case, I had pretty much wiped out what little I had managed to save over the last few months. I tried hard not to think about all the times I had watched my grandfather blow a few hundred dollars on a new hobby only to see the tennis racket, golf clubs, fishing rod or whatever, collecting dust in his garage a few weeks later.

Still, I felt truly excited for the first time in months, having warmed up to the idea a little more with each passing day. Even the shitty weather couldn't bring me down.

The eclectic group of students were pretty much what I had been expecting. Though primarily young, late teens and early twenties, there was one woman around my own age and a couple well into their sixties.

I was a few minutes early and, not much in the mood for socializing, decided to grab a chair up front with the plan to look through the camera manual I had yet to crack open, when a portfolio on the instructor's desk caught my attention. Never able to resist such temptation, I walked over to take a quick peek only to find myself flipping through page after page of the most intriguing black-and-white images. An assortment of candid shots and portraits, they were all beautiful in the realistic depiction of their subject. No soft focus, no overexposure to obscure flaws. Just the rich detail of a fine grain, slow film. Here the imperfections weren't something to be hidden from view but a part of the whole, not something to be obscured but explored.

The complete antithesis of what I did every day.

A man, his shaved head nicked and scarred, stared out at me, a stump of a cigarette smoldering between dirty, blunt fingers. A young girl smiled prettily for the camera, her bruised and scratched legs sticking out from a pale, checked dress. An intimate shot of a lovely man, his head of dark hair pushed back from his heart-shaped face, a dark-haired child in his arms. And, though they both stared out at me with the same deep eyes, smiling a smile so much the same, one face spoke of infinite possibilities, the other of hidden heartbreak. So many images, and each as intriguing in their own way as the others.

It was an extreme close-up of a very old couple, the lines of age worn like badges of honor, that had me mesmerized. The man smiled happily into the camera, the woman with eyes closed, pressed her cheek to his. Her arms around his neck. It was somehow reminiscent of an image that existed of my own grandparents, and no doubt countless others as well. An image where they were unimaginably young, arms wound tight around each other. My grandfather in an army uniform as new and perfect as the love they shared.

The image inexplicably made my heart hurt. But somehow, as I studied that particular photograph, I understood the truth. I had never felt that kind of love for anyone. Not even Jason.

The realization was both devastating and freeing in turn.

I don't know how long I looked at that image, certainly more than a few minutes, before I became aware of someone standing quietly in front of me. I looked up, self-conscious of the gamut of emotions that this stranger had undoubtedly witnessed in my expression, to look into the face of one of the most handsome men I had ever seen.

"They're both so beautiful," I managed to say in lieu of an apology. Whether for being so obviously emotional or for pawing through what I assumed was this man's work, I didn't know.

He only gave me a hint of a smile, studying me intently with pale-green eyes. "You must be Jacob."

I nodded my head and, no doubt, failed miserably in my attempt to smile. He touched my shoulder reassuringly for a moment before politely shooing me away to my desk, giving me a genuine smile of his own.

He introduced himself to the class as Elijah Fall, hopping up to sit on his desk at the front of the room, asking everyone to call him by his first name, as he planned to call us by ours. He wore a black suit jacket over a red T-shirt with dark jeans, and when he crossed his legs to reveal honest to God black Gucci rubber boots, still slightly damp from the rain, I thought even Nicholas would have approved.

"I'm going to make this quick," he said, tossing a stack of saddle-stitched booklets onto the desk of the person on his left, asking them to take one and pass the stack on. "Of course, this is all online." He stopped, seeming to laugh at himself. "But old habits die hard."

“This is just a refresher course, so everyone should already be familiar with at least the basics of film processing, print making and darkroom procedures.”

He looked around the room, seeming to take a mental tally of the attendees.

“We have a lot to go through and only nine weeks to do it. With that in mind, we additionally will only be working on burning and dodging techniques, the use of darkroom filters, and correction of both negatives and prints. Also, if there is time, we can work with dyes, and I can demonstrate hand tinting for anyone who might be interested.”

It was then that the booklets landed on my desk, having traveled around the room. I grabbed mine and, feeling silly, stood to hand back the remaining books. He reached out and claimed them with a quiet “Thank you.”

“Oh, and for anyone in my Wednesday or Friday night labs, as long as I’m free, we can work on any additional tricks you want. Within reason,” he qualified with a grin.

He slipped off his jacket then, laying it over his now closed portfolio, and hopped to standing, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s get started.”

The class went by in a bit of a blur. With the request that everyone shoot a roll of film by the following week, either on their own or in one of the adjacent studios, we skipped film processing and went straight to print making. Elijah demonstrated the mixing of each of the chemicals, grabbing a couple of the younger men to haul the five-gallon buckets and the two older students to measure the water. It had been almost eight years, but the memories came trickling back.

Elizabeth, the only other student around my own age, and I were drafted into setting up the chemical trays in the two trough sinks in the middle of the darkroom.

I tried hard not to notice how well Elijah’s jeans fit his backside as he crouched down to mix the chemicals but failed miserably. When Elizabeth looked over to waggle her eyebrows at me, we both laughed.

Elizabeth and I set up identical tray layouts in each sink. Developer first, used to bring out the image on the exposed paper, stop-bath second, to stop the developing process, fixer third, to set the exposed print, then water to wash all the other shit off. The overpowering white vinegar smell brought back memories of sneaking into the darkroom in college to kiss my first real boyfriend.

Without actual negatives, Elijah walked us through the printmaking review by having the class work with photograms. I tried hard to harness my inner-Man Ray, but sadly everything just came out looking like unidentifiable squiggles.

Elizabeth and I chatted throughout, deciding to grab enlargers that sat next to each other. By the end of class I had learned that she was an elementary school teacher, had been married almost four years, and that we were both in complete agreement that the sound of our instructor's voice was the hottest thing about the man. And that was saying a lot.

Once the lights were back on, Elijah let out a shrill whistle to get everyone's attention. "Make sure you grab your prints. There is another class in here tomorrow, and I can't guarantee they'll be here waiting."

"And," he called over the sound of students gathering their possessions, "fair warning, if you are here early, you will be helping mix chemicals."

After class, Elizabeth and I decided to walk across the street to an all-night coffee shop, each grabbing a cup and taking a seat near the window. Looking back across the wet road to the center's doors, we watched as people spilled out at different intervals.

"So, what's your story?" Elizabeth asked, taking her first sip.

"Well, I work at Blue Stone Marketing, live just west of the gallery district and was bullied by friends to *take up a hobby*." I made quote marks with my fingers.

"Wow, Blue Stone. That's a pretty big deal," she said, and I shrugged.

"So, no boyfriend?" Elizabeth asked grinning.

"And how do you know it wouldn't be a girlfriend?" I couldn't stop myself from asking.

She raised a brow. "Well, you called Fall's voice *sultry*," she made quote marks with her fingers this time, "and the fact you were watching his ass like it was reading the lottery numbers. All that was a bit of a giveaway."

I couldn't hold back my laugh. It was nice talking with someone whom I hadn't known forever. "Yeah, there would be that." I couldn't help but smile, and soon we were both snickering.

"So, boyfriend?"

I'm not sure if it was the fact that she didn't really know me and had no vested interest in my life or that I finally just needed to talk, but I found myself spilling the vault of my secrets concerning the demise of my last relationship and my lack of a life since.

"Well, your ex sounds like a fucking asshole."

I laughed. "You teach second graders with that mouth?"

"Third, and yes." She grinned. "So, four months is a long time, and our teacher is pretty hot."

I shook my head. "Assuming he's even gay, I'm thinking he might be a little too hot." I didn't mention that Evan had said he was widowed. A fact I was finding hard to reconcile with the man. "I'm thinking he's probably a bit out of my league."

"I don't know," Elizabeth said, looking me up and down and making me blush, "you're pretty hot yourself."

I laughed again, burying my face in my arms on the tabletop. "Shut up."

Her whispered *Speak of the devil* had me looking up again to watch Elijah Fall making his way across to our side of the street.

He met my eyes through the plate glass window, and he flashed me a smile, lifting his hand in greeting, before taking a right and heading to the parking lot just north of where the coffee shop sat.

We both waved back.

"If I were you, I wouldn't waste too much time thinking about it. Real estate like that goes pretty fast."

Chapter 4

When I showed up to the first Wednesday photo lab I was a little surprised at the crowd. Most of the students filled the adjacent studio, observing, assisting, or setting up shots of their own. I couldn't help but watch Elijah for a moment as he moved between the three wall-separated enclosures, helping to adjust lighting, read meters, and answer a barrage of questions about this and that. Forcing myself to turn away, I headed in the direction of the darkroom. I had spent an unusually long day in the studio, and though mine was far less claustrophobic, one you could easily pull a van into, I had no real interest in spending my night in one as well.

At the moment, I was more interested in the binder I held in my hand.

After the Monday night class, I had lain in bed, my thoughts drifting to my new instructor and to the photograph of the aging couple, when inspiration had hit. Two in the morning found me digging through boxes in my closet until I found a binder full of negatives salvaged from my grandparents' house after they had both passed away. I had always planned to scan the negatives, still did, but I loved the idea of making prints directly from them.

It took me a moment to find a medium-format negative holder for the enlarger, since the majority of the photos had been shot in 120mm, but after that, it was easy, the chemicals already mixed and the trays already set up.

The only other students in the room seemed to be wrapping up for the evening, a rush project at work having kept me late and causing me to miss most of the lab. Anyone else who might have been there appeared to have already called it a night. I was a little disappointed that Elizabeth was not there to keep me company and wondered if she had already come and gone. I made a mental note to text her, having exchanged numbers that first evening.

Looking through the negatives, I found the one I wanted. It was of my grandmother as a woman in her late twenties sitting on my grandfather's lap. He sat on one of the same painted white metal chairs that still sat on my grandparents' porch the day I had gone off to school. My grandmother laughing, a hand up to playfully bat away the one taking the photo, my grandfather, a wolfish grin on his face.

I had to stumble through making three test strips, a test print in which the image is exposed to photographic paper in narrow strips, each exposure

increasing in length, before I was able to determine the best time for the final print. When I had finally submerged my first true print in the developer, the others had gone, and I was blessedly alone, relieved not to feel the need to rein in my excitement.

I stared at the sheet, bouncing slightly on the balls of my feet, waiting to see the first shadow of the image start to darken its surface. It was like every seventies private detective show I had ever seen.

"I feel like James Garner." The quiet laughter from the direction of the door told me I was no longer as alone as I had thought. I didn't even have to look to know who it was.

I should have been embarrassed, but when I looked over to see Elijah smiling as he approached, I could only grin back. Today he wore a black tie with dark trousers and a vest over a white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up. He looked tired and slightly rumpled, and I found him more appealing in his imperfection than I had two nights before.

"You look tired," I said, speaking the thought before I could think to hold it back. The words seemed too intimate somehow for a near stranger.

He only laughed, running both hands through his hair. "Exhausted."

He studied me for a few heartbeats before lowering his hands and gesturing with one toward the tray. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not." He took a place across from me, standing on the other side of the island sink, just as I lifted the print out of the developer to deposit it into the stop-bath.

He leaned down to study it for a moment before asking how long the exposure had been. The question confusing me at first, the man's proximity making it hard for me to think.

"Twenty-seven seconds." I finally managed to get out before the gap between question and answer became too awkward. "They're my grandparents."

He smiled then, looking up at me. "It's wonderful. Do you have many more?"

"A whole binder." I couldn't hide my excitement.

"And why did you choose to print this image first?" he asked and met my eyes again when I didn't answer right away. There was something about the

way he seemed to study me that gave me the feeling that my answer had meaning far above the sum of its words. "If you don't mind me asking."

I didn't mind, of course, but I didn't want to give him a pat answer that would have normally slipped from my lips. I wanted to give him the real one.

"When I was young, my grandfather kept a copy of this photo hidden in the top drawer of his desk."

Elijah squinted at me, confused. "Hidden?"

"Yes." I laughed. "He kept it hidden in his desk drawer because my grandmother absolutely hated it. Said she looked fat." I used the tongs to indicate my grandmother's stomach. "See? She was four months pregnant with my mother and was just starting to show."

He smiled. "I think she looks absolutely beautiful."

I used the tongs to lift the photograph out of the stop-bath, letting it drip a moment before placing it into the fixer. "I think so too."

"You look a lot like her." The logical side of my brain knew, just knew, that this man was not flirting with me, even as I felt my pulse pick up.

I cleared my throat. "I've always thought I looked like my grandfather."

He looked back down to study the photograph again. "I guess I'd need to see you with a woman on your lap."

I threw my head back and laughed, and Elijah pushed away from the sink with a grin. "Ten more minutes before lights on," he told me, walking backwards, still grinning, hands shoved into his pockets, "then I'm kicking you out."

When I got home that night, I found myself restless. I turned on the television, flipping through the channels to find nothing on but a *Law and Order* rerun I had seen twice before. *The husband with Alzheimer's did it.*

Turning it off again, I grabbed my phone to text Elizabeth to exact a promise that she would be at the lab on Friday. That done, I took a deep breath and, before I could talk myself out of it, called Robert's cell.

"Hey Jacob."

"Hi, Rob. Can I speak with Evan?" There was a shuffling sound and some muffled voices before I heard Evan speak.

“Hey, Jacob. Is everything okay?” The slight confusion in his voice and the genuine concern there made me feel terrible.

I am such an asshole.

I asked him to lunch the following day, and after only a moment's hesitation, he agreed.

We made plans, me promising to pick him up at their house just before noon, finally asking for and programing Evan's cell number into my own phone.

After I ended the call, I undressed and climbed into bed. I laid there for a long while, finally rolling over to study the photograph of my grandparents that I had placed on my nightstand. I was unable to hold back a smile. I loved the image, loved the class and was starting to like Elijah Fall, no doubt, a little too much.

Chapter 5

With the long hours I had put in the day before, I had no problem arranging to take off half a day of work and eleven forty-five in the morning saw me driving to Robert and Evan's house. I was worried that the lunch would be awkward. Evan always so quiet, me, a little too nervous to make small talk. When I was pulling up to the curb at their house, I saw Evan peek out of the curtains, only to then slip out the door, locking it behind him, all before I even had a chance to get out of the car.

I hoped it wasn't a bad sign.

The two of them lived together in a small house in Old Towne East, a historic neighborhood that sat just east of the city. It was a pretty, little Craftsman style house, in cream and varying shades of brown, the wide porch lined with hanging ferns. When Robert had purchased it cheap a few years back, it had been on the verge of falling apart. The entire neighborhood had been. Now it sat among an ever-growing number of renovations, and buying into Old Towne East had become an expensive proposition.

The silence in the car was awkward at first, but eventually Evan asked how I was enjoying the darkroom class, a subject I knew would come up.

"It's going well, and I like it, I think. It's all starting to come back, and I've met this woman named Elizabeth in the class who seems like a lot of fun," I said, stealing a glance at him, and he smiled, pleased.

Once we arrived at a dark little restaurant on Mohawk Street and grabbed a booth, conversation moved on to other things, Evan chatting happily away, giving me a chance to gather my thoughts before finally broaching the subject I had wanted to discuss.

"Listen, I asked you to lunch so that I could apologize."

"Oh." He had obviously been expecting something completely different. "Okay."

I wasn't sure what I had planned to say but somehow, having already told Elizabeth, I found myself sharing the humiliation of my breakup. Evan listened, pale, hands covering his mouth during parts of the confession, hands grabbing at my own at others.

“Listen, Robert doesn’t know all this. Neither does Nicholas for that matter, but I know I have been taking my hurt and anger out on you.”

He nodded his head, but had a look on his face that told me he didn’t really understand.

“I think I haven’t given you a fair chance because all I saw when I looked at you was your age.”

Evan squinted at me. “So you thought me being young meant I was a man stealing hussy?”

I was silent, not sure what to say.

“I’m just giving you shit.” Evan said with a wide grin before slapping the table between us. “You’re forgiven.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “We can be friends?”

“Of course.” He jumped up to lean across the table, pulling me into a brief hug, before dropping back down on his side of the booth and leaning in close.

“You mean a lot to Robert and, while I hate to admit it, even when you were being a complete prick, I still liked you.”

“Why?” I couldn’t understand why he would choose to look past that.

“Well,” he said, pausing to think for a moment, leaning back in the booth and crossing his arms. “I could tell something was going on, here.” He tapped the place on his chest, just over his heart. “I even thought you might have had feelings for Robert.” He held up a hand when I started to say something. “That suspicion lasted for, like, two seconds. Anyway, sometimes I’d see these flashes of who you were underneath, you know, before you’d remembered to be an asshole again, and it made it hard for me to dislike you.”

I groaned, covering my face with my hands, and Evan laughed. “I am such a terrible person.”

“No,” he said, leaning forward to touch my arm, serious again. “I’ve never once thought that.”

We talked about other things then. About Evan’s job at an antique store, walking the floors, opening up cases and answering questions, my job, and about how Robert’s second novel would be out in hardback before Christmas. I fought against the desire to ask him about Elijah Fall. About how they knew each other. About the spouse that had passed away. About whether my suspicions were correct, and he was gay.

As we were finishing up, Evan's cell rang. He stared at the screen a moment, debating, before he answered, shooting me a hesitant look. When I saw he was about to get up, I waved him back down and excused myself to the restroom, giving him a few minutes privacy and me a moment to think. Having finally made my apology for my behavior, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest, even more so because he had accepted it with such grace. That he promised without prompting to keep my humiliation a secret, even from Robert, said even more about him. I sincerely wanted to be the man's friend.

When I returned to the table, Evan had finished his call and was ready to head out. We slipped out the door and started down the street to where my Jeep was parked at the curb, quiet until Evan brought up my photography class again, this time asking what I thought of Elijah.

I concentrated hard on not embarrassing myself, but I knew I blushed and had no doubt Evan had seen it, though he was kind enough not to say anything.

"Your friend's a great photographer," I said, and Evan gave me a bright smile. "I kind of took the liberty of peeking in his portfolio." I grimaced, and Evan laughed.

"Caught, were you?" he asked, and I nodded my head, laughing.

"His work is wonderful. It's like he..." I trailed off, momentarily at a loss for words.

"Like he isn't just seeing the outside," he supplied.

"Yes. Exactly." I wasn't sure why those words set an ache off inside of my chest. "It's like, because he can see everything, he can see the beauty other people can't."

"But you saw it," Evan said, smiling. "I thought you would."

For some reason the words pleased me, and I smiled. "Well, sometimes it takes me a while," I said, and Evan's grin grew wider.

When I stopped to drop Evan off at his house, I retrieved my camera bag out of the cargo area, and he permitted me to take his photograph, my first for the following week's film processing review. I had been trying to get back into the habit of carrying a camera on me, like I had done years ago, without success.

He stood at the top of the steps, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, head tilted, embarrassed.

I took that shot along with another, one where something I said made him laugh. I packed my camera away, declining an offer to come inside to wait for Robert, driving off, seeming lighter somehow. With the rest of the afternoon free, I stopped to pick up some groceries and to run a few errands before heading home to clean and do laundry, chores I would have normally saved for the weekend.

Once all my running was done, I headed out to hit the gym. Since Friday and Saturday were normally too busy, I always worked out on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. I actually entertained the idea of taking off a night for a minute or two, the concerns of my friends ringing in my ears, but even as I knew that my exercise kick had been triggered by my ex, I also knew it was becoming more than a way to outrun my depression.

When my cell phone rang as I pulled into the lot, and a glance showed me it was Jason, I declined the call and left the phone in my passenger seat.

Chapter 6

When I arrived at the Cultural Arts Center on Friday, I noticed Elizabeth waiting outside its doors. I gave her a wave as I crossed the street and we went in together, chatting, our footsteps echoing in the high ceiling of the hall as we headed to the photography classrooms.

I couldn't help but peek into the studio as we passed and was rewarded with a quick glimpse of Elijah standing with his back to me, his folded arms pulling the fabric of an olive-colored T-shirt tight across his shoulders, as he spoke to a handsome man I didn't recognize.

"You look good." The man's voice was hushed, but it carried to where Elizabeth and I stood. "I was surprised when I heard you were slumming it at the Arts Center." The stranger's words and step into Elijah's personal space making my heart sink.

As if sensing our presence, Elijah stepped back and turned his head. Giving us a small smile, lifting a hand.

"You two need a studio? I've got one empty," he said, gesturing to the stall to his right.

"Say yes. Say yes. Say yes," Elizabeth chanted in barely a whisper behind me, tugging on the back of my shirt.

"Not tonight," I said instead, lifting my arm to show him my binder.

"Well," Elijah paused, letting out a breath. "I'll be back and forth again between the two rooms if you have any questions. Oh, and contact sheets or prints you make from those old negatives, I would love to take a look at them." He gave me an even brighter smile then, before turning back to resume his conversation.

"I think he might have wanted you to stay," Elizabeth whispered as we continued to the darkroom.

"I doubt it. Did you see that guy?" I asked, and she just looked at me, confused. "He was fucking gorgeous."

"I don't think he likes him," she shook her head, "but he seems to light up when he sees you."

"I should be so lucky." It was easy to confess things to Elizabeth that I wouldn't have to my closest friends.

Elizabeth just frowned at me. "You're making the whole thing too difficult."

"It's a little more complicated than that," was all I could say, and to my relief she let it drop.

We chose enlargers side-by-side again and, whether because he had expressed interest or because I wanted them for myself, I couldn't say, but I found myself starting to make contact sheets for each sleeve of old negatives. It was a rather boring process where a negative sleeve is laid directly on a sheet of photographic paper and exposed to light, so that in the end you have a single print with small proof images of every negative in a sleeve. With 35mm that would normally have meant thirty-five images per print, but since I was primarily working with 120mm, it was far less.

As he had promised, Elijah was in and out all evening, spending most of his time helping students I did not recognize and that I suspected were from the Tuesday night beginners class. Elizabeth and I found ourselves doing so as well, when Elijah was out of the room and I assumed back in the studio. It was fun, especially when helping the high-school-aged kids that were still so excited about the whole process.

Between chatting and helping out, Elizabeth and I accomplished very little and as the room started to empty, we finally began working on our own projects in earnest, me working with my old family negatives and Elizabeth printing shots of her third grade students from the previous year that she planned to include in letters she hand wrote to each of them, praising their accomplishments and wishing them a happy summer.

I thought that sounded sweet.

Toward the end of the night, Elijah came to stand close to my side, watching as I made a test strip for one of my proof sheets.

"Do you mind?" I found it nice that he always asked, and I told him that I didn't, quite liking the feel of him by my side, the thought making me blush and feel utterly hopeless.

He watched as I went through the monotonous, and totally uninteresting work of making a test strip, before finally speaking. "Would you..." he stopped

as if debating something before continuing and asked if I would be interested in grabbing coffee or something after class. "I may be forced to draft you into helping put away the chemicals, but it would be my treat, and I'd get a chance to look at your proof sheets."

It took me a moment to answer the question, as distracted as I was by the way Elizabeth was less than subtly watching us out of the corner of her eye. "That would be nice."

"Great," he said, smiling before moving away to oversee the other students and eventually heading back to the studio.

"Didn't I tell you?" Elizabeth asked in a whisper.

"I'm sure it's not like that," I told her, not sure at all actually. "We have a friend in common."

"Oh, coffee together is a given then." She rolled her eyes and smirked.

We both continued to work after that, and Elizabeth kept up a quiet but steady stream of conversation, peppering it with the occasional *you two would make the prettiest babies* type comments that I chose to ignore but secretly enjoyed. I was rather nervous at the prospect of having coffee with the man, even if it was only to look at my prints, but worked hard to hide my nerves.

I was only on my fifth contact sheet when Elijah finally came back with our ten-minute cleanup warning before disappearing again.

"You don't have to go home, but..." Elizabeth's impression was a terrible one.

"I heard that," Elijah called back from the other room, and everyone laughed.

When he returned, I was the only one left and was retrieving the last of my prints from the dryer, Elizabeth having left a few minutes before, giving me what she explained the following week was apparently the universal *text me* signal. I had thought maybe her thumbs had gone numb.

Elijah and I worked side-by-side, storing and discarding chemicals and putting the room to rights, chatting about the following Monday's class. When we were finished, we each grabbed our things and headed across the street. Stepping into the coffee shop and being hit with the smell of coffee and pastries, we sighed in unison.

"These labs are exhausting," he said as he studied the late night offerings. "I'm thinking of suggesting they separate the studio and the darkroom labs."

"You do seem to run yourself a bit ragged," I said and watched as Elijah ran a self-conscious hand through his hair.

"God, I'm sure I'm a mess." He let out a tired sigh.

"No," I assured him, "you always manage to look like you just stepped out of a magazine." I blushed the moment the thought was out of my mouth.

He just grimaced and looked embarrassed. He went back to studying the menu, hands shoved into the pockets of a pair of chocolate-brown chinos, head tilted, and I flashed to an image of Evan as he stood on his porch looking down at me. I found it odd that men who were so entirely different in every other way would have such similar body language. Evan with his blue eyes, pale complexion and black hair and Elijah who was all golden skin, caramel-infused brown hair, and pale-green eyes. Eyes that made my heart pound against my ribs when he looked at me. But the tilt of the chin, so identical, told me it wasn't just a coincidence.

"So, how exactly do you know Evan?" I asked, trying to make sense of their connection.

Elijah looked over, slightly surprised. "He's never said?"

"No," I answered, shaking my head.

"I guess I know more about you than you do about me." His comment was accompanied by a look I couldn't read, and I wasn't sure what to say. What had Evan told this man about me?

Elijah was quiet for a moment before answering. "He stayed with me for a while shortly after my David died," he said, watching me closely as if trying to gauge my reaction.

"Your husband?" I asked, even though I figured I knew the answer, and he nodded.

I wasn't sure what else to say. I hadn't lost anyone close to me except for my grandparents, and at that point, I had lived two hours away so, as much as I missed them, their passing didn't affect me on a daily basis. The thought of his loss was heartbreaking.

"I am so sorry," I told him sincerely, knowing the words could never be enough. "Was it very long ago?"

He said nothing more specific than that it had been a while back and nothing more to clarify his relationship with Evan. Not that he was under any obligation.

When we were finally called forward, me gesturing for Elijah to order first, he stepped up and asked for some decaffeinated specialty drink and a vanilla bean scone. I ordered a simple black coffee, and we took our place at the same table where Elizabeth and I had sat the previous Monday.

He asked if he might see the contact prints I had made that evening, and together we sifted through the different images, talking about those that caught our attention. We both enjoyed the image of my grandfather in his brand-new army uniform, hat slightly cocked, aiming a rifle in such a staged shot that even the subject couldn't keep a straight face and the image of him standing, arms thrown over the shoulders of two other men I couldn't identify, a smile that screamed *three sheets to the wind*.

"Your grandfather has a great face," Elijah commented. "Very expressive. Do you know which print you'll make next?"

I looked through the sheets again, scanning quickly to find the image of both my grandparents sitting on the roof of an old Ford. My grandmother in her late teens-early twenties, wearing jeans rolled to the calf and leather shoes and ankle socks. My grandfather leaning back on his elbows in a checked flannel shirt, dark hair slicked back from his face. My grandmother's smile was all teeth, but my grandfather's closed-mouth smirk and his arched eyebrow made you wonder what had actually been going on behind the camera.

"I love that one." Elijah smiled at me. "There's a story going on there that we're not privy too. That look," he said, pointing down at my grandfather, "it's priceless. That look makes it more than a photograph but a frozen moment in time. Or does that sound silly?"

"No, not at all. That's it exactly." It was like he had read my thoughts, and I couldn't help but grin at him. "It makes me wish I could have asked my grandfather what had been going on." He held my gaze just long enough for my heart rate to kick up. Studying him in the brighter light of the coffee shop, I could see that Elijah was a few years older than me, probably in his midthirties, with faint lines that had started to appear at the corners of his eyes. I couldn't remember ever being so attracted to someone in my life. But it was more than his looks. It was the way he seemed to view the world around him.

He finally broke eye contact, looking down to glance at his watch, one of those heavy-looking stainless steel ones with a black face. God, you just never saw watches anymore, everyone used their phone, and for some reason I found it extremely sexy. Maybe because it drew attention to forearms that I had just realized I had a surprising desire to touch.

“Well it’s getting late.” He let out a resigned sigh. “Thanks for having coffee with me, I enjoyed it.”

I thanked him as well, and we walked out to the parking lot in companionable silence. We said our good-byes and when I was about to head to my Jeep, he touched my arm, stopping me. “So, you’ll be in class on Monday?” he asked, but I would have sworn that had not been what he was going to say.

I nodded, telling him I would, and he gave me another one of those sexy half smiles before he let his hand fall away.

I watched him as he walked to leave, heading to some sleek, black convertible parked on the far side of the lot. I didn’t know much about cars, but I knew expensive when I saw it. And that was the crux of the problem really, wasn’t it? Elijah Fall was BMWs and GQ fashion. I was old T-shirts and even older Jeeps. No matter how strongly I was drawn to the man or how much I hoped the interest was returned, how could it be? Even if it was, I doubted I could hold his attention for long. I hadn’t been able to hold onto Jason’s, and he hadn’t been nearly as perfect on the outside or as beautiful on the inside as Elijah Fall appeared to be.

Chapter 7

"It's like riding a bike," Elijah said, laughing from the front of the classroom as all the students tried to load practice film onto the stainless steel reels that had been passed out with developer tanks. He walked around the room, stopping to help with technique, eventually walking back to his desk at the front. I hadn't hand developed film in years but at least when I had, I had developed hundreds of rolls. In the well-lit classroom, I didn't find it too difficult, but I knew that once it was the real thing, when I had to thread my film into the reel in complete darkness, I might feel differently.

"I know that plastic reels can feed a little easier but the steel reels really last, and they do become easier with practice, I assure you." He hopped up onto the desk, and I couldn't help but enjoy seeing him in a tie again.

I looked away and, pulling my practice film free, closed my eyes. I failed at my first and second attempt at threading the film without looking, the film ceasing to move freely, a sure sign that it had been misfed. If that happened during the real thing, the developing chemicals wouldn't be able to develop any parts where the film wrapped and touched other parts of itself and those parts of the negatives would be lost. The photograph ruined.

Keeping my eyes shut, I pulled the practice film free, unable to fight an answering laugh when I heard someone let out an expletive from somewhere to my right, and attempted to load it again. I found it difficult to concentrate with the buzz of the other students, so I focused hard, trying to block out everything around me. Calling on muscle memory from years ago, worrying a lip between my teeth as I had done hundreds of times before, working to not overthink my movement or move faster than my rusty skills would allow me to control the film. This time it loaded without so much as a snag, and I couldn't stop my smile.

It was then that I became aware of the feeling of being watched, like an electric current running up my spine and wasn't surprised to find Elijah looking at me when I opened my eyes. He sat cross-legged on his desk, elbows resting on his knees, the thumb of one hand stroking his lip, seeming deep in thought. I wasn't sure at first if he was seeing me or seeing through me. When he smiled and looked away, I wasn't sure what to think at all.

The classroom had one film-developing darkroom we had toured our first night. It was a small room, roughly six by seven feet, and had a counter that ran

the length of one wall, a sink at each end. You entered the room through a metal revolving door that allowed no light to enter, so once you were inside and the lights were switched off, it was just dark. Not the kind of dark where your pupils eventually adjusted but true blackness. The room was small enough that Elijah had to take the students in small groups of two or three, walking each group completely through the process for loading the film into the developing tanks to the moment they hung the film into one of the negative dryers that lined the wall opposite the counter.

I worked in the printmaking darkroom waiting until I was called, with two others, to develop the film we were asked to shoot the week before. Even with other students in the room with me, once the lights had been turned out, I became acutely aware of him in the darkness.

He verbally walked us through using the opener to pop off the end of our roll of film, using the scissors to cut off the film's lead and after it was loaded onto the reel, cutting it from the film canister spool. I loved the warm timber of his voice, more so now that I had spent time with the man, and by the time he flipped the lights on so we could start developing, I was certain I was flushed.

I had completely forgotten about the importance of temperature and the need for thermometers, and it was enough to bring my focus back to what I was doing. And I tried not to worry the entire time that I would ruin the roll of film I had shot over the last few days.

Besides the images of Evan the day when we had gone to lunch, I had shot photos of Robert and Evan together at the diner Saturday morning, of Nicholas while shopping that same afternoon and even shots of my own quiet street early Sunday morning before restlessness had sent me for a run.

The shots of Robert and Evan had been my favorites. As much as they contrasted one another, they also fit together perfectly.

My developing group was the last for the night, and after we had hung our string of negatives in the dryer and left the room, individually taking the revolving door into the main classroom, I noticed it was late enough that students were starting to gather their stuff. I was sad to see the night end.

I went to my enlarger to pack up my things with no real desire to go home to my lonely apartment. I hoped that I might find a moment to catch Elijah alone so that I could ask him to have coffee with me again, but when I emerged into the classroom, he was not there, so instead I managed to catch up with Elizabeth and we walked out together. She showed me a photograph of her

husband she had printed that evening, a handsome man with a mane of dark hair and a gap-toothed smile. He was quite handsome, and they made a cute couple.

As I opened the door to her car, I shot a look back at the Center doors.

"You should ask him out," she said. She said it in a way that told me she really wasn't trying to push, and that somehow made it easier to confess my fears.

"I really like him." I stopped, debating, finally giving in. "But he was married once, and his husband passed away."

She looked surprised.

"I've known about it since before I met him. Evan told me, that friend we have in common." I looked back at the doors again. "I don't even know how long ago it was."

She slipped behind the wheel, rolling down her window as I shut the door. Reaching out she grabbed my hand through the window. "Maybe the timing sucks, maybe it doesn't. You've got nothing to lose, Jacob." She was so earnest, I couldn't help but smile. I leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, and I bid her a goodnight, watching as she drove out of the lot.

I loaded my things into my Jeep, hesitating a moment before looking around and spotting Elijah's car still parked at the far end of the lot. Taking a deep breath, I headed back into the Arts Center and to the classroom, focusing on slowing my breathing in an attempt to bring down my heart rate. I couldn't remember ever being so nervous. While I hadn't expected the classroom to necessarily be empty, I was disappointed to find Elijah sitting up on his desk at the front of the room, his back to me, the man from that night in the studio leaning in close.

"Come on Elijah, why won't you go out with me? Hell, say the word and twenty-four hours could have the two of us in our own private bungalow, the beach just a few steps away." His voice was almost a purr. "I'm sure you could use the getaway as much as I could."

Even as guilt assaulted me, I stepped back into the shadows of the darkened hall but didn't leave.

I watched as Elijah folded his arms, shaking his head. "Gabe, how many times do I have to say this?"

"I know, I know," he cut Elijah off, standing up straight again and taking a step away. He looked like a man who was used to getting his way. "So," he seemed to be searching for something to say, "I've never really gotten why these sorts of community things are so important to you," he said indicating the room around him.

"And that's just one of the problems," Elijah said with a laugh.

"God, you are so beautiful." The man stepped closer again, and I watched as he lifted up the silk of Elijah's tie, letting it slip from his fingers.

Elijah stiffened, and before I could stop myself I stepped into the room, a bright smile plastered to my face.

"Oh, sorry, Elijah, didn't know there was anyone here with you. Hope I'm not interrupting." Even as I said the words, I didn't stop my progress toward the two men.

The flash of relief that crossed his face was obvious. Elizabeth had been right, Elijah did not like this person.

"Not at all," Elijah said. "Jacob, this is Gabriel Marks. He used to work with my David."

I walked forward, reaching out to shake hands when what I really wanted to do was ask him to leave.

"Anyway," Elijah stood, forcing the man to step further away, "I hate to run you off, but Jacob and I have plans."

"Oh?" Gabe squinted at me, looking me up and down as if assessing me as a possible threat. His smirk told me he didn't find my old Converse and tight black tee much of one.

"So, where are you two heading?" Gabe asked, continuing to watch me.

Elijah flashed me an almost panicked look, as if saying that the two of us having plans was the only thing he had in his lying repertoire. I, on the other hand, was under no such disadvantage.

"We're going to the movies to watch the 1974 *Sugar Hill*." The man just looked at me. "You know, Marki Bey? Zombie revenge? Twizzlers?"

"I'm not familiar," he said, looking less than impressed.

"Really?" I shook my head. "They're like a braided licorice candy. I think they've been around since the eighteen hundreds or something." I smiled at the

man, a patronizing smile like I thought he might have been a little slow, and he narrowed his eyes.

"I know what Twizzlers are." He sounded irritated.

I feigned relief, managing to keep a straight face, even as I saw Elijah struggle to keep from laughing.

Admittedly, it was an old joke, and I was being a bit of a dick, but how often does a person get such a perfect set up? Really?

Elijah managed to school his features before Gabe looked in his direction.

"I like the cherry ones," he offered, trying to sound natural. It needed some work.

When Gabe finally bid us both a good evening, touching Elijah's shoulder lightly before heading out of the room, and the sound of his footsteps had faded down the hallway, I turned to face Elijah.

"You are quite possibly the worst liar ever." I couldn't hold in my snort of laughter.

"And you are a little too good," Elijah said, covering his face in embarrassment but unable to hold back his own answering laugh. "Oh my God, Jacob. I am so sorry to put you in that position. I don't know how, but I'll make it up to you."

"First of all, I grew up gay in rural Ohio. It was a matter of survival to lie well, but I certainly don't make it a habit. Secondly, I already know how you're going to make it up to me," I told him. "Do you have to be anywhere early tomorrow?" Elijah shook his head. "Then hurry up and grab your stuff, we have a movie to catch."

After some debate, Elijah lost his tie in the passenger seat of his car and, leaving it in the parking lot, I drove us both down to a small cinema on Indianola. Being that it was a Monday night during summer break, the odd little theater, located in an older neighborhood just northeast of the OSU campus, was nearly empty, and we were able to claim seats without a problem, even as the movie was already starting.

We shared popcorn and Sno Caps, it having turned out that neither one of us cared much for Twizzlers, in actuality, and we chatted quietly throughout the movie, me amazed he had never seen it before, Elijah amazed that I had seen it

so many times. We both agreed that Diana “Sugar” Hill looked fantastic poured into that sweet, white jumpsuit.

When we emerged back out onto the sidewalk, it was nearly midnight. The breeze blew cool as we made our way slowly down the tree-lined street, and I fought the desire to reach out and take his hand. I wondered what would happen if I gave in, just reached out to twine our fingers together.

I stole a glance his direction and saw him deep in thought, his hands shoved into his pockets. I shoved my hands deep into my own and cleared my throat.

“Want to tell me about that guy?” He didn’t speak right away. “Or not.”

He looked confused for a moment. “Oh, yeah, Gabe.” Elijah waved a dismissive hand. “He worked at the same firm with David and has been after me to go out with him.” He sighed. “He doesn’t take no well, or at all really.”

“And you’re not ready to date again,” I said, and Elijah looked over at me for a long moment.

“I’m not sure.” He was quiet for another moment or two before he spoke again. “It’s partly that, I guess. But it’s more that...” He seemed to be searching for the right words.

“Gabriel Marks is a tool,” I supplied, and Elijah laughed hard.

“Yes. That about sums it up,” he said, smiling and looking up into the branches we were passing under.

After a moment, he turned to look at me again. “Thank you for asking me to go tonight.”

“Thank you for saying yes.” We both spoke quietly, the late hour seeming to require it.

When I dropped him at his car, we managed no more than a moment of awkwardness as we said our good-byes. I wanted so badly to reach out and touch him. To brush away the hair that fell into his eyes and to run my palm over the heavy stubble of his jaw, to press my lips to his. But his words from earlier helped me rein in my own desire. I understood not being ready to move on.

He held my gaze that extra beat that always started my heart racing before saying a quick good-bye and climbing down from the Jeep. I waited there until

he was in his own car and had it started, only then pulling out of the lot, his headlights glowing in my rear view mirror.

Chapter 8

“Could you have picked a day that was any fucking hotter?” Nicholas called out as the two of us pushed open Robert and Evan’s door. He carried a boxed and bowed lemon tart from his favorite bakery, me, a case of beer.

“That’s what the pool is for, Princess.” I heard Robert yell from the kitchen.

“Where do you want this stuff?” I asked, poking my head into the room where I saw Robert making a salad.

“Just take it out to the patio,” he told me, pointing out the small window with a salad spoon, “and then feel free to hop in. Michael is already out there with Barry or Larry or something or other with a y.”

Our friend Michael went through men too quickly for any of us to really learn their names, and as horrible as it sounded, we had all pretty much quit trying.

“Where’s Evan?” I asked, setting the beer on the table so that I could lift the camera that I had slung over my shoulder, and snap a few pictures of Robert in full-on domestic mode. He flashed me a smile, indulging me.

“He’s in the far end of the yard talking to Elijah.”

“Elijah’s here?” My excitement had Robert raising an eyebrow.

“Who’s Elijah?” Nicholas said, standing on his toes to peer out the kitchen window into the backyard.

“He’s a friend of Evan’s, and Jacob’s photography teacher,” Robert supplied, still looking at me curiously.

“Oh? Is there something going on I should know about?” Nicholas asked with a wide grin, teasing.

“No. Nothing like that. We just get coffee together,” I told him. “And we went to a movie a couple of weeks ago.”

Both Nicholas and Robert’s eyes grew big, glancing at one another, and I regretted the confession. Elijah and I had not repeated the date since that night. And, even though neither one of us said the word, we both knew it had been a date. But in the days since, we had grabbed coffee after every lab and class. Not always on our own, sometimes Elizabeth or other students joined us, but we

both made an effort to catch a few minutes alone on those nights—me, showing up early whenever possible to help mix the chemicals, him, sometimes standing outside by my car, for as much as an hour after everyone else had driven away, just to talk.

I was absolutely crazy about him. And even as a little internal voice inside my head warned me that I was going to get my heart utterly broken, I couldn't stay away. I couldn't help but hope.

Nicholas and I slipped outside, dropping our contributions to the cookout onto the table. We both waved at Michael who sat on the edge of the inground pool talking to a cute blond bobbing in the water in front of him. The man turned out to be Terry. Spotting Evan and Elijah speaking intently about something by the back gate, I lifted my hand to wave.

They both waved back, Elijah's smile making my chest tight.

Nicholas slipped off his T-shirt, tossing it on a chair, before throwing himself into the pool, making me have to jump away or get soaked. We had both worn white T-shirts and matching square cut raspberry trunks. They looked great on Nicholas, but now that I knew Elijah was here, made me want to blush, wishing I had opted for a slightly more conservative cut, if not color.

We had been shopping together that morning, and Nicholas sometimes could talk me into doing the silliest things. Of course, matching swim trunks was one of the least ridiculous.

After a few minutes, Evan and Elijah joined me on the patio. Evan taking a chair next to mine, Elijah across from me. Evan introduced Elijah to Nicholas, who greeted him happily from the cool water of the pool.

Elijah wore light aqua shorts that sat just above the knee and a white button-up linen shirt, as always, impeccably dressed, and I had the hardest time not staring at his bare feet and the light dusting of hair on his legs.

After a light lunch, I spent some time in the pool, having grown tired of the curious looks I was getting from Nicholas for having spent the bulk of my time at Elijah's side, and throwing a football around with Michael and Robert in the grass. A few beers had me more relaxed, and I eventually pulled out my camera again, snapping shots of a grinning Michael and Terry, of Nicholas and Evan cuddled together into a single lounge chair like two contrasting kittens from the same litter and of a beautifully shirtless Elijah.

Later on, in the darkened living room, Evan lay on the couch, a beer on the floor at his side, and I sat slumped lazily in a chair. We could hear Nicholas and Robert laughing in the kitchen, everyone else having already said their good-byes. Even though the house was cool, and the temperature had dropped with the sun, the heat of the day, the food and the swimming had made me drowsy.

“So, do you care about him?” Evan’s voice was quiet, and it took me a few minutes to answer.

“Of course, but it’s not that simple.”

“It’s never simple.” Evan said, his eyes closed.

“I don’t suppose it ever is,” I responded.

After a moment, Evan spoke again. “What has Robert told you about me?” he asked, and I opened my eyes, surprised at the question. He still laid there, eyes closed, his arms folded behind his head, and I studied him a moment before answering.

“He’s told me very little.”

“Well,” he started, taking a deep breath and finally opening his eyes to look at me. “My dad kicked me out of the house, you know, when I told him I was gay.” I nodded, not because I already knew, but so he knew I was listening.

“It’s this huge fight. He’s so angry it gets physical. Like it was just me rebelling, you know? So, anyway, I’m on my own for the first time. Ever. And it takes me a few days to figure out what to do. Eventually, I show up at this youth shelter on Parsons in the middle of the night. I’ve got no money, a black eye and what I found out later was a fractured wrist. And there was Elijah.”

At Evan’s confession, I had the strongest desire to grab him tight to my chest and protect him. I wondered if Robert felt that same way every minute of every day.

I watched as he closed his eyes again.

“He was the director there at the time, which, if you listen to him tell it, pretty much meant his whole day was spent trying to collect donations to keep the lights on. Anyway, I’d been on the street for more than a week, it’s starting to get cold as shit, and every bed is taken. And somehow Elijah is able to see past it all. He sees past the black eye, the fucked up wrist, the dirt and the fear. He’s able to see past the fact that at that moment I would have probably pushed

an old woman down the stairs for a fucking sandwich, and he actually lets me sleep in the guest room of his own house.” Evan shook his head and opened his eyes to look at me again. “My father couldn’t even see past me liking boys, and he’d known me all my life.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I said nothing.

“David had died a few months before in a car accident,” Evan continued, pushing to prop himself up on his elbows. “His husband,” he added, and I nodded my understanding. “David had apparently been a big lawyer specializing in family and emancipation law, so Elijah lives in this beautiful old house full of things I could so easily have stolen, but he chooses to trust me.

“He hands me sweats and a T-shirt that are huge on me, points me to his guest room with its own bath, and I take my first shower in days. Afterward, he wraps my wrist and feeds me and then I get to sleep in an actual bed, the door locked because I’m scared to death. And the next morning I wake to the smell of breakfast cooking.”

Evan’s smile tells me that despite the horror of the situation, the memory was a good one.

“When I woke up, I’d forgotten where I was. I think I’m home for a few minutes before I open my eyes and remember. And when I do, I can’t stop crying. Elijah shows up, holds my good hand until I finally pull myself together enough to go downstairs, and he makes me an omelet, gives me some weird-tasting soy bacon, orange juice, and actually makes me take a multivitamin.” Evan laughed at the memory and the sound of it made me smile. “I was seventeen, just about to turn eighteen, and I lived there with him for more than a year, until I had my feet under myself, a job, a place of my own. And as much as I needed him, I know he needed me too.”

We both sat there quiet for several minutes, and I struggled to understand why Evan was telling me this. After a moment, Evan pushed himself up to sitting and leaned toward me, his voice quiet.

“Listen, Robert doesn’t want me getting involved. Says it isn’t my place, and I know he’s right.”

I nodded, though to what, exactly, I didn’t know.

“I knew something bad had gone down with you and your ex. Your hostility toward me. The weight loss you didn’t need. Here you were, this great-looking

guy, and I could tell you couldn't see that. Sometimes we are so damaged that what we need in order to see ourselves again is someone else who can see us too. Not the outside," he said, gesturing up and down my body with his hand. "That's like a puff of smoke. Gone in an instant. But see the things about us that really matter. The things on the inside."

"Evan," I said, my quiet tone matching his, "I'm good. Really. I've made it past that dark place, you know?"

Evan shook his head, reaching over to place a hand on my knee. "You're not the one I'm talking about."

With that, he stood up, heading to the kitchen with its bright light and its sounds of happy chatter, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter 9

When I arrived early to class on Monday evening, I could tell instantly that something was wrong.

Elijah was there, already starting to set up the darkroom chemicals for the evening, dressed flawlessly as always in a dark blue Henley and rust-colored jeans, but there was something about his movements that gave it away. When I approached, his red-rimmed eyes and the dark smudges that sat underneath them made my heart sink.

“Something’s happened.” I fought the urge to touch him, reaching out and pulling back, to reassure him in some way, maybe even more to reassure myself that he was okay.

“No Jacob. I’m fine.” He worked to avoid looking at me, and I had a sinking feeling for a moment that I had done something to upset him, though I couldn’t think of what it would have been, but he waved off my concern.

“It’s nothing.” He took a breath. “I’ve got this in here, do you mind checking to make sure I didn’t forget to turn the dryers on in the other darkroom?” He was still not meeting my eyes, and I knew he wanted his privacy, so I slipped away, leaving my things on the enlarger I normally claimed every week.

By the time class began, he had pulled himself together, seeming to all the world to be the happy, enthusiastic man he had always appeared to be. I supposed that only someone who had been watching Elijah Fall as closely as I had for all these weeks would have noticed any difference.

The class, which normally seemed to fly by, ending way too soon, dragged on, the ninety minutes testing my patience. I just wanted everyone out so I could have a private moment with the man without the threat of an impending invasion by any one of fourteen other people. And though I worried that I had no real right to ask what was going on, at that moment I didn’t give a damn.

Elizabeth shot me a look, the worry on her face evident, and I just shook my head. Her brow wrinkled, but she didn’t say anything.

We covered little that was new, and Elijah broke out the sepia for everyone to play with, but I couldn’t get myself to do anything, just standing there staring

at my enlarger like I had never seen one before. Eventually, I excused myself to spend the remainder of the class sitting on the steps of the Center, watching the occasional car that drove by.

I was still sitting there when the class ended, and students came flooding out, many stopping to ask if I was okay. I told everyone that I had a headache and had needed some fresh air.

When Elizabeth emerged, she dropped down at my side.

“Are you two fighting?” Her question surprised me, but I understood the logic that had gotten her there.

I just shook my head.

She gave me a look I couldn't read before patting my knee and telling me to check on him, that everyone else had gone.

I didn't move at first, just sitting and watching her as she left.

I heard the closing of cabinets and the running of water before I was through the last turn of the corridor that led into the darkroom. He was busy washing and drying his hands, and I had a moment to study the man unnoticed. His slim-fitting, blue shirt was tucked into jeans that sat low on his narrow hips, the silver buckle of a thick leather belt catching the light. In that moment, running a tired hand up the shorter hair at the back of his neck, the longer front that was normally tamed, now starting to fall into his eyes, he was so aesthetically perfect, I had to fight the urge to turn right back around. How could I possibly hope to have any claim on this man?

It was the distressed sound that slipped from his lips that stopped any thought of retreat. I watched as he closed his eyes, sliding to the floor to lean against the center island, knees up, pressing his forehead against the arms that he rested across his knees. Seeing him there, like that, I couldn't stop myself from going to him.

My sneakers squeaked on the floor in my hurry to reach him, skidding the last few inches as I dropped down to my knees in front of him.

He looked up with a start, distress so obviously etched on his face.

“I know you don't want to talk about it. Just tell me you're okay, that there isn't anything I can do to help, and I'll leave you the fuck alone.” I watched him, watching me, and saw him smile.

“You have a rather foul mouth, Jacob.”

“Sometimes,” I agreed.

We were both silent for another few minutes, just looking at each other, before he spoke again. “Sometimes it’s painful to let go.”

“I know.”

He was silent again, those beautiful eyes studying me, and as crazy as it was, I found myself fighting not to say words that I was sure he wasn’t ready to hear, whether I felt ready to say them or not. But before I said anything, before I said any of the million words of devotion running through my mind, he leaned forward, and he kissed me. Not aggressively, but a soft kiss, an unsure kiss, a hand raising to touch my cheek, the warm fingers as gentle and uncertain as the kiss itself, and I melted into him.

He deepened the kiss slightly then, my mouth opening in response, and I couldn’t stop the moan that slipped from me, the desire for him that had been building for weeks becoming an overwhelming need. Unthinking, I reached out to slip a hand into the silk of his hair, drawing us closer and another to touch the skin of his throat. It had been so long since I had felt warm skin beneath my fingers, and this was so much more because it was him.

As we kissed, I could hear little more than the roar of my own pulse in my ears and the squeak of my shoes on the floor. I longed to taste the salt on his skin and smell the lemon that always lingered faintly there from his cologne, but there was only the overpowering acrid smell of chemicals that seemed to cling to every surface, in my nose, in my mouth and the air itself.

And still, the kiss was perfect.

He pulled back then, resting his forehead on mine, our noses bumping. “I forgot to ask if you minded,” he whispered, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I think,” I confessed, a finger playing with the hair at the back of his neck, “I think that I’ve wanted to kiss you since the first class when I looked at your photographs.” I was unable to stop the smile on my lips. “I know that sounds crazy, but I felt like I could see your heart, and as gorgeous as you are Elijah, it’s still the most beautiful thing about you.”

He smiled then, a smile that lit his eyes, tugging me so that I sat, a knee on either side of his thighs, his arms wrapping around me to pull me close. “I think maybe I wanted to kiss you since the day a picture in my portfolio nearly made you cry,” he said in a whisper, his lips moving against mine as he spoke.

We both laughed quietly together, there on the hard linoleum, only the buzz of the overhead lighting to accompany the sound. And in that moment, with the feeling of his arms around me and the texture of his hair beneath my fingers, I couldn't remember ever being happier.

Epilogue

"You're going to make us late. You know we can't be late."

I groaned and rolled over onto my back to see Elijah, standing above me in boxer briefs, just starting to get dressed.

"I can't do this. It's too much pressure," I groused, though looking at the man made it impossible to hold back a smile.

"You can," he said, smiling back at me as he slipped on his shirt, starting to button it.

I sat up against the headboard, the cream sheets that pooled at my waist luring Elijah over to straddle my lap. The feel of his hands on my chest enough to make me forget what we had been talking about.

"You'll wrinkle your shirt," I chided him as I began the process of undoing the buttons that he had just closed. "We don't want that."

Elijah started to object, but my lips on his neck quieted any protest.

I pushed him over onto the mattress, climbing on top of him and taking his mouth, the man always feeling so perfect under me. I raised up again to look into those beautiful eyes a moment before bending to kiss him again. I felt his fingers tangling into my hair, hair that had now grown out into an unruly mess of brown waves. He had only just wrapped his legs around my waist, using his thighs to pull me tighter against him when there was a quiet knock at the door. I could feel Elijah smile against my lips.

"That would be room service," he told me, laughing at my groan.

He let his legs fall, and I gave him one last kiss before hopping up to grab the jeans I had left on the chair the night before. Slipping them on, I walked out to the sitting room to open the door to the hallway. A young man in a pressed, white shirt pushed in a trolley holding several covered dishes, smiling brightly at the two of us when Elijah emerged from the bedroom, now nearly dressed. I gave him my best *why are you not naked* look over the kid's shoulder, and he just laughed.

After accepting his tip, the attendant wished us a good day, and we were left to our breakfast of fruit, eggs and toast.

“They didn’t have veggie bacon,” Elijah said as he sat next to me on the love seat, “but I’ll just have to do my best to endure.” I just laughed. I had never been much of a carnivore, but in the last year, with Elijah’s fantastic cooking, I had pretty much dropped meat completely. That is, except for the occasional White Castle, the fact of which made poor Elijah turn green.

He watched me as I picked at my food. “Are you really that nervous?” he asked, studying me.

I sighed. “Yes. I wish we could switch places. This is so important, and I know you would do such a wonderful job,” I told him.

“I’ll tell you what,” Elijah said with a smile as he stood up to add fruit to his plate, “next time around, I’ll be the photographer, and you can be the best man.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Elijah in his dark tux, standing at the front of the small church by Evan’s side as he made his vows to Robert. Looking at Evan it was hard to imagine anyone happier, except me. Definitely me.

When he returned to take a seat next to me again, I grabbed his waist to pull him down on my lap instead, nearly upsetting his plate of breakfast, and kissed him.

“I think,” I said, pulling away and running my thumb over his lower lip before looking into his eyes, “next time we should agree to both be grooms.”

Elijah gave me that half smile, the one that drove me crazy with wanting him, before he spoke.

“I think perhaps you’re right.”

The End

Author Bio

Amy grew up in the Midwest. She spent far too much of her time in clubs—gay and straight alike—and far too little time in her photography classes. That is until, she met a boy with cute hair and great taste in footwear. Now they live together with a number of small, rather noisy children and a dachshund named after her favorite horror actor of all time. She runs a number of sadly neglected blogs, and even though she has a lovely job that requires her to pick up a camera every now and again, she would still rather be reading.

Contact & Media Info

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WE THE CALARI OF CALAR III

By Wart Hill

Photo Description

A naked man is in a bare room in a spaceship. He is being held up by tentacles coming down from above. They are pleasuring him as well as supporting him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Tentacles. Any creature with tentacles is a desirable creature. Those arms can go anywhere, feeling, grasping, sucking, soft, moist. This was at least what I believed before I met X, who claimed me as his before I even knew I had to leave my homeland and settle in his family's vast, wet land. His species claimed one man from my species every ten years, the joining of a man with tentacles and a human man resulted in peace between the two as the birth of a much longer for hybrid might be the result of the union.

I did as I was told. My family sent me off with great joy, it was a tremendous honor. I was scared, and when X pulled me into his arms, all eight of them, I knew that I would do anything, just anything, to avoid mating with this creature.

This story may contain non-consent, otherworldly experiences, deep, slimy penetration and, believe it or not, definitely a happy ending!

Sincerely,

Favory

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: farming, spacemen/aliens, interspecies, tentacle sex

Content Warnings: forced marriage, dubious consent

Word Count: 5,575

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WE THE CALARI OF CALAR III

By Wart Hill

For Davin's family, it began with the relocation. He wasn't even an idea in anybody's mind at the time—it had been his great-grandparents who signed on to the colony project. The plan being to establish themselves there early, get settled, and reap the rewards of already having their land and their homestead when all the rest of the human race came rushing in—refugees coming to fill up the continents. They were one of many families of farmers who came on that first trip, learning this strange new land, getting ready to help the new colonists when they arrived. It should have been a lucrative business. And it was.

Except...

Davin didn't need a history book to tell him how that turned out—his grandfather, Max, never let him forget how it started, because it started with Max's own twin brother, Alexi.

They were young men then, just touching adulthood. Gladly helping their father in the fields. Helping their fellow colonists set up a small government amongst themselves. Forging a life they could recognize in this strange new world: Calar IV.

They wouldn't know to call it that until one strange night, not long into their first year there. A couple of months, Max had said. That was when the first ones came.

The humans were celebrating. *Celebrating*, Max would emphasize, leaning forward and looking Davin right in the eye, his own blue ones cloudy with age. Nearly blind, the man could still make Davin shiver with a look. Just because he couldn't see didn't mean he couldn't *see*, he used to say. And when he looked at Davin like that, Davin knew he meant it.

Celebrating as though it was something to be proud of. As if we'd succeeded in taming this damned land. And I suppose we had. The land, anyway. The universe? The galaxy? They knew we were here. They knew we were coming here in the first damn place. Max would pause and sip his moonshine—his own special recipe that Davin's father insisted was what was causing Max to go blind in the first place. He would shake his head and look

out the dirty glass of the window beside his hard wooden chair at the night sky and the stars that had once been so unfamiliar to him, but which were the only ones his grandchildren knew, and he would heave a sigh.

Only then, after taking this moment to mourn the Earth no human would ever walk again, would he continue.

They came down from the night sky. Thought it was more of us at first. He'd bark out a laugh at the absurdity. We knew it couldn't be. Last advance ship had landed a month before. And now these lights were coming down not a mile out from where our little shindig was going down. He'd shake his head here, his brow furrowing, his eyes lidded, nearly closed. His shoulders slumped.

Sad.

They came out of the darkness like some sort of nightmare. These great, hulking critters. He'd illustrate, holding his hands up, apart, as if that could adequately convey what he meant. Like some sort of mutant squid. Almost floating, these big... gas bags. Tentacles trailing behind them in the air. He'd shudder. He always shuddered. And Davin, unable to help it, shuddered, too.

They said we were invaders. He laughed. Invaders! As if we could do anything to them. They said they were willing to make peace with us, on one condition. Max would always spit into the fire then, upsetting Davin's father—though he'd stopped saying anything long ago. Then Max would lean forward again and hold Davin's gaze, and he'd finish the story in a low, raspy voice and words that never failed to keep Davin up at night.

They wanted one of us.

And they got one. Great Uncle Alexi volunteered. "We've worked too hard," he'd said. "I'm not letting anything stand in our way."

The history books went into a little more detail, but Davin preferred Grandpa Max's stories. He didn't like the way the teachers and the history books insisted this treaty was for their benefit as well as the Calari's—what the tentacled beasts called themselves, as they lived on the only other habitable planet in the system, Calar III. He preferred the truth Max gave him: That these were nightmares. That going with them was a horror story.

Because that's what Davin had thought the moment he learned of the trade. Every few years, a Calari would come and claim a human man as its mate in the hopes that the unions would result in a hybrid and save the Calari race from extinction. It was an honor to be chosen, the history books said. It should be

every young man's dream to help maintain the good relations between the Calari and the human colony.

Instead, at night, Davin slept restlessly as he dreamed of the things the Calari would do to him if they took him. Tentacles probing every part of his body. They slid into him as the Calari used its own slime to lubricate them, penetrating him and making him cry out in unwanted pleasure as it moved within him. It curled another tentacle around his cock, stroking him to hardness, tugging and groping, winding another around and around his balls in an alluring figure eight, while still another stroked his lips until his mouth gaped open with gasps and moans, then it would slide the tentacle into his mouth and press it deep into the back of his throat.

The rest held him up, cradling him in the air as he writhed in pleasure and horror.

And he would wake to darkness, sated and disgusted.

This, they claimed, was an honor.

For Davin, it was a constant nightmare. He dreaded the day the Calari would come and choose their victims. Personally, he was convinced it would have been better if they had asked for blood sacrifice. Death had to be better than being forced to mate with one of those disgusting, tentacled freaks. Still, the sooner they came, the sooner they chose, the sooner Davin could sleep easy because they *would not* choose him.

Rumor had it they were psychic. They chose their "mates" by feeling their thoughts—just another violation as far as Davin was concerned, and he was determined to keep his thoughts as unappealing as possible. Not that that would be hard—he couldn't stand the Calari. His disgust at the few he'd seen when he was a child, coupled with the facts of their relationship with humans, had festered within him. First they were the monsters that lurked in the dark. Then, as he grew older, they became the enemy. And he would make sure they *knew* how he felt, so they would not take him.

They came out of the darkness like some sort of nightmare.

It was twilight. The harvest was ending. Davin and his siblings were packing the crop of hybrid wheat away in the barn, and soon they would join the rest of the village in the town square to celebrate another successful year.

Gavin, the youngest of the seven siblings, saw the ship's lights. He pointed it out to Eva, the eldest, and she called the others away from their work. It was mostly done anyway, and they closed up the barn and stood before it, waiting for whatever came next, while Gavin ran to get their parents.

Grandpa Max came, too.

And the family stood, waiting to be honored. Davin stood in the middle of the line, the middle child, just nineteen and looking forward to the rest of his life. His posture was different from the rest. They were all relaxed, eager. Except Grandpa Max. Only he and Davin were stiff, closed off, arms crossed over their chests, heads bowed. Davin kept glancing at him, making sure he truly wasn't alone in this. It was a comfort, knowing someone in his family saw sense.

It glided out of the shadows and into the light. A hulking monster. A kraken out of its natural habitat. It looked so wrong, hanging in the air instead of plunging beneath the seas like the squids and octopi that had inhabited True Earth and now existed only in books.

It seemed to study them, though Davin had no idea where its eyes were, then it glided towards his father and mother and they *bowed* to it. As if it deserved honors. Davin didn't try to hide his disgust—it was better for him if it knew, he thought. Then it slid down the line, passing the two girls—Eva and Vane—and pausing before Marvin. Davin froze, afraid again. If his plan worked, it would take one of his brothers. Not Gavin, he was too young, but Marvin was well old enough and Xavier had just turned eighteen. Only Eva, Vane, and Ashlyn, Xavier's twin sister, were safe, because the Calari never took women or girls. Only young men.

As much as Davin didn't want to go, he didn't want his brothers to go, either.

When it moved on from Marvin, Davin let himself relax, relieved even though it meant the thing's scrutiny moved on to him. It hovered before him, tilting its whole body back and forth as it studied him with invisible eyes. Its tentacles writhed around him, and Davin shuddered, memories of his nightmares flashing through his mind, stiffening his cock even as his stomach roiled with disgust.

It stopped, freezing before him, then its tentacles dropped and it slid over to hover before Xavier. Davin stiffened again, fear for his brother replacing fear for himself. But it only stayed before Xavier for a second before it slid back to

hover before him again, reaching out and wrapping two of its tentacles gently around his shoulders.

I will have this, a voice said, echoing and sing-song in Davin's mind.

"No," he whispered.

His parents bowed again. "You do our family a great honor," his father said.

"Honor my ass," Grandpa Max snapped. "It's disgusting."

But no one paid him any mind, not even the Calari. It gently urged Davin forward, guiding him into the darkening night towards the glow of its ship. Away from his family, too afraid to look back and see their expressions—honored, blessed, *happy*. Away from his world. Away from his life.

And straight into his nightmare.

The ship was no surprise to Davin—he'd seen enough drawings over the years, had even seen one in person once, years ago. It was tall and conical with panels on the side that concealed the propulsion system. Davin had never seen one take off, but the Calari had very few secrets from the humans. Probably, Davin figured, because they knew humans were no threat to them.

Inside, there was a globe filled with water in the center of the ship and around it a walkway that led to different doors—engine room, the exit... and a small pod that had been segregated from the globe by added glass. There was no water there, just a chair and a bed. The Calari didn't have to say anything when it opened the door. Davin stepped into his room, glad to leave the tentacled thing behind.

For now.

It went into the globe. There were two other Calari on the ship. One came onto the walkway from another door, spoke (Davin assumed) with the other two and then disappeared again. Engineer, Davin guessed, if such a term could be applied in this case. He didn't even know how the ship worked.

The Calari were strange to watch when they were in the water. Their movements there made sense, unlike when they were on land. Davin found himself studying them, searching for differences between the two hulking masses as they worked controls he couldn't see and set the ship rumbling around them, taking off into space, steering for Calari III.

Prisoner transfer.

His mate—he shuddered to think it, but he had no name for the thing—was a strange brownish-purple while the other was more blue. Its tentacles were longer than the other's, Davin noticed, when they floated briefly side by side.

Then they drifted apart, Davin's Calari drifting over to the window that separated them. It stopped, floating there, tilting its body like a human would tilt its head. *You are comfortable?* it asked.

Davin shook his head. "No," he said, though he couldn't be sure it could hear him. "I'd be comfortable if you let me go home."

It tilted its body the other way, its tentacles curled up towards itself. *Home is our destination.*

"Your home," Davin snapped. "We're leaving mine behind."

The tentacles coiled tighter. *Honor*, it said. *Fate*.

"Disgusting," Davin answered. He had nothing to lose now, and the honesty rushed out of him with a surge of relief. "That's what this is. *Disgusting*. Couldn't you just mate with your women and leave us out of it?"

The Calari let its tentacles drop back down, and its body sank a bit. Disappointment? Davin wondered. Then he decided he didn't care, crossed his arms over his chest and turned away, staring at the sparse furnishings of the room. The bed was bolted to the wall, the chair to the floor. There were no books, nothing to occupy Davin during the trip. Not that he knew how long it would take. He knew how long it would've taken for a human ship, but the Calari were far advanced. Maybe it was like taking an airplane versus taking the train in the old days. On True Earth.

Home.

Davin shook his head and turned back around. The Calari was still watching him. "What do you want?" he snapped, falling back onto the chair. He regretted it immediately; it wasn't even slightly comfortable.

Name? it asked. It seemed more relaxed now, its tentacles floating easily beneath it.

"Davin," Davin said, seeing no reason not to tell it. Besides, maybe if he had a name it would see how wrong this was. Wasn't that how it was supposed to work? Make the victim a person and... And would that work with aliens?

Then again, Davin realized, *humans* were the aliens here.

Sea, the Calari said, breaking through Davin's thoughts.

"What?" Davin asked, wondering what it was saying. Was it saying it lived in the sea? That was fairly obvious—though how Davin was supposed to live *with* it in the sea was beyond him.

I am Sea, it said.

"Fine," Davin said, wishing he could turn the chair around and face away from the tank. He could move to the bed and lie with his back to the window, but he felt like moving would give the wrong message. "Whatever." He shook his head. "I don't care."

But he did. Kind of. He'd never realized the Calari had names. They all seemed like one entity sometimes—a collective of kraken come down from the skies. Some sort of hive civilization. But clearly there was individuality.

He supposed that was a good thing—it would have been far worse if he'd been forced to mate with the hive. One was bad enough.

Sea watched him a few moments more before turning and floating back towards the other Calari.

They left him alone for the rest of the trip.

Davin would never admit it, but the city was beautiful.

Most of it was under the surface of a vast ocean that covered the majority of the world. A few small islands were the only land he saw as they came in for a landing. But from beneath the seas, spires and structures stabbed up into the sky. Gray coral built up into sky-scraping buildings—partially beneath the water for the Calari, partially above for their human victims.

The ship docked under the water, and Davin got to see the vast spread of even more buildings of varying heights clustered and scattered along below. They docked halfway down one building, its bottom hidden somewhere in the dark deep where Davin knew he could not go, and Sea came for him. His little room detached from the rest of the ship and became its own submersible vessel, and Sea steered it up to the surface, where they docked alongside a door that opened on the water, and it led Davin into the room beyond.

It was simple, plain. Only a small sofa, carved from the same coral as the wall, decorated the place. A steep staircase on the other side of the room led up to another floor or down into the water. Davin followed Sea cautiously into the

room, stopping when it stopped and turned to him. It reached out a tentacle and stroked at his shirt. *Remove*, it said.

Davin shook his head. "Why?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Unnecessary.

"And if I refuse?"

The tentacle drifted carefully up under the hem of Davin's shirt, tightening around the fabric. Davin pulled his arms tighter to his torso, but Sea gave a quick pull and the seams tore with a quiet rip. Davin reluctantly let his arms drop and the shirt slipped from his limbs to the floor, leaving Davin bare-chested. Exposed.

He thought about avoiding his pants, but given the ease with which Sea had removed the shirt, he doubted they would prove much of an obstacle for the thing. With a sigh, he untied his rope belt and let his pants drop, toeing out of his shoes and stepping out of the fabric pooled around his feet, trying to ignore the way the cool air played across his bare skin, or the feeling that Sea was studying the hang of his cock with its unseen eyes.

It reached out its tentacles and Davin instinctively cringed away, trying to cover himself with his hands. Sea stopped. Its body tilted in that strange way again, like a squid taking on human mannerisms. It reached out again, and this time Davin managed to stay still, his body stiff like a statue, his cock limp and heavy between his legs as tentacles stroked, cool and slick, along his bare chest and arms and back and—

Davin stiffened further and tried to pull out of Sea's grasp as a tentacle slid slowly around his puckered anus. He clenched his ass, trying to close himself off to Sea's advances, but Sea kept circling the hole even as another tentacle slid around his traitorously hardening cock, and Davin felt himself relaxing into the unwanted pleasure.

He thrust his hips forward, into Sea's grip, a moan slipping through his lips as the tentacle worked into his ass, twisting inside him. He hated himself even as he relished the feeling of that slick tentacle, the tight friction of the one around his cock, the two that toyed with his nipples, suctioning and letting them go.

Davin had had sex before, with men and with women, but no single person could pleasure someone in this many ways at once, and Davin found it hard not to enjoy it.

He let his eyes fall closed, let himself sink into the moment.

He could be disgusted with himself later.

After, Sea left him, going down the stairs. Davin stood, naked, sated, covered in tentacle slick and his own cum, horror and disgust rising in him now that the pleasure had passed. He bent down and scooped what was left of his shirt up off the floor, using it to wipe as much of the remains of the tryst off his body as he could, then he threw it aside. Another reminder of how depraved he had allowed himself to be.

He considered putting his pants back on, but decided not to bother. Sea would likely only rip them off him if it saw he was dressed again, so he left them on the floor as he crossed the room to the stairs. He glanced down them and saw the water didn't encroach on the room below quite all the way; it was about half filled, water lapping at the walls and steps. He wondered if he would be made to go down there for another session, and he hoped not.

It was bad enough in the dry air, he didn't know if he could stand being forced to do it in the water.

He shook his head and turned to go up the stairs instead, taking them two at a time up into a circular room perched on the top of the towering structure. A window set in the wall looked out over the water, shining in the strange light from the moon above. The two suns had still been shining when they'd landed. Davin wondered how much time had passed.

There was a bed in the room as well, and Davin collapsed onto it—it was much more comfortable than the furnishings on the ship had been—and sooner than he thought possible after everything that had happened, he was asleep.

Davin woke to find Sea hovering by his bedside, tentacles waving, reaching towards Davin but never touching. How polite. Davin sat up, giving the Calari a sleepy glare, though he wasn't sure the expression would translate. He still hadn't figured out where the thing's eyes were.

Now for me, it said

Davin shook his head, trying to clear it, still not fully awake. "What?"

Before, for you. The tentacles waved towards the stairs, then towards Davin again. *Now for me.*

It took Davin a moment to understand, but when he did, his stomach lurched, and it was all he could do not to throw up the nothing in it all over Sea. More sex. With this thing. And it was trying to claim their previous encounter had somehow been for his benefit? Sure, it had felt... amazing. Davin swallowed down the threatening bile, his cock hardening as he remembered the feel of Sea's tentacles, the care with which it had caressed him, the force of its thrusts into his ass.

And he thought he understood.

Before had been about pleasuring him. Now it was time for something else.

Fear and disgust and anticipation roiled together in Davin's stomach as he stood and followed Sea down the stairs. He stopped when they reached the first room, but Sea kept going. *I need water*, it said, descending into the half-submerged room below.

Davin took a deep breath, then slowly went down himself.

The water was warm and it felt good on his skin as he sank down into it. It came up to just below his shoulders, and he stopped at the bottom of the stairs, feeling it slowly lap at his oversensitive skin. Sea floated to the middle of the room, turned so that its underside was facing Davin, and spread its tentacles.

Come, it said, *we must try*.

Davin took an unsteady step backward, his heel hitting against the step behind him. He teetered for a moment then fell backward, landing hard on the steps, his head submerged. He choked on water, frantic, panicked. Not thinking clearly enough to get himself back to the surface.

Then a gentle tentacle wrapped around his midsection and pulled him up. He sputtered, spitting water, gasping and retching. Sea held him steady, patiently waiting for him to be done. After a few minutes, when he found his footing and could finally get a full breath, he nodded his head and Sea released him.

Are you ready? Sea asked.

Davin blew out a frustrated breath and tried not to look at Sea. But there wasn't anything else to look at in the room. "Why can't you mate with each other?" Davin asked. "Why us? I don't want to carry your baby."

Sea floated quietly for a moment, then let its tentacles sink into the water and it settled still and quiet. Davin thought it was studying him, and felt self-consciously aware of his naked body. Which was silly, all things considered.

You will not carry it, Sea finally said. Davin held his tongue, though a hundred questions raged through his mind. He would let Sea control this situation. *Our females inject us with their eggs, and our bodies fertilize them and nurture them until they are strong enough to emerge. But time has not been kind to us.* Sea looked defeated, deflated, and despite everything Davin felt pity tugging painfully at his heart. *We need new seed, but our planet no longer has a compatible species.*

“So you thought we would be compatible?” Davin demanded, though his anger was lessened the more he thought about the struggles the Calari must have gone through to survive.

Not right away, Sea explained, *but with enough exposure to the environment on Calar IV... after a few generations. Maybe.*

“So you took us on a maybe?” Davin asked, the anger hot again, fists clenched at his side. “You tormented us without even knowing if it would work?”

We did not want to die.

Davin turned away, started up the stairs.

Please, Sea's voice was quiet in Davin's mind, pleading. *Please, we do not want to die.* Davin stopped, but he did not turn around. *I will take you back After. Whether it works or not. I promise. Please.*

Davin shook his head and continued up the stairs. “I don't want to be your guinea pig,” he snapped.

He slept because there wasn't really anything else he could do.

And he dreamt of Sea.

They were in the water, entwined. His cock was buried in Sea, thrusting into the tight space, smaller tentacles massaging him and gently pulling him in every time he pulled out for another thrust. Sea's larger tentacles were wrapped around him, touching him, suctioning his nipples, thrusting into his ass, coiling around his legs and arms, running through his hair, strangely gentle.

After, they floated together. Sea holding him so he would not sink beneath the water, their bodies pressed together.

I feel it, Sea said, *I feel it starting. We will not die.*

When Davin woke, his body was sticky with cum, his face wet with tears.

He didn't bother to clean himself off, just quickly got up and hurried down two flights of stairs into the water below.

Sea was waiting for him.

Davin swam slowly over to Sea. Sea reached out for him, wrapping tentacles around his arms and legs, even as it floated so that its underside faced him, the little opening where the eggs had been injected did have those tiny tentacles Davin had dreamed of. He must have seen them before. He licked his lips, watching them writhe, anticipating the feel of them wrapping around his cock. It hardened at the thought, and he moved forward, Sea helping him position himself to enter it.

Are you certain? Sea asked.

Davin only nodded, and a tentacle wrapped around his cock, guiding him to the hole. The smaller tentacles reached out and took control then, pulling him into the tightness, slick with water and Sea's own natural lubrication. Davin let out a groan as he slipped inside, relishing the feeling. But he stopped then, buried to his balls in the cephalopod before him.

It was nothing like his dream. Sea didn't move, only lay there in the water, letting Davin take it... *him*, but not reciprocating. Davin bit his lip, wondering if he should say something.

What is wrong? Sea asked when Davin didn't move for a minute.

Davin adjusted his grip on Sea's body, holding them as tightly together as he could so Sea couldn't pull away. "Fuck me," Davin growled.

What?

"Like you did before," Davin said. He ran a hand along one of Sea's tentacles, guiding it towards his ass. "Fuck me while I fuck you."

I do not understand your words.

Davin pulled out a little and then thrust back in. Out, in. "Fuck. Me," he said, emphasizing each word with a thrust. It took a few repeats, but Sea caught on quickly, his slick tentacle pressing into Davin's ass, thrusting in when Davin thrust into him.

And then it was like the dream—tentacles feeling, probing, sliding over Davin's body. Touching him and teasing him, the one in his ass sliding over that bundle of nerves, making him writhe.

Finally, he went rigid, one last thrust sending his cum into Sea's egg cavity to do what it would.

As he collapsed onto Sea's body, he found himself hoping this would work.

They floated for awhile, quiet, warm, Davin resting on Sea so he would not sink. He drifted in and out of sleep, smiling at the feel of Sea's tentacles stroking gently along his body. He didn't cuddle—not with his siblings, not with his lovers. Apparently extraterrestrial cephalopods brought out his soft side.

A little later—Davin wasn't sure how much time had passed—Sea gathered him up in its tentacles and carried him up to the bedroom, laying him gently on the bed and pulling the blankets over him as he shivered. Sea stroked a tentacle across his brow and said, *I will take you home.*

"No," Davin said, not thinking, just talking. He ran a hand along Sea's tentacle and looked up into the gray expanse of Sea's body. "No, I want to see how it turns out."

Certain? Sea asked.

Davin took a moment. *Was* he certain? Could he do this?

Sea waited, patient, kind, willing to take Davin back home.

But how could he walk away now?

He nodded once and smiled. "Certain," he said.

When it came time to name the child—a strange looking creature with the head, torso, and arms of a human, but tentacles writhing from the waist down—Davin felt like an idiot.

"What will we name him?" Davin asked.

Name?

"Yeah. You know," Davin pointed to himself, "Davin." He pointed to Sea. "Sea."

Sea tilted his body to the side, cradling the child in his tentacles. *Sea is not a name*, he said. *It is only what you call me, because we know humans use such things.*

“So what will we call him?”

Sea. As with all the Calari. It is only for humans.

“You all go by Sea?” Davin asked, reaching out to run a hand over the wispy dark hair on his son’s head. “Doesn’t that get confusing?”

It is only for humans. Sea raised his tentacles in an approximation of a shrug, something he had learned from Davin. *It seemed easiest to use a letter.*

And Davin realized. He hadn’t said Sea all those months ago, but C. And he felt like an idiot.

He recovered quickly.

“Well, that may be the Calari way, but humans use names and he’s half,” he said. “So I say we give him a name.”

And from that day on, to the Calari of Calar III, the child was just another Calari. But to his family, he was Alexi.

The End

Author Bio

Wart Hill is a queer Trans man who hails from the wilds of western New York. In 2011, Wart graduated from his university Cum Laude with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in classics, both of which have helped him grow in his craft. Writing has been Wart's passion for much of his life, and he is thankful to have had the opportunity to participate in this event.

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