

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



**LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY**

**BONUS
VOLUME 3**

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Bonus Volume 3

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 Bonus Volume 3.

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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HONESTY *and* ARTIFICE

A person wearing a dark blue hoodie and olive green cargo pants stands with their back to the camera on a dark beach. They are looking out at a turbulent sea with white-capped waves under a heavy, grey, stormy sky. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

An Egan and
Atherton novel

S.H. Allan

————— Don't Read in the Closet 2014 —————

HONESTY AND ARTIFICE

By S.H. Allan

Photo Description

A muscular, dark-haired man lies prone on a sandy beach, waves frothing and swirling around him. He is naked save for a tiny bikini or underwear that is barely clinging to the round globes of his backside. He also has on a small, dark, braided bracelet. If not for a mound of sand beneath his head, his face would be immersed in the water. He appears to be unconscious.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I found him in the edge of the surf one morning, on one of my many solitary treks down the beach. Naked, battered, unconscious—just another bit of discarded flotsam on the sand.

Who is he? How did he get here? Is he telling me the truth? Can I trust him at all? Can I help him—or can he help me? Or maybe we can even save each other...

(I'm very flexible on locale and genre. Ocean-front condo or beach resort or remote coastline or desert island or water-planet or whatever—any would be fine. Contemporary, historical, action/adventure, paranormal, flat-out fantasy—any would be fine. Please no BDSM between the MCs, although abuse or other trauma to either character by someone else, either before or during the story, would be fine but not required. Please no helpless-waif-needing-rescue—these are both strong men. A pronounced sense of isolation at the beginning would be a plus. Also, I enjoy first person POV—but it isn't a requirement. Thanks!)

Sincerely,

Plainbrownwrapper

Story Info

Genre: action/suspense/adventure

Tags: first time, masturbation, past abuse, strong HFN, Alaska, series, isolation, boats

Content Warnings: mentions of childhood abuse, violence

Word Count: 59,133

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Dedication

To Robert Lavigne, an incredible artist and beautiful human being. He didn't hide his sexuality, despite the era during which he was in the public eye. I am honored to have met him.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Allison and Trisha, who were truly there for me throughout the entire process. I literally couldn't have done it without you.

To my sister Renee, and JJ my foster care case manager for getting me through a nightmare so that I could write again. I would never have finished if you hadn't kept me sane.

To Deb, Kris, and Nan for being there at the end to save me from my own angst.

I'm grateful to PlainBrownWrapper for creating this wonderful and open prompt, and for her support and understanding.

Special thanks to the M/M Romance group's Don't Read in the Closet managers and editors who worked so hard to make Love's Landscapes a reality, and the rest of the group members who kept the excitement and momentum going.

HONESTY AND ARTIFICE

By S.H. Allan

Type 1: Offshore Life Jacket

Finding

Finding a body on the beach amid the kelp, sand, and driftwood was not the typical or preferred end to my day. It hadn't been there two hours before when I had passed by on my way to the point to check the traps, so it was a recent and unwelcome addition. I would rather have found a pretty bit of beach glass or a solid chunk of hardwood.

I admit I stood there in the rain for a minute staring at it stupidly. My only excuse was that it wasn't every day that a person showed up on my stretch of the coastline. In fact, it had been more than four years since another human being had graced these shores. Human remains were a little disconcerting. Just their presence disrupted my solitude, yet somehow it emphasized my loneliness.

Embarrassingly, my first reaction, when it came, was fear, and a chill shot through me. What if the thing had been sent as a message to frighten me? Had I somehow been found and now it was time for it all to end? Of course that was ridiculous. There was no need to scare me; I was already terrified and *he* knew it. There would be no warning. I would already be dead. But that didn't stop me from painting a morbid picture in my head, or from a little adrenaline being released into my blood.

Still shaking from my thoughts, I looked at the body which had come to rest in a pile of flotsam just at the wave line. Most of the coast was a mixture of pebbles and crushed shell, but somehow this body was nestled on one of the only expanses of pure sand on the whole beach. It was like a scene from a myth; some godling crawled up the bank following an epic journey only to expire upon the shore. The fact that it was whole without missing limbs was part of the mystery. Numerous feet had washed up on beaches south of this one in recent years, which had generated national media attention, but a whole person?

It was only when I stepped forward to get a closer look that I thought of the body as a man, not just a corpse. I felt a little guilty for my insensitivity, regardless of the fact that there was no one within miles to see my behavior. Senseless death saddened me. If the man had been wearing a life jacket, he might have survived.

The leading cause of death in cold water was drowning, not hypothermia, I remembered *him* telling me. If the initial cold shock passed without the victim

inhaling water, he or she had at most ten minutes before being unable to move. The only way even the strongest swimmer could last was with a flotation device. I pictured this man drowning, unable to move, and I shuddered again.

Judging by the man's skin, still red from the cold, he couldn't have been dead very long. Waves swirled back and forth around him with only a small mound of sand holding his face above water. Wouldn't it be ironic if he were to have survived the harsh and unforgiving ocean only to drown at the beach edge? Reaching down, I pulled away seaweed clinging to his back and neck, and very gently rolled him over. That was when I saw the goose bumps covering his mostly naked body. Was he...? It took a good thirty seconds before I found a pulse, and I was so startled I slipped and one of my knees landed in the cold water. *Alive!*

There wasn't a whole lot of guesswork as to what was wrong. He wasn't shivering, his pulse was beyond slow, his breathing almost indiscernible, and he was unresponsive. He was clearly hypothermic. His hands and face were scratched and he had a few bruises, but the wounds were superficial, and nothing was more critical than his dropping temperature.

As fast as possible, I slid my arms under the man's shoulders and lifted him just enough to drag him carefully and steadily up the beach until we were well above the tide line. It had been harder than I had thought it would be, and when I looked back I saw why. A strap led from his leg to a life vest tangled with what looked to be a pair of slacks and maybe a jacket or shirt, which were in turn snarled with seaweed and driftwood. So he had been wearing a flotation device after all which explained how he had survived his journey. One mystery solved.

I used the hunting knife I always carried to sever the harness from his leg and took another two seconds to cut off the underwear which was the only thing he was wearing. Cold cloth was the last thing he needed against his skin. I dismissed the corded bracelet around his wrist as being irrelevant. Maybe one day he would thank me for saving it. Some people thought baubles were more important than life itself.

One of the most dangerous parts of a life-threatening situation is the rescue itself. A body changed when it was in shock or hypothermic. Blood collected in different tissues than usual, adrenaline sped up the organs, and the heart overcompensated. My mind went back to the time we had pulled Zebudah from the lake and how when she came to, we let her get up and five minutes later she was dead from heart failure. She was fifteen.

I pushed the thought aside. I refused to think about anything other than what I was doing to help this man, because if I stopped to think about it, the possibility that I would be the cause of his death would have nauseated me. That mental place where I was solely focused on the solution and not the danger, where my mind was sharp and my emotions minimal, was what I called survival mode. I had spent a lot of my life in survival mode.

I concentrated on keeping the man alive. The most important thing was to warm him up so I started by turning him on his side and pushing his knees up against his chest to keep him from losing any more body heat. The air temperature was around fifty, fairly warm for a summer evening around here, so I wasn't wearing a jacket, only a long sleeved T-shirt. It was better than nothing, though, so I yanked it over my head and laid it over the man.

He was muscular, and taller than I was, far too big to haul back to the cabin quickly. I probably couldn't even carry him more than a few hundred yards. By then the rain had taken a breather. I reasoned that I could run the mile or so round trip to the cabin in far less time than it would take to drag him there. The best course of action was whatever raised his body temperature the soonest, so I sped back as quickly as was possible on a sandy beach at half tide.

I'm fast but I still had a few minutes to plan what to do when I got to the hut and in what order. Then my mind turned to my usual self-indulgent reverie, and I wondered what had happened to him. Had he fallen off one of the cruise ships that passed by on their way up the Inside Passage? That was a very long distance for his body to travel. He was incredibly fortunate that he'd survived and made it to the island, that he hadn't been swept out to sea.

When I arrived at my tiny shack, I stopped thinking and did what was necessary. It took less than a minute to grab a handful of plastic garbage sacks and a sleeping bag, as well as throw an emergency pack of pellets in the wood stove along with a lit book of matches and a handful of kindling. I had efficiency down to a science. *He* made sure of that.

On my return trip, I again planned exactly what to do and in what order when I reached my destination. I wasn't sure how long the man had been in the water. The island was pretty far from those cruise lanes, but not far enough that my imagined scenario was impossible. A person could stay awake in freezing water for up to an hour. Now, at the height of summer, these waters averaged about 54 degrees Fahrenheit. At that temperature, a person could last considerably longer before even losing consciousness and perhaps hours before heart failure.

Once when I was a child, I had made it nearly two hours in water that was turning to ice around me, wearing only a sweatshirt and pants. Those had been controlled circumstances where others had kept an eye on me, but no one was allowed to help me as long as I was still breathing. The experience had been terrifying, but I had survived with no deleterious effects. Being fit helped in survival, and this man was fairly buff, plus there was the fact that these waters weren't even close to freezing.

He was still lying where I had left him. No big wave had rushed in and carried him off. I didn't quite understand my feeling of satisfaction—I loved my solitude, didn't I? The thought of someone invading my private world nauseated me. I rid my head of the thought, and looked at the man's chest to see if he was still breathing. He was, so I pulled my T-shirt off him and began to quickly dry him off.

Then I heard a kind of whistling gasp followed by silence. I lifted the T-shirt to see the man's chest had stilled. A quick check with my ear over his mouth confirmed the fact that he was no longer breathing; his lungs had stopped even as I bent over him. Damn. I fell to my knees, rolled him onto his back, and began CPR.

The powers that be changed the specifics each year, the ratio of breaths to compressions, what to do first, etc., and I had no idea what the latest instructions were. The last time I had trained, rescue breathing had been eliminated for the first few minutes, but what if that had changed? What if I did it wrong? My worst fears had become reality. Survival mode had disappeared and doubts had flooded me. I had become complacent and out of practice, and no longer had any of the survival skills I had been taught.

No. No way was I letting this man die if there was anything I could do. There had been too many needless deaths in my life. I told myself to stop with the self-recrimination. Each CPR method must have worked to some extent or they wouldn't have kept teaching it to people, and I had been trained to do each method properly.

I continued chest compressions. *Focus. Assess.* Why had his heart stopped? Was it caused by a massive rush of blood to his extremities because I moved him, or did it just slow to a stop because his body had been cold too long? As I continued pushing on his chest, I got into a rhythm as my locked arms moved up and down.

Usually CPR was used to keep someone alive until help arrived, but there was no chance of that happening here. He needed my expertise. I knew that the

chance of success with CPR was many times higher when the responder knew what he or she was doing, and I did. Hopefully if I got his heart beating again, the rest of his body would wake from its stupor and keep it going.

Although thirty more seconds of me pumping his chest assured that at least some oxygen was getting to his tissues, he still wasn't breathing on his own when I checked. "No! Who do you think you are, coming to my beach only to up and die when you get here? That's extremely rude." I tended to resort to gallows humor in emergency situations. Sometimes it was the only way to get through them.

I continued compressions. Was the skin beneath my hand warmer? Maybe my own hands were just getting really cold. It was possible that he was too cold for his heart to start working again, so I paused long enough to grab the sleeping bag and fold it over him. Only my arms passed the fabric to touch skin as I restarted CPR.

"Don't you dare die on me. I will take that very personally." My voice sounded rusty and grating, it was so ill used. After another minute of CPR, I pulled the bag back a little to check for signs of breathing. No. I got back to it.

CPR was exhausting, even for a fit man like me, and I was already beginning to flag. If I weren't so stubborn—and an optimist about most things outside of my own situation—I might have given up by now. This thought was spinning through my head, when I thought I felt the man's chest move. My fingers were shaking as I held them over his lips. Air. He was breathing, but he was still much too cold.

Quickly, I spread out the sleep sack and layered it with plastic bags for more heat retention. The man was big, but I lifted him without too much trouble and laid him on the pile. I strewed another layer of plastic bags over him before folding the other half of the bag over and zipping it up.

Then I contemplated how long it would take me to drag him back to the cabin to the heat of the fire, assuming it had caught. I really didn't know if there was enough heat still emitting from his body to fill the bag and keep him warm enough until then.

The only thing I could think of was to warm the bag with my own body, so I unzipped it a little, slid between the sheets of plastic, and lay over him, covering him almost completely. His skin was so cold against mine, I would have thought he was long dead if I hadn't just checked that he was still breathing.

"I haven't seen you around before. Do you come here often?" Holding a nearly dead man was awkward even if the man wasn't awake to notice. I had to entertain myself somehow, if only to distract me from the situation. I pulled him up a little and wrapped myself around his body.

"This is a first for me. Usually the other guy is more responsive." A bigger fabrication was difficult to imagine. I hated lying and avoided it unless it was absolutely necessary. However, making stuff up when talking to a nearly dead man was probably not a big deal.

We lay there for a few more minutes, wrapped in the bag as his body leeched heat from mine. He thankfully continued to breathe. "Don't get any ideas." I was probably losing it since it felt perfectly reasonable to talk to an inert body. Although it was inappropriate to even think such things, it didn't escape me that it took a man almost dying for me to be this intimate with someone.

Finally I felt he was warm enough to survive the journey back to the cabin. I climbed out and zipped up the bag around him, after making sure the plastic bags were again spread evenly over his body. Despite my efforts so far, the man's skin was still icy cold, and I knew he wasn't out of danger, not even close. A thread of fear worked its way down my spine. *This man will not die. This man will not die.*

I reached into the bag and checked him again. He was still breathing, and his pulse was easier to find this time with its slow but steady beat. A surge of relief lessened my anxiety a little.

The survival rate for people who have received CPR wasn't very high, but most of the time it was performed on people because they had suffered a catastrophic event in an already broken body such as cardiac arrest in an older man with heart failure and diabetes. Victims generally were elderly or their bodies were giving out, and CPR could only do so much.

But this man was clearly in good shape, and if he had only succumbed due to the cold, he might be okay. Although it had seemed like forever, I had only been doing CPR a few minutes, and had begun within seconds after his lungs stopped. His brain had continued to receive oxygen without a break. The man looked fit and hardy, so I had reason to believe he might be fine, and hopefully wouldn't suffer any permanent neurological damage.

The sleeping bag had a head flap, and I used that as a handle to drag the man back to the cabin. Once there, I pulled the mattress off my bed and put it in

front of the stove, then laid the living mummy on top of it. The fire had caught so the room was fairly warm, but I put more kindling and a couple of logs on it to get it blazing.

After that, there was nothing left to do, and I became jittery as the adrenaline wore off. I figured less than half an hour had passed since I first found him lying on my beach, and yet it felt like hours. Every minute detail was burned into my memory.

Part of me welcomed the intrusion of another person into my self-imposed exile, but my isolation had become familiar if not comfortable, like an old sweater that was scratchy but kept you warm and dry.

The thought of the man fully awake and expecting me to have conversations with him like a normal human being, was enough to make me dry-heave. Food was the last thing I wanted despite the late hour, but I forced down a glass of water to quiet my stomach before returning to sit on the mattress next to my patient.

I was grateful he was unconscious for now. Talking wasn't my strong suit. There had been few opportunities to speak growing up. When I first faced the real world, I was oblivious to how stupid and ignorant I sounded, how my lack of appropriate education presented me as a backwater rube, and more than that, how I had purposely been left ignorant and isolated. It took me years before I became confident enough to speak around adults. How would I talk to my visitor and not sound like an idiot?

I pulled back a corner of the sleeping bag to get a better look at him. The man's dark hair curled a bit at his face and neck, and I pulled a tendril away from his brow. It was softer than I expected, not coarse like mine, and I suppressed an urge to run my fingers through it. Instead I found a watch cap among my things and put that on him to keep in more body heat. I sat back, but my eyes strayed again.

He was good looking, strong boned and masculine, and he made my heart skip a beat. He was maybe a little older than my own thirty-four years, probably upper thirties, and he had smile lines around his eyes and mouth, softening his masculine, stubbled jaw.

His skin was unblemished and free of scars, his teeth straight and white. I had noticed earlier that his hands were neither callused, nor scarred, and the nails free of the striations that might indicate poor nutrition. (It was important

to note such things even in the midst of a life or death struggle. Small observations could save your life.) This man had not spent his life in the muck and mire of the backwoods. The signs indicated someone affluent and well-bred, or at least living such a life. What could I possibly have to say that wouldn't expose me as an ignorant yokel?

In the nine years since I had... left... my childhood... domicile, I had spent most of my spare time schooling myself, making up for the education denied me. Everything was interesting, and I gobbled up knowledge like pancakes. (There's really nothing better than pancakes, except maybe fry bread.)

I earned two degrees by correspondence. I read the classics and made a dent in the *Guardian's* top 1000 list. A few years ago, I even sold an article to a national journal, anonymously of course, but someone had deemed my words worth reading. I was proud of whom I had become, but how would this man feel?

Looking at him, I realized that what he might think of me mattered more than I thought it should. Perhaps it was because I was so drawn to him, maybe because he was the first person other than a couple of clan folk I had even seen in four years.

Here was a strong, brawny man, turned helpless by the forces of nature. He was a victim, in danger, and for the time being, was helpless without me. I couldn't remember the last time someone had needed my help, if ever. It was both terrifying and appealing to have someone finally depend on me.

"What will you say to me when you wake up?" Understandably, he refrained from answering, which was probably for the best at this point.

When I went for supplies every three months or so, I picked up a large stack of newspapers *Dzóox'*, always accumulated for me between trips. I never wanted to appear ignorant or stupid again. But it had been four years since I had last had a real conversation, and I had never been particularly good at having one to begin with.

How would I come across now? Maybe if we just wrote notes to each other he wouldn't notice. But I knew my solitary education and lack of proper socialization had made me stuffy and bombastic in my writing. Instead of a hayseed, I would come across as a windbag.

As I sat there navel gazing, the man started to show signs of life. They were minor at first, a twitch or two, then a tremor and another, until finally he was

shivering so hard he was moving across the mattress. I tried to steady him, but it was impossible without injuring either of us.

Finally I treated it like a seizure and just removed anything potentially dangerous from his vicinity and sat back. His shivers were so violent, it was as if he were on a boat in a hurricane. Although it was terrible to watch, it was actually a good sign. It showed that his body had warmed enough that it was trying to heat itself.

A few minutes later, his head moved a bit, and I sucked in a breath as his lids lifted, revealing startlingly deep, dark eyes. He turned his head a little as if looking for something, but it was obvious he wasn't actually aware. Within the sleeping bag, his hands pushed against the fabric, and he started thrashing feebly when he found he was trapped.

It took me a minute to free him with all the wriggling, but I managed and pulled most of the plastic bags out of the way before loosely re-covering him with the sleep sack. He wasn't trying to go anywhere; it was more like he was having a nightmare or a fever where he was struggling against some unseen force but was trapped in the covers.

The comparison was further emphasized when he started flailing and mumbling through chattering teeth. "No, n-no. I'm d-drow-n-ning. St-stop." He pushed the covers off. "It's s-so d-dark... c-cold, s-s-someo-one h-help-p me-e. I'm-s-so-c-cold-d."

With those words, he looked at my face, but his eyes weren't focused and he obviously didn't know where he was. He was weak, though, and I was easily able to pull the sleeping bag around him again. He kept trying to fling it off and get up, but he didn't have the strength to stand, let alone fight me.

My body heat and the warmth from the stove helped, but he still needed to be covered; his skin was still chilly. After a while, his struggles slowed, though he continued to shiver fiercely. His eyes slid around the room, and he ducked something invisible that he probably imagined flying at him.

"Shh." I sat comforting him, crooning nonsense and humming soothingly while gently rubbing his back as he clung to me and gasped. It felt insanely good to hold someone in my arms.

When it came, it was the screaming that undid me. High-pitched cries of pain filled the room as feeling came back to his extremities. That was so hard to take, sitting there, not able to do anything as the man scrunched his eyes and shook, howling through clenched teeth.

If he had been at all lucid, I would have given him pain medication, but as it was, I didn't dare let him have even a sip of water lest he choke. My kit held only standard first aid supplies, no morphine injectors or IV bags to rehydrate him and lessen his pain. I felt powerless.

It had been a long time since I had felt that way, and a long time ago, I had vowed never to again. Much of my childhood was spent defenseless, hurting, and scared; that was horrible. But I wasn't a child any longer, and it rankled that I could still experience those feelings. I wanted to scream myself.

Eventually his cries died down and his shivering slowed until he had a moment of stillness between each one. I continued to hold him until he fell asleep, at which point I got up and covered him again. My own muscles burned when I stood and stretched because I had been in one position for so long, holding a man who was experiencing such violent symptoms. I was exhausted. Rescue and recovery was hard on the responder as well as the victim, and it was well into the night by now. I had been at it for hours.

I put a big pot of water on the stove to heat while I went about preparing the house for the night. The weather on an ocean beach in the northern Pacific is rough, and it's necessary to bring as much as possible inside, tie down anything that has to remain outside, shutter and latch windows and doors tightly, and check ropes and bolts to make sure they're tight and secure. Yes, a lock on a deserted island was probably overkill, but I was nothing if not paranoid, another thing I learned from them.

It took me long enough to finish my chores that the water on the stove was almost warm. I filled a bowl with cold water from the water container which I used to clean myself of sand, saltwater and sweat. I then dressed in loose nightclothes. My nausea had retreated and been replaced by hunger which was sated with some leftover salmon and bannock.

My thermometer assured me the man was no longer hypothermic, although his core temperature was still too low. He really needed a hospital but that wasn't possible right then. It was up to me to make sure he recovered safely.

Cold water was fine for me because I was used to it, but the man needed to be bathed in water that was a little warmer, tepid not hot. Too much heat applied directly to the skin would be dangerous. When the water was lukewarm, I used a little to wash out the bowl I had dirtied, then poured the remainder into it. I gathered a washcloth, towel, soap, and the water, and sat down beside the man again.

He barely moved as I opened up the sleeping bag, although he shivered once. He lay on his side, his knees pressed to his chest as I had left him. I washed his back first, and then his arm, shins, and face. When there was no more exposed skin to clean, I laid him out flat on his stomach and began on his lower half.

It was hard not to stare as I bathed him. His body was exquisite under my fingers, his muscles firm but yielding. When even his toes were clean, I rolled him onto his back. It was hard not to feel I was violating him by looking at his body, but I found it hard not to. DaVinci had never painted a more beautiful man, nor one so well-endowed. I really had no frame of reference, but I had always thought the Vitruvian Man was a little lacking in that area.

As I continued to bathe my patient, I couldn't help but notice the firm contours of his chest as the water trickled across the grooves in his abdomen and down his sides. I had never seen another man naked before, at least not in person. Boys, yes; we were frequently forced to stand unclothed and unprotected in order to toughen us up. But we were not men. The one time I had touched someone in any kind of intimate way, clothes had remained on, and hands had roamed only briefly where eyes couldn't see.

With such limited experience I could hardly make a scientific comparison, but I was hard pressed to imagine a better looking body. When the man shivered, I realized I had stopped my ministrations to stare. When had I become so obsessed with a man's anatomy?

Sure I was gay, and despite my past, was perfectly happy about it, but besides porn (which I got through mail order packaged in plain brown paper with a generic label as there was no way I would let Dzóox' see that) I had never drooled over anyone before. This was ridiculous and I felt mildly ashamed. I quickly but carefully finished washing him before covering him with the sleeping bag while I washed his hair which only took a few minutes.

The sleeping bag was now filthy, and I threw it in a corner to wipe down in the morning, and I slid the man between the sheets on the mattress. He was shivering again, so I piled all of my blankets on top of him and stoked the fire in the stove. By that point, I could barely keep my eyes open, so I crawled onto the armchair—the only other seating in the whole place was a stool—and covered myself with my jacket.

For a moment, I watched the man. His back was to me as I had wanted the heat on his front and so had positioned him facing the fire. He was quiet, and I

could hear him breathing, which was good, even though he still wheezed a bit. But he was alive, and I had done all I could for now, so it was time to let go and close my eyes. Within minutes I was asleep.

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Fighting

Midmorning the next day, I heard him wake up before I saw him move. I had only been dozing since there was a stranger in my home, and the change in his breathing was enough to pull me from sleep. Well truthfully, it was the coughing. The movement of his hand toward the fire poker, though, was much too obvious, so when he tried to leap and swing at me, I was there to catch him as he fell.

“Well shit.” He looked more annoyed than scared. “That didn’t go quite as planned. And fuck that hurt.”

I eased him back into a sitting position on the mattress and got my first look at his face awake. People always looked different when they were asleep. Their muscles relaxed, their faces went slack, and the overall look was softer. Now that I saw him alert with open eyes, it occurred to me that I was completely wrong when I thought he was good looking. No, he was drop-dead gorgeous, even with the mild scratches marring his skin.

“The least you could have done was try to stop the poker and let me pretend I fell as a result.”

I snorted. “Next time.”

He coughed a bit. He was still breathing heavily, and I was a little concerned about that, but it made sense if he had swallowed seawater.

“Where am I? Who are you?” The energy he showed when he first moved was already gone, and he looked like he was about to pass out.

“An island. I live here.”

His eyes narrowed then blinked like he was dizzy. “Could you be a tad more specific?” He rubbed an arm. He had to be in a lot of pain.

“It’s remote. I’m the only one here.”

“What do you mean?” The look he gave me almost made me laugh. Almost.

“No one else lives on this island.” The paleness of his cheeks was worrisome. “Maybe you should lie down.”

“That was my plan.” He sort of collapsed into a heap, and I rearranged the blankets over him before putting the kettle on to heat. “I was going more for the graceful but macho, ‘I’m just going to lie down now’ kind of thing rather than

the 'I'm going to collapse into a pile of goo,' though." He grimaced. "What the fuck happened? How did I get to this 'island' you say I'm on?"

"You washed up on shore."

"Aw crap." He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "I did? I seriously washed up on shore like a piece of driftwood?"

I nodded. For someone recuperating from nearly dying, who didn't have the energy to stay upright, he was insanely alert. I was reassured that he would hopefully be one of those who survived CPR without any harm at all. It did happen, although it could be years before any neurological damage showed.

"So you're a modern day Robinson Crusoe and I'm, what, Friday?" It was pretty clear he had never read the book. "Movie shipwrecks have been done to death. Can you come up with a new scenario, one the buying public will want to see?"

What? The guy didn't make any sense. I sat back in the chair because he was almost making me dizzy.

"I'm not thrilled with this scenario. I want to try something else, preferably with a lot of people and a lot less sand." He stopped talking long enough to stretch his arms out. "Where—fuck!" His face went taut as he blanched and breathed through his teeth for a minute. "Why do I hurt so much, Crusoe?"

Crusoe? Perhaps I had cracked a rib or two. Broken bones and ripped cartilage were pretty common with CPR when done imperfectly. Regardless, it was really too long a story to go into at that point. He was clearly nearing the end of his ability to function and needed to go back to sleep, so I tried to cut the conversation short. "Too many questions for now."

He glared at me again. "I need to know..." He rubbed his eyes again. "Damn. Why am I so tired?"

The kettle was beginning to steam, so I figured the water was warm enough. Last time I went to the village, Dzóox' had stuffed a bunch of packets of hot chocolate mix laden with dried marshmallows in one of the boxes of supplies. I didn't like things floating in my beverages, especially slimy white things, so I had plenty to spare, and I made up a cup for him. It smelled okay. "Drink this."

He took the cup from me and sniffed it suspiciously. "What is it? Is it safe?"

I shook my head, surprised. Saving his life wasn't enough? Now I had to prove I wasn't trying to poison him? This man would do *him* proud. I took the

cup back and had a sip before handing it to him again. "If I'd wanted to kill you..."

"Sorry. I'm not thinking clearly at the moment." After taking a sip he made a face. "Wow, that's sweet."

"Best way to get calories into you right now."

"I'm not hungry."

"No problem. Drink."

He laughed at that and finished the cocoa quickly. While he drank, I got him a cup of water, too, and made him drink it all. When I tried to give him more, he pushed my hand away, then lay back down.

"I don't even know your name. I'm Eric, by the way, with a 'C.'" *Eric*. "I kind of like the 'K' spelling. I don't think it's quite as common, but then it really wouldn't be me, would it? Crap, I'm babbling."

"Eric." The name rolled pleasantly across my tongue.

He nodded and shifted, adjusting the blankets. As he did so, a wide band of skin at his hip was exposed. My eyes followed it to the blanket edge, at which point my imagination took over. "And you are?" He moved again, covering up the silky flesh once more.

Distracted by the thought of him naked under that blanket, I answered his question. "Boaz." Damn. I hadn't meant to tell him that. I would rather put up with that silly nickname, since if he didn't know my real name, maybe no one would connect that weird man he met in the middle of nowhere with the guy from that court case a few years ago. It wasn't a name easily forgotten. I watched him to see his reaction.

He blinked. "Bo as? As what?"

"As in the Bible." All of our names had been biblical, and not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Mary. We all had been given heavy old school names like Tishbite, Hukkok, and Misrephoth-maim, no joke. Boaz was rather pleasant by comparison.

"Oh shit. You're not one of those right wing-nut bible thumpers are you? Just my luck to end up on a desert island with an extra from Deliverance. Crap, what's your name again?" Apparently the name actually was easy to forget.

Not sure what Deliverance was, and not fond of his assumption, I just schooled my features. "Boaz." Rarely was my name spoken aloud, and when I heard it, I was flooded with memories—ones best forgotten.

“Shit. I’m sorry. There I go again being an ass. I swear; this isn’t like me. I’m not usually rude.”

Was he a little unnerved by me? Huh.

“You don’t look like a Boaz, although I don’t know what a Boaz should look like. Is that where the city in Wyoming got its name? Bozeman? Bo-azman.” I didn’t know, but it didn’t matter because he kept going. “That would be kind of funny. Bo-az man. The hick castaway from Montana. I guess you’d have to be from Montana. And a hick.”

That really wasn’t a picture I wanted associated with me; it was too close to the truth.

Maybe Eric saw my expression because he looked like he knew he had said the wrong thing. “I mean, not that it would occur to me that you were a hick or anything. The only person I ever knew from Montana, well that I know that I knew because really, how often do you know where someone is from? Anyway, the only person I knew from Montana was a redneck named Duke, like Bo Duke from that show with the cars. I think Duke is a rather ironic name in general.”

He laughed then looked a little surprised at himself, again followed by an expression of chagrin. “Not that being from Montana makes you a hick. I mean, I’m sure there are lots of great people who come from Montana: philanthropists, scientists, patrons of the arts. And not like living rustic makes you a hick, or that being one means you’re not a great person or anything.”

Fortunately his ADD method of communication moved on without requiring comment from me because I had no idea what to say to any of that.

“Boaz. It’s an interesting name for an interesting man.”

He had no way of knowing I was anything more than dull. Then again, I supposed living on a desolate island alone was a little out of the ordinary. I frowned but he didn’t appear to notice.

“I’m trying to think if I’ve ever known someone called that. I don’t think so. Well, pleased to meet you, Boaz, although I personally wish it had been under better circumstances. Maybe I’m dreaming.” He massaged his forehead. “I feel like crap, like I was stuck in a cement mixer for a week with a caseload of rocks. I think I could sleep for a month.” Yawning, he pulled the covers closer. “I have a lot of questions but I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.” Another yawn. “Shit, I should call... Fuck, who should I call?” His brow furrowed.

“No phone.”

“What? You don’t have a phone? Really?”

I shook my head.

“Not even a satellite phone?”

“Nope.”

“But how do you—never mind. I’m too tired to think anymore.” His head flopped back down on the pillow. “I figure you haven’t tried to kill me, and that you may have even saved my life. I’m sorry I took a swing at you.” Another yawn.

“But you can understand where I’m coming from, right? It was a bit disconcerting waking up in your bed.” That presented an interesting image. “I need to know what’s going on. But first I’m going to take a little nap. Just... just please be ready to really answer my questions when I wake up, okay?”

I smiled but he was already out.

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Frivolous Flights of Fancy

When I came back from my morning chores, the man was sitting up on the mattress looking decidedly more human and alive. He wasn't coughing, either. One hand was using the little poker to stoke the fire, and the other was clutching a blanket around him.

"There you are. I thought maybe you'd abandoned me. Like maybe only one person can be on the island, kind of a *Survivor* epilogue or something, and now that I've arrived, you can take off, and I'm stranded here until the next poor sap washes up on shore."

I just blinked at him.

"Are you ready for questions yet? Because I've got a gazillion of them. First off, how do I get out of here? How do I call for help? Got any flares? Do I have to use smoke signals? You have a raft you built from logs or something? How far away from civilization are we anyway? Where are we exactly?" It was fascinating how he didn't wait for an answer before asking the next question.

"One at a time."

"Oh, sure. Okay, uh, first question: How do I escape this... this... island in the middle of nowhere?"

"Escape?" That was weird and yet oddly close to the truth. My legs felt weak so I sat in the chair.

"I mean get out of here. When can I leave?"

Maybe I could avoid answering for now. "Anytime."

"Okay... How?"

I pointed at the door.

He narrowed his eyes. "How do I get off this island? You said it's an island, right?"

"Yep."

"Can you give me a little more detail?"

I thought for a moment. "It's about two point two square miles, forested. Uninhabited."

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it out. "Yes, I know, except for you. What I'm asking is for more information about how to get off the island."

Not a lot of options there. My stall tactics weren't working. He was certainly persistent, but I supposed that was to be expected. I would have been too. "Swim. Hitchhike."

"Stick out my thumb and hope a boat goes by."

I shrugged.

"Anything else?"

"Helicopter."

"You have a helicopter?" That was said with appropriate skepticism.

"No."

This time there was a little growling with his sigh.

"But the Tlingit kwáan next island over have a float plane." I fiddled with a frayed edge of the chair arm. I didn't like being so indirect—it wasn't me—but I needed to annoy him enough that he changed the subject. I wouldn't lie to him, and I didn't want him to ask the questions I couldn't answer, at least not the way he wanted.

Wary, he paused for a moment before speaking. "Who has a plane?"

"The kwáan, a clan of the Tlingit people. I would tell you the name, but it's too hard to pronounce. The village is Yáxwch'."

"And that's easier to say?" He sighed. "Fine. How do I get in touch with them?"

"Phone."

"But you don't have a phone."

I shook my head.

"Are you being obtuse on purpose?"

My lips conspired to smile without my permission, but I got them under control quickly. They were also demanding to do other things that really weren't appropriate with someone I had just met.

Eric was clearly exasperated. He would be too frustrated to ask questions any minute now. He glared at me. "You must get off the island somehow. This

pile of magazines is only a couple of months old.” He pointed to a stack on a small shelf near him. “The treads on your boots are barely worn.” I had laid them by the fire and he held one up.

“And you left the tag on this blanket that has the date the thrift store priced it, which was just in March.” Huh. A tag. Dzóox' told me it was an extra she was getting rid of. “So unless you just arrived, and I don't get that newly moved in feeling for this place, there is some way you restock.”

That surprised me. “Observant.” That was a desirable quality in a man. *Stop it.*

“I make my living by being observant.”

That was the opening I had been looking for. “What do you do?”

“No, no, no. Don't change the subject. How do you get your stuff? Do you go get things or does someone drop it off?”

Smart man. “I take a boat.”

“Whose boat? Yours? You have a boat?”

Hell. I would have to answer now. “Technically the bank's.” Not really. I had paid the money; I just didn't want to go in person to sign the papers. The glare I received was almost chilling. Fine. “Mine.”

“Finally.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, his beautiful, thick, dark hair. I was really drawn to that hair as were my fingers. “So how much do you want to take me to the mainland?”

“Not very much at all. Last time I went was less than a month ago.” No one would expect me for at least another couple of months.

“I meant money. How much cash do you want?”

The snort just erupted from me; I couldn't help it. I traced his body with my eyes as I tried to think of where he could possibly be hiding money, and the thought of the only possible place it could be made my groin grow warm.

He narrowed his eyes. “I have plenty of money, just not here. You can take me to a bank as soon as we get there, and I'll give you the money, I promise.”

Like I could trust that. Like there was a bank in Yáxwch'. “I don't need money.”

“Well what do you want then? A cake? A skateboard? Maybe a phone? More weapons and guns?”

Guns? I felt the blood drain from my face. Well that was one way to change the subject. Unfortunately it was worse than the original one.

“Yeah, I saw them. When you’re lying on a mattress on the floor, the area under beds and bookshelves is at eye level.”

I had strapped holsters to the undersides of the furniture so those guns couldn’t be seen standing up but I could get to them easily. I hadn’t thought of someone lying on the ground.

“By the number of weapons I can see from this one spot, I’m guessing you have an arsenal hidden in this place. Are you planning for World War III? It’s like you’re some crazy—”

“I’m *not* crazy.” Oh yeah, sore spot there. “You can barely stand up. How did you figure all this out?”

“Well you left the tin from the cocoa out for one thing, and I have a sweet tooth, so I’m kind of riding a sugar high.” He grinned. “But in addition to the four handguns you have hidden under the furniture, the painted saw blade over there has a few of the teeth missing on one edge making it safe to hold before throwing. By the way, really? A painted saw blade? Rather gauche, don’t you think? It really doesn’t fit with the natural rustic thing you have going here.

“Anyway, the ‘star fish’ in that three dimensional seascape you have on that wall have only four points, and from here, they look like dead ringers for, what are they called? Throwing stars, I think.” Shurikens was the technical term actually, although his term would do. “Again with the painted metal? At least those go with the beach theme, but there is plenty of legitimate art out there that would fit in here just fine. Like the carvings you have. This one on the shelf here of the rodent and the face? It’s exquisite.”

Exquisite? That was one of my frivolous flights of fancy. It wasn’t much more than a simplified carving of a shrew, almost an impression really, that I had made out of a piece of Pacific yew that had washed up on the beach. The wood was a little difficult to work with, but I had been able to fashion something reasonably identifiable and sanded it to within an inch of its old life so it was very smooth.

But it was still boring. I tried to see what Eric saw. On a whim, I had carved an abstract basic line drawing of Shakespeare’s face into it, almost taking up the whole surface. The disproportion of the image to the size of the piece made the squiggly lines look random. You had to move it around to see the likeness. A professional sculptor I wasn’t.

Eric had already moved on. "...not to mention you carry a huge knife strapped to your leg. On the same shelf as the carving, there are shot gun ammo boxes with labels that don't match the contents. Sorry, I snooped. The—"

"I get the point." Locating and identifying weapons was not a common skill, and I wasn't sure how comfortable I was with him being so savvy. "Why did you think to look for weapons?" I wonder if he'd searched through my go bag and found the weapons there. I would have to check later when he wasn't looking and make sure everything was there.

The point of a go bag was to be prepared for any anything. A typical one was an easily carried backpack stocked with emergency supplies like a flashlight, Mylar blanket, and food rations. For me, "prepared" meant that right beside the first aid kit and water filter, were a gun and ammo.

Actually, you could do without the filter in this part of the world. The water was all clean, cold, mountain run off, or strained well-water cleaned of bacteria by years of sand and silt. But I wouldn't feel safe without weaponry. Sometimes it made me sick that I thought like that. But not usually.

Eric was still talking so I needed to pay attention. I would have to check the bag later. "Part of my job. Keeps me safe. Some of my... let's call them clients, are less than savory."

I tried to remember what I had asked him. The man frazzled my brain.

He continued. "I don't know why your stuff doesn't freak me out, but somehow you don't come across as dangerous." Only to someone like Eric who wasn't dangerous himself. Someone with my training would see me for what I am. "But you don't get to change the subject yet again. You're way too good at that, by the way."

What was the original subject again? Oh yeah. It was time to come clean. Maybe it would make him mad enough to stop talking for a few minutes. "You're not getting the boat yet."

He stood up, only swaying a little and looking rather annoyed. "Why the hell not? Are you keeping me prisoner on this island?" Nope, anger didn't make him stop talking.

"You can leave any time."

"I can't leave without transportation!" Oddly, his look wasn't fury, just exasperation. A normal man would be glowing red by now.

“Not my fault you showed up.” I was being a jerk, and I knew it. Fear does that to a man sometimes.

It kind of seemed like Eric couldn't figure out whether to charm or strong arm me. He stood for another minute or two before he finally sighed and sat back down. He looked up at me and smiled. Charm it was then. His smile was so beautiful that he was probably used to getting anything he wanted with it.

“I can see I'm not getting anywhere. There must be something you want or need.” He gestured around him. The disarming grin on his face was kind of a “Hey, we're friends here, you can be honest with me” kind of look. “You obviously don't like living around people, you're in complete isolation. You can't possibly want me here. So what is it?”

He directed that sassy smile at me. I had to admit it was kind of sexy. “There must be something you want... or need...” His voice turned a little sultry. “What can I do to show you I need your... help?”

No way to miss that innuendo, not with that expression. More heat shot to my groin. Was he playing me? Was my attraction that obvious? My emotions were under my control, though, so I didn't think I let my desire show on my face. Maybe it was my mannerisms. Maybe he could just tell I was gay and lonely.

“There's nothing.” I stood up and moved to the kitchen area in the corner. My face wouldn't have revealed anything, but there would be no mistaking my arousal. It was mystifying how I knew his words and smile were fake, designed to get me to do what he wanted, and still I wanted him more and more.

“Come on; tell me how I can get you to help me. Let me do something for you, give you something. Everyone has their price.”

That took care of my erection. Carefully I composed myself again and turned around to face him. “I don't.” Actually, I could be bought with one thing and just that thing alone: the removal of the threat to my survival. For that, I would do just about anything including, no, especially, leaving my refuge. But that was an impossible task so it wasn't worth thinking about.

He looked skeptical.

“I live in this place, alone, without electricity or running water, and you doubt me?”

That sunk in and he deflated. “Then what? I need to get off this island. I have a life out there.” He gestured toward the beach outside. “I can't stay here.

Tell me I'm wrong, but it doesn't look like you can afford to support me, either, Crusoe. And I'm not going to contribute money if I'm being held captive." For a moment I thought I might be seeing the real him.

I tilted my head and looked at him. "It's about trust." I wasn't fond of that nickname, either.

"Okay..."

"I can't risk you leaving. You might tell someone I'm here." My mouth had run dry. The reality of how dangerous he could be to me sunk in. It wasn't about a physical threat from him; it was something far greater. "That can't happen. I need to be able to trust you."

He surprised me when his face softened instead of him exploding. "Why? I mean why is it a problem that people know you're here? Did you do something? Are you on the run? What are you so afraid of?"

Another man might have insisted he was trustworthy, or become afraid at the thought I was a wanted criminal. I had rather imagined that Eric would be one of those people. Yet he wanted to know why I was scared. Something loosened in my chest a little, but we were not at that level of surety yet.

"We're running low on water." I grabbed a couple of the empty five gallon water jugs and headed out. I heard him calling after me, but I ignored him and headed out to the well.

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Feasting

The trip to the water hole took about five times longer than it should have because I was struggling with what to do about Eric. Of course I couldn't keep someone hostage on the island. That was not only illegal but immoral.

All I had in the world was my knowledge and my integrity. I would give up the first in a heartbeat if it meant I could survive, yet it was the only thing keeping me safe. The latter was the only thing I had that mattered to me, and I wouldn't give it up for anything.

This time when I returned, the man had straightened the place up a little; he'd rinsed out his mug and put away the cocoa. The mattress was back on the bed against the wall, and he was sitting on it in a pile of blankets looking a little woozy.

"You okay?" I walked over to him and tried to feel his pulse but he pushed my arm away. The thought that he might up and die on me after all frightened me a little.

"I'm fine, Crusoe, just pushed myself a little too much."

That nickname was really irritating, but in the interest of peace, I kept quiet. "You didn't have to do anything." It was my fault that he felt he needed to. He probably thought he had to ingratiate himself to me to get what he needed. That might be his *modus operandi*.

Eric shrugged. "The mattress was taking up most of the floor space."

He was right. The cabin was only one room and it was a very small one. I went and got him a cup of water and made him drink it all followed by a second.

"Thanks." He leaned back against the wall. The fact that he didn't say much was probably proof he wasn't feeling well. Was he experiencing side effects from oxygen deprivation?

"Do you want some ibuprofen?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"I think you should lie down again." He had to still be in pain. Not only had the hypothermia done a number on him, but the waves probably threw him around, too, not to mention he fell off a boat. No telling how far the drop was. Then there was the whole CPR thing. But I let it go.

He rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Nurse Nightingale." I hoped he wouldn't start calling me that. Crusoe was infinitely better.

It was easiest just to ignore the name, and I sat on the ground near his feet. "Look, I'm sorry; what I said was wrong. I'll take you to Yáxwch'. I think you're still a little too weak right now to make the trek to the boat, and we should go when there's plenty of light left in the day, so we'll leave first thing tomorrow."

Perhaps my words were confusing, more likely he didn't believe me, or maybe he was just too tired. His body was still recovering. "That sounds good." He then eased himself down and pulled the blankets up to his neck. "I'm just going to rest a while."

"Okay."

He was asleep within minutes. I made a stack of peanut butter sandwiches and left his on the table. I just needed to get out of there and get my head back where it belonged, not dwelling on a seductive man with an enticing smile. That wouldn't be easy. I wasn't even sure it's what I wanted. I hadn't fantasized in a very long time, and Eric was really attractive.

The next couple of hours were spent combing the beach for hard driftwood to carve and softer, larger pieces for firewood. It was important to leave wood where it had been for ages so the ecology wasn't affected too much, but new logs coming in were fair game. By checking at low tide every day, I got a good selection without seriously harming the environment.

The haul was plentiful as I went much farther around the island than I had in a while. It was nice to see something different for a change, and I took some time to enjoy the different rocks and tide pools. The ocean was smooth that day and soothing.

At one point I thought I saw something reflected out on the horizon, but then it was gone. I didn't like the idea of a boat coming in close enough to see me, but I had probably just been imagining things, so I went back to my beachcombing.

Two of the logs I found were too heavy to drag by myself, so I had to go back and get rope to haul them. It took several trips to get everything I found. The muck on my shoes squelched as I climbed the stairs to my door. As usual, I was thankful for the iron boot scraper I had splurged on and installed a couple of years before. The house had been so much cleaner since then. Yet I was painfully aware that it was probably filthy compared to what Eric was used to.

He was reclining on the mattress, reading a paperback from my little bookcase. Living on the remote island made it hard to get reading material, but each time I went over to Yáxwch' for supplies, Dzóox' included a stack of books with the other things. I brought her the books I had read, and left a list of subjects I wanted next. I trusted her to pick out good ones, and she always did a great job.

The book Eric was reading was one of my favorites, Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*. The travelogue was hilarious, more so given my background and skills. I found it entertaining and joyous to read the naiveté of people approaching tamed wilderness as if it were dangerous uncharted territory. It left me wishing that my introduction to the wild had been as positive, not quite so terrifying.

All of Bryson's books left me thirsting for something beyond my empty island, and I hungered to travel. Sometimes when I read about a dangerous encounter a person had while trekking the world, I thought I was a coward for preferring to live in isolation rather than risk death.

Fortunately, I didn't have time for such musings because as soon as I walked in, Eric was jabbering again. I worked on making the adjustment from my quiet solitude as I dumped the armload of hardwood by the chair.

"Hey, Crusoe. Found some firewood?"

He probably was talking about the wood for carving, but it didn't matter. Hopefully he wouldn't chuck any into the stove. "Yep."

"So did you mean what you said before I took my nap?" He sounded eager, and I liked how his voice resonated, although I wish I heard it a little less often. "Do you remember?"

No way had I forgotten. The thought of him leaving the island, knowing my name and where I was, made my stomach heave. "Yeah."

His shoulders dropped as he finally relaxed. "Thank you. I know it's hard for you to trust, but I promise I won't tell anyone about you. Your secrets are safe with me. You have nothing to worry about. You believe me, don't you?"

No, not the way he spoke so easily and glibly. "Sure." The light was still bright outside, deceiving as to the time, the result of living so far north, and I watched the pattern it made on the wall as it shimmered through raindrops. The rain was peaceful, not constantly trying to talk to me.

I watched his reflection. He looked like he was going to say more but then he left it and moved on. "Can I ask more questions? I have a lot. Most aren't

any of my business, and you don't have to answer those, but some are pretty relevant, and I really would appreciate a straight answer, if you don't mind." That award-winning smile came back, and this time it didn't look so fake, like maybe he was being friendly because he wanted to be, not just because that was the way to get the answers he sought.

"Shoot." I turned around to face him.

He chuckled. "Nah, you'd be aiming before I could even grab a gun, I bet." No, if he tried anything, he would be bleeding out before he even moved his hand. "No. You'd have shot me already."

Although the idea that I would ever fire a gun at him made me queasy, the fact that we'd shared the same thought made me smile.

"It's nice to see you smile." I didn't know what to say to that. Compliments made me uncomfortable. Instead of responding, I leaned against the window, the solidity steadying my nerves.

"So my first question and, I think, a rather important one is, why am I naked? Not that I'm complaining, mind you, I just prefer to be conscious during these things."

I was not going there. "You're not naked, you have a bracelet on."

He narrowed his eyes.

"What? You're wearing it." Eye-rolling really did nothing for his otherwise splendid looks. I figured I should probably tell him so. I didn't.

"Thank you for pointing that out. Why am I naked except for a cheap bracelet?"

"You had underwear, but I had to cut it off."

"And why is that?"

"Because you should always remove cold, wet clothing as soon as possible."

"You're being difficult again. Is that a habit of yours?"

"Sorry. You beached that way."

"I beached. Like a whale."

I shrugged.

He squinted one eye as if to say that was a ridiculous word to use, then moved on. "Okay, so to clarify, I wasn't wearing any clothes when I washed up

on shore? Just me in my birthday suit, perhaps a little seaweed for decoration, maybe even a starfish in my hair? Not that I'm accusing you of anything, but I'm finding this hard to believe. I went in the water fully clothed, and last time I checked, fish don't have fingers to undo buttons." No they didn't, but he did.

"Food first." There had been a few crabs in the trap when I checked it that afternoon, and I set about preparing them for dinner.

"You can talk while you're cooking." He stood up and adjusted the blanket wrapped around him but for a moment it all hung out. I was pretty sure it wasn't intentional. I got the impression he was just so comfortable in his own body, nudity didn't matter and he didn't even notice. "For future reference, where's the bathroom? I couldn't find one so I used the bushes. I'd prefer not to have to do that again."

"Latrine is outside behind the cabin, up the slope a little."

His eyes bugged out. "Seriously? No toilet? Are you kidding me? Are you living this way on purpose? It's barbaric." He pulled the blanket tighter around him and stumbled over to the armchair. I watched to make sure he didn't go down in the process but he made it okay.

Once in the chair, he shook his head and looked at me. "Sorry, that was uncalled for. I'm just not used to such, uh, rustic accommodations." He looked a little sheepish. "This whole situation is a little unsettling. I'm not usually quite so impolite. I prefer to make people happy." The smug look returned. "I'm *very* good at making people happy."

I had to force myself not to picture how he could make me very happy. I was becoming a pervert. "What are you used to?"

"Solid gold fixtures, fountains of champagne and chocolate, diamond windows, platinum furniture, you know, standard fare." He laughed. "Yeah right. No, it's just that I'm a city boy through and through. Never liked camping. I prefer to travel abroad than into the forest."

The room was quiet for a moment while the water was boiling.

But my new friend was apparently not good at quiet, so soon he piped up again. "So you were going to tell me why I'm naked."

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "You probably got confused and took off your clothes."

The blush on his face was kind of alluring. I really needed to stop looking at him and focus on the cooking. It was hard though. It had been so long since I

had seen someone so handsome. There were probably good-looking men in the village, but I really never saw anyone other than Dzóox' and her sixteen-year-old grandson who carried the boxes down to the pier. Someone always saw me when I was still far out and by the time I got close, only she and the teenager were there.

“Confused? I’d have to be really confused to take off my damn clothes outside. I like being naked but I like being warm and alive better.” I turned around to face him.

“Happens sometimes with hypothermia. People start hallucinating and remove their clothing.”

He blanched. “Hypothermia? Really? That’s serious. Shouldn’t I be in a hospital?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t take me.”

The water was taking forever to boil. I began to kill the crabs anyway by destroying their two nerve centers from their undersides, one in the back, one in the front. There’s no reason to boil a creature to death when you can kill it quickly and painlessly seconds before it would have died anyway. That it would be minutes this time rather than seconds was just how it had to be because I needed the distraction.

“Hello?”

I had to answer so I turned back to him. “No. I’ve been trained in how to deal with it. The nearest hospital was too far away. Still is. Hopefully tomorrow you’ll be ready to travel that far, though, as that’s where the nearest airport is, too.”

Instead of getting angry, he cocked his head and considered me. “Did my clothes survive? Do you know where they are? Or did I take them off in the water? Crap. Do you have something I can wear? I can’t sit around naked all day.”

Why not? was my first reaction, but I tamped it down.

“Unless you want me to.” He smirked at me. “I look very good in the buff, I’m told. Want to take a look?”

Could he read minds? His clothes had been long gone by the time I had gotten outside that morning. It was funny how the tide dragged away anything

you wanted to keep and deposited all kinds of things you really didn't want, such as naked men. *Liar*.

After killing the last crab, I left the food and rummaged in a crate I kept my clothes in. He was taller and broader than I was so I found my loosest sweatpants figuring the stretchy waist would help a little. A T-shirt that was too big that I kept because it was really comfortable would fit him fine, I figured. I tossed him the clothes and started cleaning vegetables.

"Thanks. I take it that means my clothes are gone."

I nodded. I kept my back to him as he pulled on the sweats. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't asked for privacy, but I was pretty sure my body would tell him information that I wasn't prepared for him to know. Just the thought of him naked and exposed had made my jeans a little snug in the crotch. My body really needed to find another hobby.

"Well, they were in a pretty bad state by that point, I suppose, so no big deal."

The rustling stopped, and I heard him sit again. I glanced back to make sure everything fit okay. He was splayed in the armchair, body language wide open but not obscene, at least not intentionally. The lack of underwear and the giving fabric didn't leave a lot to the imagination, though. I quickly looked away again. I wasn't sure my libido would ever go back to normal even after he was gone.

"So, how did you end up in this godforsaken place? You wash up on shore, too? You, me, and Tom Hanks. That how you got here? Shipwreck? A mighty pirate ship on the high seas came along and one-eyed, one-legged pirates shouted, 'Shiver me timbers!' as they made you walk the plank?"

I wondered for the briefest of moments if I could just throw him back out to sea. Instead I threw the crabs into the pot. The vegetables went in a wire basket in the same water. When I glanced back, Eric was watching what I was doing closely, and I got the impression he wanted to say something about how I was cooking but didn't quite know how.

Then his grin came back. "I'm waiting."

Oh yes, how I got here. Eric was like a seagull with a clam. He wasn't letting go of this line of inquiry. "Not quite."

"Care to explain?"

"It was more of a log than a plank."

Eric whooped. “He makes a joke! I was beginning to wonder about you, Crusoe. I was starting to think you didn’t have a sense of humor in that mysterious head of yours. I’m glad I was wrong.” He laughed again. “You don’t have to tell me. Next question: You just found me on the beach while taking a walk and beachcombing?”

“Pretty much.” Again I was smiling. That was getting to be a habit. How long had it been since I used my cheek muscles for anything other than chewing? “You were lying half in and half out of the surf. Looked like you dragged yourself that far and were done.”

He didn’t deserve how cagey I was being. He wasn’t the enemy... I was pretty sure. I sighed. “I chose to come here to... to avoid a certain situation, but I didn’t do anything wrong and I swear I’m not running from law enforcement. This island is in Tlingit territory, so I spoke to the local clan about living here.”

It had been a long drawn out process trying to find somewhere to stay far away from civilization, a place where I could remain anonymous and safe. It took most of the time I was in North Carolina. Then I had to negotiate a mutually beneficial arrangement which took even more time.

He turned thoughtful. “Thanks for sharing that. I’m sure I’m not the easiest person to confide in right now, especially given your circumstances. I promise you can trust me, though.” He continued to surprise me every time we spoke.

Fortunately our meal was ready, and I dished it out so I could avoid showing him my face which I was sure was red. Probably that was the case here, too, though. In my experience, most people ignored me unless they wanted something, Dzóox' excepted. Eric certainly had a good reason to manipulate me.

Delivering the plates to the tiny table I had moved to the center of the room was enough to get my head back on straight. I figured Eric was hungry. The sandwiches were gone but that was all he had eaten since before he had gone into the water more than twenty-four hours before. He dug in with great gusto but with good table manners. I had had to learn them from a video. I figured he had grown up having to be cultured as it seemed to come so naturally.

He stayed in the armchair, and I sat across from him on the stool, and I spent as much time watching him as eating. Somehow he managed to keep speaking while eating great quantities of food, and yet not talk with his mouth full.

Most of what he said kind of went through me because it was all chit-chat. I appreciated that he didn't ask anything important while we were emptying our plates. Eating was task enough for me as exhausted as I was from his presence, and I didn't really speak again until the food was almost gone.

"I love crab." He wiped his mouth. "It's been a while since I've had fresh seafood, but I've never had anything that was pulled from the ocean just moments before I ate it. I envy you this."

It had been fairly apparent that he thought the meal was somehow lacking. He was perfectly polite and had several servings, but although I couldn't say what it was exactly, something in the way he had eaten had me thinking he wasn't impressed with my culinary expertise. I noticed his words weren't actually complimenting the cooking, just that fresh shellfish was good. I wasn't sure what he was expecting though. How else would you cook fresh crab and vegetables? I didn't know how to respond so I ended up just smiling and nodding a bit. He smiled back.

"Where do you get the rabbit food? This was crisp and green. I love vegetables and salad. I know many guys don't like them, but when they're cooked right they're delicious." He continued to talk about food for the next five minutes. "So where did the greens come from?"

"I have a garden."

"Of course. Not something I think about. Food comes in shiny plastic bags from the grocery store or wrapped in recycled paper products and labeled 'Artisan.'" Although I wasn't sure what that meant, I joined him in another smile. That felt good. "You know, I could cook for you. I'm pretty good around a stove. A cast iron one would be different, but I'm game to learn something new."

I very much wanted him to cook for me, but that wouldn't happen. "You're leaving tomorrow, remember?"

"Oh yeah." I could have been mistaken, but I thought a shadow passed his eyes. Regret maybe? Fear? Then it was gone. "How could I forget? Got to get back to work. I'm sure they're missing me. Where am I anyway?"

"Somewhere in the lower end of Southeast Alaska, or maybe northern B.C."

Eric narrowed his eyes, although he didn't look mad. "You're being obtuse again. Could you be more specific?"

“Not much. The Tlingit tribes cross the US/Canadian border, and these islands are right on it, but it’s a little hard to tell which is on what side without a map and an aerial view. There are hundreds of islands around here. I’m sure I could find out but it’s better if I don’t know. That way if someone tortures—”

Oh no. What did this man do to me that made me forget all of my training and blurt out the first thing that came to mind? “I mean, I could always accidentally say something when I was out somewhere like if I needed to go to the hospital, and I was delirious.”

He pretended not to notice the slip but his voice became fixedly chipper. “No one would believe anything you said because you’d probably also be talking about purple polka-dotted panthers in parachute pants.” Like that, my mood lightened. “So somewhere on the Inside Passage.”

I nodded.

“Well that makes sense. It’s beautiful country. Never been up here before. It’s a little cold, and a lot rainy, but I like it. You can never get too much fresh air.” Another five minutes later, he was done with that subject. I wondered if he ever stopped talking. Maybe he just babbled around me to fill the void my quietness left. “So how do you pay your keep? I’m guessing that the tribe is getting something out of it too.”

I was grateful for the change in subject. I loved this terrain but there was only so much you could talk about fresh air and greenery, and he had covered all the bases several times over. “I make money from my carving.” He cocked his head so I shared more as he apparently preferred, who knew why. “I learned carving and stone craft when I was young.” The skill was used to make spears, arrows, and tent pegs. Later we were taught to make knives and hatchets including their handles, and it went on from there. “When I was in—when I got out—when I left... where I grew up, I started whittling to pass the time and as a sort of mental calming device.”

“Like meditation?”

“Guess so.”

“Makes sense.” Then his eyes widened. “Did you do these woodcarvings around the room?”

“Yeah. The stone ones, too.”

Still looking amazed, Eric stood and walked over to the bookshelf and picked up the little shrew. It really was quite small. “You did this?” He sounded kind of awed, which was weird and a little uncomfortable.

“Uh, yeah. Anyway—”

“What is this wood?”

“Pacific yew. I made it from a narrow piece of driftwood. That’s why the thing is so small.” I didn’t understand why he was so interested. It was a piece of wood.

“That’s very hard to carve, isn’t it?”

“It wasn’t so bad. The hardest part is drying it, which is really difficult in this environment, as you can imagine. It takes months. I have a special box I built for the purpose.” Why was I going on about a silly hobby that happened to pay the rent?

“This is Shakespeare isn’t it? It took me a minute before I made the connection because to be honest, I really don’t know what a shrew looks like. Well, until now. Well, I guess this is a little abstract, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“If someone had told me about this, I would have pictured the bard’s profile smack dab in the middle of the side which would have been tacky, like that horrible saw.” He looked up. “I’m sorry to be so rude about that, but I’m a little picky about art, and that thing is atrocious. You didn’t paint it, did you?”

I shook my head. I supposed it was ugly, but the painting wasn’t why I bought it; Eric had guessed correctly about its purpose.

He relaxed a bit at that. “That’s a relief. I love art, and I could go on and on about it, and I get a little judgmental. You have no idea.”

Actually, I was pretty sure I had an excellent idea, and if I didn’t, I had no desire to learn the extent of his ability to speak on the subject or any subject for that matter.

He looked back at the carving in his hands. “This subtle way you gave only a hint of the face, and how you have to move the piece in just the right way to see it? It’s lovely when it merely looks like some stylistic lines, but when you see what it really is, it’s obviously beautiful art.”

My face heated, and you could have knocked me over with a sand flea. I couldn’t believe he knew who that face belonged to or that he even realized it was a face. He really was observant. But to think it was beautiful art? I figured he was flattering me but it felt nice anyway. Maybe I did have a little talent. “Anyway, I give my carvings to the kwáan and they sell them.”

His jaw dropped and he looked at me, the carving apparently forgotten.

“You pass your art off as Native American?” He looked quite upset at that which pleased me a lot while also being insulting.

“Of course not. I would never do that, and the Tlingit would never agree to it either. They have their own amazing artists, and a long tribal history of beautiful craftwork.” The very thought horrified me. “I don’t really know what they do with this stuff, actually.” I gestured at the piece in his hands. “I imagine they sell it to some dealer who then distributes it, probably as tourist schlock somewhere.”

My only request to them had been that my real name not be used. I didn’t care what they did with it. “I don’t know how much they get. They let me live here and supply me with what I need with whatever money my stuff generates. I suspect they supplement my income because they think I’m crazy and need to be taken care of.”

“Crazy, huh? A mad man is my host?”

“We prefer the term lunatic.”

He laughed at that, and my heart raced. The damned thing needed to calm the heck down.

His smile turned contemplative. “Boaz, your work is really good. Believe me, I know art, and this is—”

“Yeah, well, one man’s treasure is another man’s bauble.” Either he was still trying to win me over, or he only thought he knew art. My stuff was okay, maybe beautiful sometimes like he said, but really.

He let it go. “I think since we finished dinner, you’ve said more than the sum total of everything you’d said up until that point.”

I had? How could he tell? He hadn’t stopped talking for three seconds himself. I just shrugged. “I guess you bring it out in me.” That was definitely true. I had possibly said more that evening than I had spoken on any given day in my entire lifetime.

Eric suggested a game of cards, but I admitted I didn’t know how to play and asked if he would show me how.

He agreed but looked baffled. “You don’t know how to play cards? Then why do you have them? And why are they used if you don’t know any games? Do you play solitaire? Or do you have guests you haven’t mentioned?” He grinned.

“Not guests exactly. Just the fairies who come to clean the house at night. They play a game or two before leaving, and they’re very rough on the cards.”

That made him laugh. “I like your sense of humor, Crusoe.”

That made me oddly happy. “Actually, they were a gift from the kwáan elder who packs up my supplies. She doesn’t understand how I live in such solitude, so she’s always giving me gifts to make me feel less lonely.” I retrieved the pack from its place on my bookshelf and handed them over.

“They’re used because it’s an old pack of hers that she said she was getting rid of anyway. Solitaire is kind of pointless, isn’t it? Work is never done—I can always carve something—so when I’m tired and winding down, I would rather read and learn something than play a game by myself.”

He nodded like that made sense. He wiped down the table and dealt while I cleaned up, then he taught me gin rummy. We ended up playing for a couple of hours, and of course he spent the whole time talking, although he kept trying to draw me in by asking me things.

I realized that he wasn’t trying to pry or get me to reveal anything personal; he was just interested in getting to know me. I didn’t have any practice in carrying on a conversation, though, and I felt guilty about making him do all the work. Then again, he really didn’t seem to mind.

Eventually, I saw he was fading and suggested we stop. He agreed readily. We argued about who would get the bed, but the victory was mine because he was the guest, and I was more than used to sleeping on the ground, even if it had been a while. Really, I won because he was still recuperating and in pain so he didn’t have a lot of energy to argue. He rather stupidly hadn’t taken any pain medicine all day, but he accepted some ibuprofen before I went to seal the place up for the night.

As before, he fell asleep quickly, and for some reason, despite my spot in the not-quite-dry-yet sleeping bag on the hard floor, I did too. Apparently I was starting to trust him much faster than I expected or intended, and that was dangerous. Very dangerous. Maybe even for my physical wellbeing, too.

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Fondling

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke to a sound I didn't recognize. As always, I became alert without moving and without changing my breathing. Quite a few beatings had taught me that skill. Another helpful talent I had learned early on was how to open my eyes the tiniest fraction so I could see through my lashes without anyone knowing I was conscious, and I used the skill now.

As my eyes adjusted to the pale light of the moon slipping through the slats of the shutters, I tried to figure out what the sound was. It was coming from the bed, but I was bewildered because it wasn't anything I could identify. It took a sharp breath on Eric's part followed by more rapid movement for me to realize what he was doing. At that point, I hated the fact that I couldn't sleep through anything abnormal, while at the same time, I was shocked that his movements had started before I awoke. I was getting rusty.

This was more than awkward. All I could do was close my eyes, lie there as quietly as I could, and hope he would finish quickly. The sounds were enticing, though, as embarrassing as they were. My own flesh was growing and hardening. It was particularly unpleasant as I was very exposed, wearing only light sleep pants with no covers because the place was so hot.

I was used to a much colder climate than Eric and lived in poorly insulated walls. The stove was blasting heat both night and day for him, and still he slept under the blankets. I, however, was so hot I was sweating, and the current circumstances were making it worse. With the lack of cover, I couldn't even subtly move to ease the ache of my squashed erection. I silently prayed for him to be finished soon and fall asleep so I could relieve the pain.

When he gasped, I began to have trouble keeping my breathing even. I opened my eyes the tiniest fraction again, and the reflection of the moonlight in his pupils showed he was looking at me. It was startling, and it was all I could do not to gasp myself. Then I saw he wasn't looking at my face; he was looking at my body.

Eric's eyes traced my form from my neck to my feet, lingering on my buttocks before moving again. When his movements sped up and his breathing quickened, he focused solely on my rear end and he licked his lips. The darkness thankfully hid the blush I could feel.

“That ass...” He whispered so softly, I barely heard him, and it did nothing to help my heated face. “So fucking hot.” Then he groaned and his back arched, and I knew he was achieving release. It went on and on, and I nearly whimpered, I was so aroused. Even his profanity, which I usually found crass and avoided at all costs, sent thrills up my spine.

Finally he slumped. He lay there for a couple of minutes before getting out of bed and heading out the door, presumably to wash up and perhaps use the latrine. It was enough time for me, though. With just a few quick strokes, I was overcome by pleasure, too, picturing what his face looked like when he peaked.

It was quick work to wipe myself off with my discarded T-shirt, stuff it behind the bookcase, and lie down again by the time he came back. My body was in the exact position it had been in before he left, and I hoped he would think the lingering funk in the room was solely from his own discharge.

He stood near the bed for a while staring at me, I thought, although I couldn't be sure as I could only see him from the waist down. It almost looked like he was getting hard again. Finally he swore, squeezed his crotch hard, and climbed back into bed. Within moments he was asleep, but I waited another twenty before getting up to wash myself and the T-shirt.

When I finally drifted off, it was in spite of the thoughts I couldn't stop from spinning around in my mind. I was now pretty sure Eric really was gay; he hadn't just been flirting as a way of manipulating me. More importantly, I was also pretty sure he wanted *me*.

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Forlorn

For me, the next morning was terribly awkward but not so for Eric. Of course not, he didn't know what I had witnessed—and felt. It was probably for the best that he was leaving, but suddenly I didn't want him to go with a desperation that shocked me.

Could I return to that lonely isolated existence that had been normal to me only a couple of days ago? Now even the idea was soul crushing. What had I missed out on all these years? Was the assurance of a long or at least longer life worth it?

There wasn't a lot of time to think on it as he had nothing to pack. I let him keep the clothes, although I would have preferred to watch him without them. We ate a quick breakfast of the rest of the bannock. He actually liked it and asked me what it was.

"It's bannock. Like fry bread but slightly healthier."

"I don't know what that is."

How do you explain fry bread? "It's um, bread that's fried."

Eric was obviously trying not to laugh.

"Well, fried dough. Dough you put in a pan and fry. Kind of like pancakes, but not really because it's fried. I mean, pancakes are fried sort of but there's a lot less oil." Now I was the one babbling. "When I was negotiating about staying here, I got to know one of the clan elders, a woman named Dzóox'. She taught me how to make it."

"That was nice of her."

I ducked my head a little. "She knew I loved any kind of fried dough such as funnel cakes and hush puppies because she made me pancakes the first morning after I arrived, and I ate around twenty. I really love pancakes. So she showed me how to make this.

"Fry bread is a traditional food, but you know, it's fried. Bannock is actually a Scottish food adopted by health-conscious Native peoples I guess. Not that bannock is that healthy, either, being all carbs." I laughed nervously because now I was the one who couldn't stop talking. "Dzóox' was kind of worried I was going to die out here because she'd tasted my cooking."

He lost the battle and burst out, his laughs filling the room. Surprisingly, it didn't bother me. Somehow I knew he was just teasing not judging me. "Well you are good at cooking this at least." The rest of the bannock soon disappeared into his belly.

When we were done, I shouldered my go bag and we left. Throughout our preparations for the trip, Eric had been his usual gabby self, but as soon we walked through the door, he spoke less and less until he was silent when we entered the tree line behind the cabin. I wasn't in a particularly talkative mood either, but his silence was curious. I found I missed his chatter as we went up and over the hill that topped the closest bluff and then down the other side.

The island looked a little like a flipped over comma, although not nearly that smooth, with the curled bit pointing northeast and the fat part due west. The cabin was nestled on the eastern slope of the depression on the northern edge, and the boat was moored on the other side of the promontory, away from the hut, so someone coming after me wouldn't see it first and destroy it.

By walking over the ridge that separated the two places instead of around the rocky and dangerous point, we shaved off a lot of time even though there wasn't an obvious trail and the brush was thick under the crowded trees. I didn't want to leave a path to my escape route for anyone to find. For the same reason, I didn't cut back the bracken.

Eric proved to be more graceful than he looked and took the relatively few new scratches to his hands and face without a word. That seemed out of character. I would have guessed he would be cracking jokes and complaining in half-truths, so more than once I looked back to see how he was doing.

I caught him looking out at the water a few times, looking a little nervous and distracted. He always met my eyes, smiled, and nodded, but it wasn't his usual grin, neither the one meant to charm nor the real one.

It had me a little worried. Something was up but I didn't know what it was. Didn't he trust me to follow through? Did he think I was taking him off somewhere to kill him? Was he going to try something when we were offshore? Maybe he thought I was planning something, and he would preemptively try to shove me off a cliff.

For the first time, I wondered if he was a physical danger to me after all. I kept a close watch on him the rest of the way, but it was impossible for us to walk side by side most of the time with the dense vegetation, and he didn't know the terrain. If I walked behind him and told him where to step, he would

know I was suspicious, or believe I was trying to hurt him, and that could spur him into doing something he was currently just thinking about.

It was with this grim uncertainty that we arrived in the little cove that harbored my boat. Despite the rough going, we reached the craft in under thirty minutes. I pulled back the debris I used to hide it from sight and stepped back so Eric could see that I wasn't lying.

"That's your boat? Wow... Is it safe? It kind of looks... how should I put this? A little... worn?"

I looked at the boat with an outsider's eye and saw it for what it was: an old wooden rum-runner that had seen its heyday long before Dzóox' had been born. The paint was peeling, so the old, graying wood showed through. She was long overdue for a cleaning. Barnacles had clamped their pointy hides on the sides of the ship up to the high water line, which could just barely be seen above the murky water. I didn't like to think what had made its way into the intake valves. Eric might have had a point.

"She's seaworthy. She's made it through nearly a century of harsh salt water, extreme temperatures, and storms. She can make another trip."

Eric looked at me in horror. "The boat's how old? Is it some ancient fishing boat or something?"

"*She* was a smuggling boat back during the days of Prohibition." She was backed in as always in order to be ready for a quick escape, and I now put my hand on her stern. "She was an active one, I heard."

"I thought rum-runners were racers, like cigarette boats or something."

"That's a drug-running boat now. You could fill the space for the life preserver with plastic baggies and still make enough to retire in a mansion in Tahiti. But they're actually the same thing. The difference is that those were used for short and fast runs on fairly safe water and they couldn't carry as much. They were better for lighter cargo like cigarettes, hence the name. Bigger girls, like my sweetheart, were built for coastal transfers, right here in the Pacific, smuggling Canadian Whiskey down to San Francisco and LA."

Eric looked interested so I continued. "Truthfully, the term 'rum-runner' doesn't really mean much. Basically it was a watercraft that hauled contraband spirits. Some were meant for short distances across tame waters and were therefore pretty small like you described. Many were just converted fishing boats."

I stepped over the bulwark as I explained. "My little beauty was made for it, though. She's a home on water, bigger than the hut I live in, with a hidden hold for storing contraband. She's wonderful. What?"

He was grinning like a madman. "You are so adorable when you get excited about something. You just spoke for at least two minutes straight without stopping. That must be a record."

"For me, maybe, but I'm sure you hold the world's record for longest speech." Was he making fun of me? I didn't think so, but I wasn't always good with subtleties in verbal and visual communication. When in doubt, make a joke. "And only romance novelists call grown men adorable."

"You sound like me when I talk about art." I doubted that, but he continued. "The look in your eyes, like you can't see anything but your boat, the admiration in your voice, the information you're giving me, like you're just sharing a little tidbit and know so much more than you're telling. Now that I think about it, you've never called the beach cabin yours."

The hut was where I lived. He wasn't making any sense, but then that was a frequent occurrence. "What are you talking about?"

"You never say, 'my cabin,' and you never call it 'home.' But you both used the possessive and called the boat a home when you were talking about her."

Huh. Interesting. "I guess I don't really think of the cabin as mine. I built it, but it really belongs to the tribe." That and it was just a place to hide. I looked my little rum-runner over. "This home is mine." Why didn't I just live on her? The little hut was just a place. As usual, Eric's observational skills were impressive.

He tilted his head and bent over a bit. "The Knotty Lady? Really?"

"It's bad luck to rename a boat." Not to mention it hadn't really occurred to me. "They couldn't very well call her 'High Spirits' or 'Aquaholic' which I saw on a boat near Ketchikan. It wouldn't do for two boats in the same area to have the same name."

"No, that would just be tacky." He chuckled and straightened. "This isn't her original engine, is it?" Despite his amusement, he still looked a little nonplussed.

"Don't be absurd. She had a new one installed at the end of the war."

"Which one? Iraq? Afghanistan?"

“World War II.”

To his credit, it only took about five seconds to realize I was joking, but those few seconds were priceless. “You know, you so rarely show emotion that it’s not my fault I keep believing your crap. It’s like playing poker with a robot. So how much do you know about boats in general?”

Uh oh. Now I would look like I had been trying to impress him with my knowledge, which I wasn’t. My love of my boat was specific. I was smitten with my Lady, not boats in general. “Not so much, really. Enough to get by out here. Nothing like the fishermen and women do.”

“Well it’s better than what I know, which is nothing except that a sailboat has a big flappy thing at the top, a rowboat has sticks, and everything else has an engine.”

I scoffed. “Not everything else has an ‘engine.’ A canoe doesn’t.”

“Type of rowboat.”

“A raft.”

“Also a rowboat or sometimes a sailboat.”

It took me a moment to come up with something else. “Paddle boat.”

“You mean one of those things you pedal?”

I nodded.

“Well the name says it has paddles, and I’m sure that means sticks, and your legs are the motor—”

“Just stop.” It was fun to banter around with him but today I had my limits. “How do you not know how to sail? You grew up all classy, right? I thought you traveled.”

“Because I’m a city boy, and you assume I’ve been a lot of places, and to you being world traveled means I know all about boats, huh? Talking about not making any sense.” There was that mind-reading again. “Most urban communities don’t have a lot of boats running through their streets, Venice excepted, and it’s called an airplane.” His good humor was back which eased my mind considerably.

“You forgot Ketchikan across the way.”

“Really? They have water streets? Or do you mean airplanes.”

“Well they have both. I meant Creek Street, although I don’t know if you’d think it counts, and float planes are common in Alaska.” The gunwale felt good when I ran my hand over it, safe.

“You love this boat, but I think you *love* love her.”

I realized I was caressing my Lady. Awkward. “She’s the one woman who could make me straight.” I realized I had just outed myself and turned my head to look at him.

His expression didn’t change; he just laughed as he said, “She’s the first thing you’ve ever really owned, right?”

How did he do that? It was creepy. “Um, yeah. She’s mine, you know? She’s a... a symbol of freedom. I can just disappear completely if I have to.” Even more than I already had.

Eric had an inscrutable expression on his face then smiled and nodded. “I get it.”

“So climb aboard and I’ll show you around.”

About three seconds later, we were standing back on deck, tour over. Basically there was a little stateroom with a triangular double-bed, a galley, salon, mess, and small bunk room, although some of those terms described something much more elegant than what the Lady had. For example, the mess was just a built in booth across from the tiny sink.

“Nice. She’s beautiful. That hidden compartment under the floorboards? Where you can see the water below? That’s so cool. But I don’t get how the boat doesn’t sink.”

I had only shown it to him briefly, as it felt a little too personal sharing my boat with him. But I couldn’t help talking about her secrets. “The hull is a lot like a donut with the center open to water.” I climbed back down and beckoned to him. “Not completely, obviously there’s a solid surface, but it’s just a grate. There’s a lever here that can open the bottom and release whatever the hold contains into the sea so that the contraband could be left behind in a getaway. It had the added benefit of keeping the spirits colder.”

He touched the lever which was cleverly hidden just outside the panel to the secret section. “But wasn’t this stuff in barrels? Wouldn’t it float?”

I shook my head. “No, a lot was stored in ceramic jugs, which was kind of stupid because the containers alone weighed down the boat which made the fact that she was a smuggler that much more obvious. If barrels were used, they

were filled so full that the liquid was heavier than the buoyancy of the wood. Since the water frequently splashed up into the hold, the wood would have been saturated and not buoyant enough to keep all that liquid above the water."

"Very, very, cool. This could be used to smuggle guns or something even today." His eyes twinkled. "That's really how you make your money, isn't it?"

That wouldn't have been the best way to keep a low profile. "DEA agents are a little savvier now." It was nice that he was clearly joking, and the fact that I had guns wasn't really making him question my use of the boat's cargo area. My cheeks heated yet again at the thought he trusted me. It was getting ridiculous. *I* was getting ridiculous.

"Well it—she—is a really beautiful boat. I kind of like that the outside needs a few coats of paint hiding the fact that she's so lovely and homey inside."

"Thanks. Part of the camouflage. Makes it easy to disappear, as I said." Then silence fell, and like that everything was uncomfortable again. "So we should head out."

It finally occurred to me that he didn't have a problem with my being gay, although why it would when he was clearly at least bisexual, I didn't know. It was promising, although of course it didn't matter.

"Yeah, we should," Eric agreed. "Uh, do you think I could get a look up top?"

I shrugged and led him up the ladder. He pretended to look at the helm, the instruments and wheel, but he was still glancing out at the horizon apprehensively. What was wrong? I watched him and then it came to me. "You're afraid to go back out there."

"Huh?" He looked confused.

"Because you fell off the boat, you're scared something's going to happen again."

For a moment, he appeared mystified, then his face relaxed. "You caught me. Scared to death." He chuckled in a self-deprecating manner, and running his fingers through his hair, tried to look like he was just a big goof, as if to say "Silly old me, afraid of falling in again."

Even though he made all the right moves and his tone was perfect, something was off. He wasn't scared of the water; it was something else. "No, that's not it. What are you afraid of?"

He looked a little surprised, and I wondered if his act usually worked on other people. "The water, like you said. But I can handle it." He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it lightly. "It's all good." I felt a stirring inside at his touch. That wouldn't do. There were only a couple of hours left before he and his companionship were gone.

"If you say so." I climbed down to the lower deck and started untying dock line from a cleat. After a moment his hand on mine stopped me.

"Do you want to disappear?"

I looked at him over my shoulder, puzzled.

"Like you said earlier. Do you really want to vanish?" The smoldering look in his eyes wasn't entirely fake, and I had to turn back toward the water. I realized his words could be construed as a threat, but after that look in his eye, there was no mistaking his mind was on very different things.

My heart began hammering in my chest when I realized how close he was standing. I could feel his breath ruffling the tiny hairs on my neck, and it took a moment for me to ground myself. "N-Not really. I mean, I don't know." How long had it been since I had been this close to anyone who was conscious? Oh yeah. When I was fifteen. I shuddered at the memory and felt like vomiting.

"Boaz." His voice was low and sensual, pulling me back from the past. "You don't want to disappear, do you?"

"Not anymore. Or, I mean, I already have. Disappeared I mean." My voice was so soft it was amazing he could even hear me, but he must have because he turned me around to face him. His eyes were bright as they stared into mine. My throat felt tight.

"Do you want to stay here, hidden, forever? Never being with someone else?" His fingers lightly touched my jaw. "Never again feeling the touch of another?"

Oh... That felt so good. His words were so sensual. I was sure they somehow moved the air to caress me. Heat pooled in my groin. The lust in his eyes was real, I would almost swear. Not touch another? Not touch him? I shook my head. No, I didn't want to never touch someone intimately, to hell with the double negative. At that moment, he could have asked me to take a ride on his unicorn, and I would have gone willingly.

He moved closer still until I felt the warmth of his body bathing mine. "Then don't. Come with me. Leave the island and live a little. We could stay

another couple of days while you packed your things.” He went in for the kill and lowered his voice again. “And then I’ll take us to the other side.”

My mind was frozen except for an image of what he meant by that. I felt myself swell below, but then I really looked into his eyes, and I saw that while the lust was real, he wanted something else. He was trying too hard.

Then the reality of what he had said sunk in. Leave with him? Leave and go back to the real world? I backed up so fast I nearly fell over the side. “I c-can’t. I-I’m not—It’s not poss—You don’t understand—I—I—” I couldn’t breathe. I clawed at my chest trying to get in air.

Somehow I managed to climb over the bulwark and onto the steady rocks where I fell to my knees. Spots interfered with my vision, and although I could feel air coming in and out as I gasped, I felt like I didn’t have enough oxygen. My fingers hurt where they scrambled to hold on to the solid and safe island.

Strong hands touched my shoulders then reached around in front of me to cup around my mouth and nose. I started to struggle until I heard, “You’re hyperventilating. Relax. Breathe slowly to my count. Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four. Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four.”

There was just enough space between his hands and my face so I wouldn’t suffocate, and although it was harder to inhale, somehow it became easier and easier to breathe. Once the danger of my passing out was gone, he pulled his hands away.

“Sorry about that. Thank you.” The words came out in mild gasps. I was grateful but still overwhelmed by my fears of leaving the island, and I didn’t know what to make of what had happened between us.

He rubbed my back. “Just sit for a minute. Get your breath back.”

That wouldn’t be easy with him touching me, but I didn’t really want that to end yet so I went with it. My emotions were all over the place, but my body knew what it wanted more than anything in that moment, well aside from oxygen. Finally, Eric moved back, and I stood up.

An explanation was in order but I didn’t know what to say. “I’m really sorry. I just can’t leave the island right now. I don’t mean to be so pathetic.” More than he knew. *He* would have left me alone in The Pit a couple of days for that show of unmanliness. Part of me still believed that shows of weakness in front of others were dangerous. There were plenty of opportunities to fall apart in the safety of my solitary refuge.

He assessed me for a moment and apparently decided I was okay because he changed the subject. "You know, I was thinking." His head tilted a little, an easy grin appeared on his face, and his voice, when it came, was light and casual. He was apparently going for nonchalance. "No one expects me back for a while, not until the first, and it's only, what, the eighteenth? nineteenth?"

"Something like that." I actually had no idea.

"You have a calendar on the boat?"

I shook my head.

"Never mind, the date's somewhere around then. I'm pretty sure I jum—fell off the boat on the sixteenth and I've been here two nights, right? So allowing time to fly home and cope with jet lag before returning to work, I have about a week off. I really like your secluded hideaway here. Think I could maybe stay for a bit? I don't want to impose but I could pay you back."

He wanted to stay? I thought back to his suggestion of remaining a couple of days while I packed. He didn't want to go yet but why? I thought it a little presumptuous of me to think I was the reason. "Of course not. I mean, sure you can stay, and no you don't have to pay me back. I'll just put you to work." I smiled. "Just, you know, you don't have to if you don't want to. I'm fine. I'll get out of here eventually." I was testing him to see how he would play it.

His grin turned smoothly into a sultry smile. "You don't want me to stay? We haven't had time to play in the sand." His voice was like velvet caressing my skin. He licked his lips to entice me, but again I could see that underneath it all he wanted something badly, and it wasn't me this time. "Let me stay, just for a few days." True he was trying to play me, but I didn't feel he was lying, either, just being cagey. There had been real heat in those eyes, although even if it had been fake, he never actually said he wanted anything but to stay for a few days. He hadn't lied.

Nevertheless it annoyed me a bit. Part of me wanted to jump back on the boat and haul him off the island despite what I had said. The other, and I had to admit bigger, part of me wanted to jump back on that boat and haul him down to the main stateroom and have my wicked way with him. There was actually a third, tiny part of me, that was smarter and more practical, and that piece always won out.

"Why?"

The question unnerved him, I thought. "Why do I want to stay?" He tried to look like the question was ludicrous but failed.

I simply nodded.

His shoulders slumped a little. “Can’t I just want to hang out here with you, have a short vacation away from it all?” He had dropped the act.

I’m really good at not saying anything.

He rubbed his head. “How do you see through me like that?” Now we were getting somewhere. I just waited. “Okay. Deal is, I’d really like to hang low for a while. It’s no big deal. If you want me off the island, that’s fine. It’s just that this... job... didn’t go quite as planned, and I kind of want to figure out how to handle it before I go back. I swear it’s nothing illegal. I’m not a criminal.”

He stepped closer but still gave me space. “I’m not kidding when I say that you’re an interesting person, and that I’d really like to get to know you better. I think it would be fun.” He smiled, a real one this time, I thought, and it was nice. “I promise I’m not dangerous and you can trust me. I really just need a break to regroup. So what do you say?”

If I were honest with myself, the decision was made as soon as he stopped playing me. He’d been there a day and already I was getting used to the company. Maybe I wasn’t as far gone as I thought. Maybe I could be around people sometimes—as long as it was safe. And I really liked that smile. I shrugged my shoulders. “Sure. Why not?”

“Well with that enthusiastic invitation, I’m ready for a week’s vacation. Lead the way.”

A huge weight lifted that I hadn’t even known had been there. As we trekked back over the bluff, I found it hard to believe that just an hour or so ago, I was worried he was about to try to kill me, not that he would have succeeded. I was very, very good.

Now my heart fluttered with excitement as I watched him swagger up the hill. I hoped that I might finally be able to be around someone and still feel safe. Just a couple of days ago, I hadn’t imagined that would ever be possible but here we were. Funny thing, life.

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Type 2: Near Shore Buoyant Vest

Seafood

When we got back, I did my morning chores then took him out on the raft to check the shrimp pot.

Before we climbed in, he pointed to the inflatable. "Rowboat. Sticks." I just rolled my eyes. "Is this one seaworthy? I imagine it's younger than the other half of your flotilla given that they didn't have many inflatable boats back then."

"Actually, inflatables have been around since the mid-19th century but no, they weren't common outside the military until the 1950s. The first Zodiac was made before the war, though. World War II that is." Then I made what I figured was my first smirk.

"Seriously?" He was getting a lot of practice making that skeptical look.

I nodded.

"You are a veritable fount of knowledge today. I can't shut you up."

I froze.

"Not even if I wanted to."

I breathed again.

"I like learning things from you. You get so excited; I don't feel like I'm being taught anything, just finding out things."

What was the difference? And was that a compliment? Hopefully. "I didn't have a lot of educational opportunities when I was younger—I mean to learn interesting things. Other than the regular stuff." Smooth. It was way too easy to relax around him, and that loosened my tongue. I needed to be more careful. "I've spent most of the last nine years studying things that interest me."

Everything was interesting to me. I was as eager to study colonial Canadian history—which I have to say is even less exciting than it sounds, no offense to my Canadian brethren—as I was to read about molecules and the atom. Being kept from a real education when young often resulted in an adult whose thirst for knowledge was insatiable. It didn't make sense to me that we hadn't been taught the same things as other children because if we needed to fit in, we would never have been able to.

"With any luck, what I remember is actually true and not boring to you."

“Never a chance of that.” His grin was infectious, and we climbed in the raft, each grinning like the proverbial canary-eating cat.

A few yards from shore he raised an eyebrow again. “This raft designed to take on these high waves?”

High waves? Where? It actually took me a few seconds to figure out what he was talking about. “What, these here? These are baby waves. Not even, they’re more like tadpole waves that will become baby waves.” That scared him, to judge from the look in his eyes. “Don’t worry, though, this bay is naturally protected from the ocean by the rocks over there.” I pointed to the western headland. “This dinghy can handle itself just fine. We’re just going to that buoy over there.” The float in question was only about a hundred yards away.

“Itself? This isn’t a female boat?”

“It’s a raft not a boat. That’s like calling the Catskills mountains.”

Eric squinted. “They aren’t mountains? Aren’t they like six thousand feet high or something like that?”

“Only one or two even top four thousand feet. Compare that to Mt. McKinley, which is over twenty thousand feet tall.”

“Point taken.” He laughed.

My family used to say something similar since we lived at the base of the Rockies in Montana. They liked to feel superior about things. It didn’t escape my notice that I had just proven I wasn’t quite as different from them as I had hoped.

As I rowed us the rest of the way, Eric kept scanning the horizon like he was looking for something. His eyes darted back and forth like he was nervous about something.

“Everything okay?”

He looked at me and smiled. “Yeah, fine.”

“You sure? You look a little nervous. I promise I’m not planning to kill you and dump your body.”

“Good thing.” He laughed. “No, I’m sure. Just looking for other boats. You get many cruises coming by here?”

I shook my head. “None, that’s why it’s so strange you ended up here. Only rarely do I see anything at all, and even then it’s an orca pod or a humpback. Why?”

He grinned. “No reason. It just wouldn’t feel as remote if they were here. I like the privacy.”

“Yeah, me too.” His grin was that kind of fake one where he was trying to charm me. He was worried about something, but he clearly didn’t want me to know. Briefly, I wondered if I should expect trouble coming to the island, but I realized that was silly. No one had come near in the four years I had been there. It was a remarkable improbability that he had washed up on shore here. The likelihood of two people finding me in the space of a few days was remote. I believed he was telling the truth when he said he didn’t know who I was and about how he’d come here so whatever he was worried about had nothing to do with my past, I was pretty much positive. So what was it?

When we got to the buoy, I put it out of my mind as I tied us up and hauled up the shrimp trap.

“That’s not a pot, that’s a cage. No, it’s a net on a frame that looks like a cage. I was picturing a big ceramic pottery thing.”

“I use that to catch flowers. This is for catching shrimp. More lowbrow.” His laugh made me feel like singing and I do not sing. “This is too trashy even for prawns. You have to use something gilded for them.”

There were too many shrimp for us to eat in one day, and without electricity we couldn’t use more. Dried shrimp don’t really cut it for me. So we threw most of them back and then headed for shore.

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Shrimp

That night Eric begged me to let him cook. Truthfully, he could have demanded payment as I have no interest in—or talent for, apparently—cooking and just the thought of eating something someone else made had me salivating. I helped him shell and clean the shrimp, but the cooking was all his.

As we pulled the creatures from the cold bucket where they'd been soaking and set to preparing them, Eric adopted a Southern accent (or at least what I figured he meant to be one) and started talking about shrimp. "We got tiger shrimp, Alaskan shrimp, ocean shrimp, sea shrimp, bay shrimp..."

"What are you talking about?"

He just went on without answering me. "I can make Mustard Shrimp, Shrimp with Onions, Hurricane Shrimp, Shrimp of the Gods."

I snickered. He turned to look at me, a twinkle in his eye. "We serve sand shrimp, prawn shrimp, cocktail shrimp, salad shrimp, pond shrimp, shrimp casserole, shrimp from the sea, shrimp of the sea, shrimp above the sea—"

"What the heck are you talking about?" I tossed the last shrimp into the bowl and its shell into the bucket for composting.

"Have you seen *Forrest Gump*?"

"That's a movie, right? No. I haven't seen many movies." That felt like admitting I was a deviant or something.

But he just nodded as he moved to wash his hands in the basin. "Well there's a scene in there where this guy goes on and on about what you can do with shrimp. It's hilarious. I'm not one of those guys that can remember all the lines to all the movies and shows. I'm more of... an idea man."

He looked at me and grinned. "So I just remember it sounded something like that. I don't really know what he said, but the list came out like it was all made up. I mean, it wasn't—I recognized most of the things he described—but I always thought the scene would be even funnier if some random things were thrown in there that were just made up."

I nodded like I had any kind of idea what he was talking about. I just cleaned up the mess while he began to pull things from the large cooler I kept buried in the ground under a trap door, as well as from my one cupboard in the corner. My little table doubled as a counter, so I couldn't set it for our meal.

I had done all of the chores when we'd gotten back, so I sat in the chair and started whittling something new. The wood was nice but I wasn't quite sure what I would do with it, and it was much more fun watching him work.

Eric really got into cooking. His hips swayed and his arms moved around like he was dancing, at one point even humming a bit and shuffling his feet in a kind of soft shoe impression, at least that's how I pictured the dance. Pleasant smells wafted over, and I thought about how nice it was, this little moment of domesticity. I mulled over whether it was a momentary sensation or whether maybe I could handle this sort of thing for a longer period of time.

"I love shrimp pizza, shrimp puttanesca, shrimp Pesci, shrimp cobbler, shrimp custard, shrimp pie..." His voice came out of the blue and startled me a bit.

It was impossible to not react, and I burst out in what *he* would have called childish giggles, but I was very sure was manly laughter. It almost hurt, I was so out of practice.

To his credit, Eric didn't whip around as fast as he could have, but he did turn and looked at me with his own smile, a twinkle in his eyes. "You've got to try botanical shrimp, biological shrimp, shrimp fries, shrimp on toast, Lady Shrimp, Knotty shrimp, Knotty Lady Shrimp..." He punctuated each type with a swish of his spoon.

My sides hurt I was laughing so hard. "Stop."

"Shrimp Kiev, Shrimp Wrangell, Shrimp Nome, Shrimp Elf, Shrimp Fairy—I really like that one, although usually I like them a bit manlier." He winked then turned back to the stove to stir something.

I registered his flirtation even as laughter enveloped me. Did he think I was manly or fairy-like? Which did he prefer? He opened his mouth to start up again, but my sides couldn't take it. "Stop, stop, please!" My eyes were watering and it was hard to breathe.

"Sure thing, Crusoe. Ready to eat? Because eatin' is ready."

The food was amazing. What he put together from nothing could have been served in the fanciest restaurant as far as I was concerned, and I told him so. He actually blushed.

"Well, the fanciest one on this island at least." Then he stopped and held my gaze for a few seconds longer than was necessary. For the third time that day, I couldn't breathe but for yet another reason. He finally broke contact and started

on about what Knotty Lady Shrimp would actually be made of and taste like as we cleared the table and cleaned up. He thought it would be whiskey and hemp flavored, but I figured Red Cedar and sea salt. We pretended that this wasn't just a sojourn in our lives, and that one day we would have a chance to experiment and come up with the preeminent Knotty Lady Shrimp recipe.

After I had the place tied down for the night, and the lights were out, I slipped into my sleeping bag on the floor, completely drained. Emotional exhaustion manifested physically sometimes. Eric had tried to talk me into taking the bed again but gave up and agreed to not bring it up again lest I make him get to Yáxwch' via raft rather than rum-runner. He promised quite readily actually.

Despite my fatigue, I found it hard to fall asleep. My memory of the night before, Eric panting and stroking himself morphed into visions of him gasping and writhing in my arms. It was impossible to get that out of my head.

“You have your mild chickpea shrimp, your spicy curried shrimp...”

Well that worked.

“—your vanilla shrimp, your BDSM shrimp—”

And that made me nauseated as I was inundated with memories of being tied up against my will. Fortunately he only had a couple more, and then he fell silent for a full two minutes, possibly a record for him, well except for our silent walk that morning.

Then just as I was sure he was asleep, he turned to look at me. “I’d never heard you laugh before tonight.”

Well he hadn’t known me that long, but the reality was I probably hadn’t laughed in nine years. Actually, maybe ever.

“I like it. Do it more.” With that, he rolled over and soon his breathing evened out as he fell asleep.

If he kept saying things like that, I would end up wanting more than I could really expect. It took quite a while for me to fall asleep to dreams of a naked Eric rolling around in vanilla pudding—which was erotic—then of him wearing leather and chains and riding giant prawns the size of horses—which wasn’t. It was possible I would never have another normal night again.

Type 3: Flotation Aid

Time

The week flew by. I had never had so much fun in my entire life. The day after what I would forever call “Shrimp Night,” he was already helping with the daily chores, which gave me a lot more free time to spend with him. We explored the island together, parts I had never even touched. He almost broke a leg avoiding a fissure in the shadow of a rock, which opened into a little subterranean cave I hadn’t known existed. We didn’t have the equipment to explore it safely, so we vowed to do it another time. I didn’t let myself think about how unlikely it was that would ever happen.

We learned a lot about one another. Eric was an insurance investigator who specialized in stolen and forged art. Working for himself, he was able to choose which jobs to take, and he had a tiny little company, with the surprisingly boring name Eric Atherton and Associates. It sounded like he made out pretty well.

He was every bit as cosmopolitan as I had thought, traveling around the globe for his investigations as well as for recreation. He was single (a relief) and lived alone in a small condo on the East Coast in a town I had never heard of. He said he traveled so often he was rarely home.

Everything about him was fascinating, and he appeared genuinely taken with me and my world. He wanted to know all about my daily life. For a short while, the paranoia that had been cultivated in me from birth made me question why he wanted so much information. Eventually I believed that he just wanted to get to know me. I didn’t share too much, though. It was just too ugly a past to tell someone I wanted to like me.

He tried to convince me to let him sell my art. He was obviously right that he knew a lot about it, and I had come to believe him that my carvings were pretty good. But he really didn’t need to flatter me that they were more than just nice knickknacks. I didn’t get my self-esteem from a hobby I had started in order to make something nice out of the ugliness of my past.

Of course Eric talked a lot—all the time in fact—but he was calmer now that he was being himself. He pulled me into long conversations, and I found myself talking at length. It was freeing, and I loved it. But I preferred to listen to him and let his melodic voice wash over me. Once or twice, I even fell asleep to his words, they were so soothing. In all my adulthood, I had never fallen asleep in the presence of someone awake, never. But now I did.

I felt like I had met the best friend I had never been allowed to have, and I was pretty sure he enjoyed himself too, if the sheer number of times he laughed was any indication. For the first time in nearly a decade, I went for a whole week without nightmares.

The shrimp dinner wasn't an anomaly. Eric was an amazing cook. He could throw together the most delicious meals from the simple ingredients I provided. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to taste food he made after a trip to a grocery store. But the best part about his cooking was him. He got so into it, I just sat rapt, and when he started the dancing and humming, sometimes I had to excuse myself to go outside and get myself under control.

The morning after Shrimp Night, I remembered how I had lost quite a bit of weight when I first arrived as living off the land had slimmed me down. I had never been overweight or bulky, but now I was lean and compact, which meant that I had a stack of clothes from the early days that were now way too big for me. They were just tight enough on him to emphasize all his assets without being perverted. The legs and sleeves were a little short, but he rolled them up, and he looked like any beach bum enjoying a day in the drizzle. It was a very sexy look, even when he got cold and rolled them back down again.

I wondered and dared to hope that he felt as attracted to me as I was to him. Despite all the hints and sexual innuendo, I didn't know what he wanted. I couldn't really be sure that he had pleased himself to the thought of me that second night. He might have just looked at my body and pictured someone else.

That didn't stop my lust from building until it clogged my throat. Every time he moved, and I saw those strong muscles and tight body, I got urges unlike anything I had ever had before, like wanting to lick him from head to toe.

The only clue I had that he might have felt as I did came one afternoon midweek. We were running low on firewood because even in the summer heat, Eric still was cold at night, so we left the stove fire going long after we finished cooking. We needed more fuel, and I was behind the cabin chopping logs. The work was hard but it needed doing and it was a good way to keep my upper body in shape.

Eric emerged from the outhouse and flopped down on a stump, leaning back to bask in the only bit of sun we'd had all week. "Oh my fucking God: sun, Crusoe. You have like three seconds a year, right?"

"There are cloud breaks many days each year. One percent of the time the sky is clear."

“Ha ha.”

I looked over at him. “I’m not joking.” I actually didn’t remember the exact statistics and could have been exaggerating, but I didn’t think so as it certainly seemed that way. “I don’t have data for this island but you should look up Ketchikan when you leave.” Leaving wasn’t something I wanted to talk about so I hurried on. “I don’t know much about the rest of the state, but this is standard for Southeast Alaska.”

“Seriously? It’s a wonder you haven’t hurled yourself off a cliff by now. This weather is so depressing.”

It was true that a lot of people had trouble with how overcast the area always was, and with all the precipitation year round, but I didn’t mind it. In fact, I barely noticed the rain now, and I had lived with snow my whole life. “Alaska actually has one of the highest suicide rates in the country. You should probably petition the governor to make more sunny days to take care of that.”

“Oh, so you collect dismal factoids, too.”

My shirt was getting sweaty, so I took it off. “I aim to please.”

“You’re hot? Well I suppose you’re working. But this morning? I can’t believe you were too warm and had to go back to change into a T-shirt.”

“This is a fine summer day. You’re just a wimp.”

“It was like forty degrees when you got up. In Florida, people would be wearing parkas.”

The logs were all cut into segments by then, and I picked up the nearest and stood it on end. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration—it had to have been a least fifty by the time we got up—and besides, this isn’t Florida.”

He made a *hmph* kind of noise. “Well, I hate Florida weather, too. What’s the average summer temperature there?” He sure was grumpy, and he kept staring at me.

Sweat was flinging off my forehead so I stopped for a moment and wiped my brow with the back of my hand. “I honestly have no idea.”

“Wow, something Rain Man doesn’t know.” He grimaced. “Sorry, that’s a rude thing to say. Sorry.”

That was yet another reference I had no framework for, so I ignored it and turned my back to him. I didn’t want wood chips and sawdust flying his way. They smelled fresh and wonderful but getting hit by some, or having something get in your eye, was less than pleasant.

“Well I, for one, prefer mild weather. San Francisco is nice this time of year.”

“If you say so.” I got into a rhythm with my chopping, and I had split two of the wood sections into firewood before I realized Eric hadn't said anything in a while. That was, of course, quite unusual. I turned back toward him, and I nearly dropped the axe. He was staring at me with his lips pressed together, with a weird look on his face, kind of stunned maybe. I wasn't sure; it almost looked like he wanted something very badly. His jaw was clenching and unclenching and his breathing was a little irregular.

“Eric? Are you okay?”

He looked up at me which was when I realized he hadn't been looking at my face. His legs were crossed and his hands were in his lap. He just stared at me for a moment then he swallowed and cleared his throat. “Uh yeah, I'm fine.” He stood up, hands clasped in front of him, and he turned quickly like he was hiding something.

“Are you sure you're okay?” He was acting weird.

“Yeah, I'm fine, Crusoe. I just need to go to the bathroom.” He turned and jogged toward the latrine. *No, outhouse*. Normal people called them outhouses.

I was kind of starting to like the whole Crusoe thing. “You just went a few minutes ago.”

“It's all that water I've been drinking, got to keep hydrated, but it has to come out the other end.” He was calling over his shoulder even as he opened the little door to the shack and the stench wafted out. “I'm going to get some more water in a minute. I'll bring you some.” With that, he slammed the door shut behind him.

Call me stupid or just naive, but I stood there stunned for at least a minute before I finally figured out that he'd most likely been hiding an erection. For me? I went over the scene in my mind. I had just been chopping wood, my back was to him—and my shirt was off. All he could have seen was my back and my muscles flexing, as exciting as that could possibly be. Oh. A fluttery feeling started in my chest before moving south. Oh... And then what had to be a “shit-eating grin,” as Eric would have called it, filled my face, and there it stayed for the rest of the day.

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Trust

Life was beautiful and easy, but I was living in Wonderland and knew my days were limited. As the week neared its end, I found myself tense and edgy. Our last day, I woke up moody and stayed that way throughout the morning. I dressed and bustled around trying to keep myself busy so I wouldn't think about what would happen in the morning. But my emotions ran from elated to depressed and back again from moment to moment. It was hardly a surprise that Eric noticed and called me on it.

"What's got into you, Crusoe?" Eric had relaxed in bed most of the morning and was still only wearing a pair of sleep pants that gave me quite a nice view, especially the parts just below his waist. I sat down on the edge of the mattress.

Rubbing my eyes, I avoided his gaze. "Sorry, I'm just tired."

"Something you're not telling me?"

I shook my head and stared out the window like the waves were the most fascinating thing on the planet. My breath fogged the glass but I didn't bother wiping it away.

"Worried about tomorrow?"

Yes. "No."

"Crusoe, you've got to trust me by now. I promise with everything that I am, I'm not going to give your secrets away." His hand touched my cheek then took hold of my chin and turned my head to face him. "I would never do that to you, never." For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. I was terrified and yet wanted it so badly it hurt. But then it passed.

My smile hardly achieved the standards of even his falsest, but I put on the most dazzling one I could manage. "I'm fine, really. I trust you, I do." That, at least, was true. "Everything's fine."

Apparently I was a terrible liar around him. He narrowed his eyes. "Then what? Tell me."

The room was hot and stuffy like there wasn't room for both of us and my emotions at the same time. How did I tell him what was really going on? How would he react to hearing that he had twisted my world so much that I felt like I was in an Escher painting? I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore.

As usual, he figured it out before I could decide how to talk about it.

“You want to leave with me tomorrow and not come back, don’t you? But you’re scared.” He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. He had really nice arms, and I looked at them instead of meeting his eyes. “It’s okay to be scared.”

That was only half of it—the other half involved him and my feelings around... well, my feelings—but it was the only part I could even think about let alone speak on. “I’m not some child afraid of the dark.”

He chuckled. “No, you are definitely not a child, and I’m not sure I’ve ever met anyone less afraid of the dark than you are.” I looked up at him in time to see his eyes roaming my face. I wondered how he knew that. Maybe it was a metaphor. “It’s more than just leaving your solitude, isn’t it? There’s something out there that terrifies you.”

I just sat there frozen, as if moving would make all of my secrets fly out of me and blanket the room, tainting everything they touched. I needed to let go of the past but I had no idea how.

“Is it social anxiety? That’s what I thought at first, but as soon as you got to know me you became positively gregarious.” He grinned which was a relief. Things were getting way too serious. “You aren’t incapacitated by it at least.”

At that I had to laugh. I wasn’t afraid of people. I knew how to take care of myself—I had spent my whole life learning how. I might not know how to relate to people, but being around them didn’t scare me. Although I supposed that wasn’t the same kind of fear he was talking about.

He raised one elegant eyebrow. “I take it that you don’t have a problem with that then.”

“Not so much, no.” I chuckled. “I’m not good with it, I was... homeschooled... so I was never socialized properly, but I’m not afraid of people. I do get claustrophobic if there are too many, though.” Rain was falling in sheets but it didn’t stop me from suggesting that it was time for my daily run as I stood and headed for the door.

He stood and it sounded like he took a step to follow me. “Yeah, right. If you don’t want to talk then don’t. But don’t try to con a con man—” His eyes grew wide. “That’s not what I meant.”

It was something I had already suspected. I turned to face him. “I don’t care if you’re a con man. I usually know when you’re trying to charm me.”

Actually, I wasn't sure at all, I just hoped. Now I had another thing to worry about. Apparently it showed. Apparently everything about me showed.

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Sighing, he sat back down on the bed. "I'm not a con man, I swear, and I never have been. I'm mostly a good guy. Manipulating people often makes my job easier. Sometimes I feel like a con man myself." He rubbed his face. "Actually, it's bled into my everyday life. It comes too easily for me." He looked at me earnestly. "But I promise I don't want to be that way with you and something about you makes me want to be honest all the time."

Somehow his sincerity, his lack of airs, his whole demeanor shouted "I'm telling the truth. You really can trust me." I wanted to, and I was tired of being afraid so I let myself. "I believe you. I'm telling you the truth, too, just not all of it. There are just parts of my world, of my history, that I haven't shared with many people. Some of it no one has ever heard. It's too ugly and too dangerous."

Eric looked sad. "That really upsets me to hear. I hope someday you'll tell me everything. But right now, I just would like to know what's going through your head about leaving the island. Please?"

Slowly, very slowly, I nodded. My skin felt tight, my head hurt, and my stomach ached, but he deserved that much. He'd trusted me when he decided to stay the week.

"Can you tell me what you are so afraid of?" He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

My legs were weak so I leaned against the windowsill before speaking. What was safe to tell him? "They might kill me if they find me." *If I'm lucky*. It was weird admitting even that part out loud.

As was becoming usual, he surprised me. The look on his face wasn't pitying, nor was it skeptical or judgmental; he just looked concerned and maybe a little angry, but not at me, I didn't think. "Who? Who do you think might kill you?"

I had trouble meeting his eyes, so I looked at the surf through the window. "My father and the—his friends." It was odd calling *him* that.

"The what? You were going to say something else, some important piece of the puzzle."

His perceptiveness was sometimes annoying. "Puzzle?"

“Of who, exactly, is Boaz, my Crusoe.”

Oh. His Crusoe. That was... that was nice. Swallow. “The, uh, the officers.” It was even harder to look at him now. At this point, even I wasn’t sure whether I was trying to tell the truth or be evasive.

Eric frowned. “Military? Are you AWOL?” He didn’t appear to be judging me, just asking.

“Not exactly. Not any recognized military.”

“What do you mean? Like some rebellion or insurgence somewhere?” He sounded confused.

I laughed at the thought. “They think they are but it’s not likely the US feels threatened by them in any way.”

“The US—”

I glanced up and practically saw his synapses firing.

Then he got it and there it was, the expression I had been waiting for: his eyes widened and he looked incredulous. “A militia? Like those loony backwoods guys who want to overthrow the US government? You’re kidding me.” And now he was disgusted.

I didn’t have the time to get angry or afraid. My heart just started hammering and my hands got clammy and once again I couldn’t breathe. It was starting to become a nasty habit. My mind tried to go to survival mode, but my body was taking a long time to get there. As soon as I could breathe again, I lurched for the door. “I need to check the traps.” I was halfway down the beach before Eric could have had time to react let alone follow me. I finally heard him shouting my name in the distance—my real name, Boaz, not “Crusoe,” a more telling sign than any facial expression.

I was an idiot. Why had I trusted him?

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Tide

For the next few hours, I wandered around the island, literally. It wasn't particularly big, so I walked around it slowly counterclockwise and arrived back at the cabin early afternoon. By this point, I was more embarrassed than anything. What had I expected? That Eric would understand immediately? That it wouldn't take some explaining? I could hardly blame him if he assumed I was like my insane parents and the other people in the cult they called an army. He had seen some of the weapons around the cabin and knew there were more. I isolated myself. I was obviously paranoid, and he had no way of knowing I had good reason to be.

When said out loud, it sounded like the plot for a cheesy B-movie, not that I had seen any. People in militias were seen as the enemy, all or nothing, like living in such a place made someone evil whether that person had a choice or not. I certainly didn't, not when I was a kid and not when I was older, when I had already seen a young woman who had run away brought back and saw what they did to her for being a traitor. She was an example set for the rest of us. They caught her in a day and they made us stand and watch while they—

No. I wasn't going to think about that. I completely overreacted to Eric's expression and had spent all morning figuring out how to apologize. My self-image of a heroic, high road taking, wrongdoer deflated when I walked in the door, though, because he wasn't there. Maintaining that level of self-serving martyrdom was exhausting, so I made myself a couple of sandwiches out of hard salami I kept in my high tech subterranean cooler, and fell onto the bed to eat. I fell asleep before I had finished.

When I awoke, the sun was much lower in the sky. Well, the shadows were darker even if I couldn't see the sun. Eric wasn't back yet and I started to worry. All sorts of things ran through my head as I checked first the outhouse then the ledge where I stored the raft, which was still there.

My emotions were high as they ran the gamut between fear for his safety and panic that he'd taken off in my boat. Not only did I love my Knotty Lady, but if she were gone, it meant I was trapped on this island. More importantly, he knew nothing about boating and both he and my rum-runner would be in danger.

Rational thinking overruled my panic, and I headed west down the beach toward where I had found him only a matter of days before. It seemed like

weeks in some ways, minutes in others. Breathing in and out slowly helped until I finally saw him far ahead crouched at the water's edge near the far bluff. Then my relief caused my temper to flare, although he had done nothing wrong, and I marched toward him.

As I got closer, I realized he was kneeling in the surf, water swirling in eddies around him. He was holding something in his hands as he bent over. My anger was gone, replaced by confusion until I was close enough to see that he was gesticulating wildly. I dashed the last few yards to his side.

"Eric? Eric, what happened? Are you okay?" I began to examine him for bodily trauma, holding on as best I could when he was so agitated. He was freezing. Not as icy as that first day, but still too cold. He must have been wet for a while. "Eric, talk to me. What's wrong?" There wasn't any blood on him, nor visible injuries.

He looked me in the eye, his eyes shiny. "It's gone. It's gone, Crusoe, and it's my fault. I did this. The Agony of the Martyr is ruined."

Gibberish is not my first nor is it my second language so I opted for a more physical approach. "Eric, come on, let's get you out of the water."

"No! I have to save it." He grabbed for what looked like large swaths of ripped paper floating around him. That was when I noticed he was already holding a piece delicately in his hands. He would put it down on the pebbles beside him to grab another, and put that one aside to reach for a third, and by then waves had pulled the first one away. He yelled at them in what sounded like frustration. I hadn't seen him like this, and it scared me a little because I didn't understand it. Not a lot scared me.

"Shh, it's okay, I'll get them." I went for the furthest two pieces first, wading out to grab them and tucking them against my chest before making my way back.

"No!" He was practically yelling. "You can't layer them, they'll stick together."

I glanced at what I was holding. It was painted cloth which looked to be okay, although the surface felt a bit sticky. What I knew about paint, though, was less than Eric knew about boats, so I raised my arms above my head so the pieces dangled above the water and raced up the beach. There were some smooth and dry old logs above the high tide line, left over from some horrible storm, and I spread the pieces out colored side up. I noticed there were whitish

spots on some of them, and the sides were shredded but most of the paint was intact.

They didn't look too bad, except for the fact there were two of them and more still in the water and I was pretty sure there was only supposed to be one. Maybe they could be glued or taped back together. I sped back down to the water and nabbed the last one trailing past. I tried to take another from him, but he refused to let go. When I tried to lever him up, he wrenched his arm away, lurched to his feet, and stomped up the slope, well, as much as anyone can stomp on sand.

After spreading his out with the others, he fell against another log nearby, with a look in his eyes I couldn't interpret; outraged and frustrated, sad, somewhat bitter, and maybe a little self-pitying? No, that wasn't right. Anger at himself; that was it. It wasn't clear to me what he was that upset about. The pieces were clearly a painting that had been torn apart, but he acted like he'd lost a loved one. There had to be more to it. Maybe he painted it himself.

I placed the fifth piece with the others then crouched beside Eric. "Talk to me, please." My mouth snapped closed as I found myself almost adding an endearment. That would have been awkward.

He took deep breaths. "One of the pieces had washed up on the shore so I looked for more. I rushed up and down the beach, into the water, over that promontory thing there—one was caught on the rocks and had possibly gotten even more damaged—but I could only find these. It was so big and these are so small and it's ruined." The pieces looked huge to me, but the thought left me as a tear slipped from the corner of Eric's eye.

I had never seen a grown man cry before. I had rarely seen anyone over the age of two cry. But this... this was heart-wrenching. He looked broken and furious and raw, so emotionally naked, it cracked something inside of me. This big, larger-than-life man was coming unglued, although the thought was like acid on my tongue. I knew he would rather swim to Anchorage naked than show this kind of weakness, and I wanted to tell him that it was okay, that he was safe to be vulnerable with me.

All I could do was put my arm around him. He didn't resist so I put the other one around him, too. He leaned into me, which set my heart pounding, and I took a chance and pulled him close. He came willingly, and he curled between my legs, his head against my chest.

Surprisingly, he let me hold him while he tried desperately not to let any more tears fall. It really didn't take him that long to calm down, but it seemed

like forever and yet not nearly long enough. Although it was hard to see him in such pain, holding him was incredible. I was rather amazed he let me. He felt so good in my arms, and he smelled deliciously of salt and seawater and him.

I was so lost in the sensation, that I really didn't notice he'd been quiet awhile until he leaned back a little and looked at me. "Sorry and thank you. I get a little emotional about art." He laughed. "That's an understatement. I'm not usually like that. In fact, I can't remember the last time I really cried. It's the emotion of the whole situation, I think. Not just the painting but how it got here, my role in it, my near death... you." He looked up at me.

I sucked in a breath as he looked at me, his irises tracking back and forth as he looked at each of my eyes. Then he glanced down at my lips and back to my eyes, looking for something. An okay? Was he asking what I thought he was? I let myself lean forward just a hairsbreadth to see what he would do. Did I really just make the first move?

He looked at my lips again and back up at my eyes, then it was his turn to move forward a little. I found myself following his lead without even thinking about it, looking down at his lips and then back at his eyes and moving forward a little until there wasn't any more room between us. Neither of us moved for a few seconds as if not actually finishing would have meant nothing had happened.

Then he gently touched his lips to mine, and just that little bit had a spark running through me. He held the kiss a moment before backing up a little and looking at me, perhaps to see how I felt about it. What I felt was that I had just had the most erotic moment of my life.

We sat there a moment, both breathing a little faster because it was my turn, and I was still a little nervous. But I forced myself to move because I really wanted to kiss him again, and this time it was easier to close the space between us. I held the kiss just a little longer before pulling back only to feel his hand touch the back of my neck and pull me to him again. *Yes.* We were kissing. It felt so different than anything I had ever experienced before, so much better than that one time so long ago with someone else who didn't mean anything in that way.

Eric's lips were soft but firm, so perfect. He opened his mouth a little and rubbed his bottom lip across mine. I think I may have trembled, which was a little embarrassing and horribly unmanly, and he pulled back to look at me again, probably to make sure I was okay. I was better than okay. This time I

grabbed his shirt and yanked him forward, and then his arms were around me and our lips parted and our mouths were joined and his tongue tangled with mine and we were pressed together like we were sharing our very breaths, and then I forgot to think for a while.

When we finally separated, he pressed his forehead to mine and breathed deeply. "I've wanted to do that for so long, Crusoe... You have no idea."

I kind of did, but I just smiled and concentrated on getting my breath back. "I think maybe I've wanted to longer." Since I first saw his beautiful face. How could I have thought avoiding *them* was worth never having this? This intimacy, this sharing of more than just words and touch, of something just a little bit deeper and closer, was more wonderful than I had ever imagined.

Eric didn't give me time to think longer and pulled me close again and we kissed some more. When we finally separated, we were both breathing heavily. He looked concerned as he stared into my eyes. "You ran off—"

"I'm so sorry about that, I was being too sensitive." Right now I was so embarrassed, I never wanted to discuss it again. But I owed him an explanation for my behavior. "I haven't told a lot of people, and it's something I struggle with a little." To say the least. "I completely overreacted."

"No, I understand how hard that must have been to tell me. But I wasn't judging you, I swear." His fingers touched my cheek. "I was just horrified that you had a parent in a militia; you hear such horror stories. I immediately pictured you as a kid growing up around guns and violence, feeling like you were in the military."

His eyes were shadowed. "I hate the thought that you may have had to grow up in a place like that." It sounded like my story really had affected him. Damn, I didn't want that. He didn't need to take that on. This was way too intense.

I ran my fingers through his hair and laughed. "It wasn't all bad." Yes it was. "The grownups were just really fucked up." Understatement of the century. At that point, I realized that by saying so, I had inadvertently let him know that his assumption that I had been raised in that environment was right.

Eric cocked his head. "Can I ask you something about it? Not personal, just a general question?"

No. "Sure."

"I took a psychology course in college that talked about splinter groups, isolationist compounds, and militias, things like that. The professor said that

most separatists are just disillusioned. They love their families like anyone else. They have potlucks and get married and do mundane things. Was it like that for you?"

"Not really." Okay, *that* was the understatement of the century.

"Oh. Because I was going to say that I know they're not evil people, not for the most part. They're mostly just ignorant and scared and feel like everyone looks down on them, so they pretend they're better than people who aren't like them so they can feel better about themselves."

I really didn't want to talk about this because I was getting the impression he wouldn't like what I had to say, so I just shrugged.

He continued. "That's not to say that what they do isn't ever wrong. Sometimes it is, especially when a few take that hatred and fear and do horrible, racist, murderous things." I felt him shudder in disgust, and I squeezed his arm to reassure him that I thought those people were horrible too. More than that. I wasn't nearly as understanding as he was, and I wanted to make sure he knew I wasn't like them at all, at least not anymore.

No. I never had been. I always knew that the things I was being taught were contradictory, like if it was wrong to murder one person, how could it be okay to kill people just because you didn't like them? Maybe some of the people leading our group were just misled, but I felt that as a whole, the ones in control were a malevolent bunch and deserved whatever happened to *them*.

He shifted and sat back so he could face me. I already missed feeling his body against mine. "I just want you to know that I don't think that people in those groups are innately bad people. I don't want you to think I hate your family and the people you knew before. I know it's a cult mentality and when those people isolate themselves, it just reaffirms their beliefs and the hatred builds."

He looked really worried. "I don't judge you. I know you're not like that. You aren't building a wall of hate here. You're hiding from something and I don't know what it is, exactly, just that you're in grave danger." I appreciated how he said that I was in danger, not that I *believed* I was in danger. "Please don't think I have any preconceived ideas about you from knowing about your past."

Eric really didn't know anything about my past, just that I had been raised by extremists, but it meant something to me that he wanted me to understand

that his knowing about it didn't change what he thought of me. I felt that deserved giving a little something back, a tiny tidbit of the information I could tell he craved.

"The group I grew up in was obsessed with the end of the world. They were convinced it would happen any day." That was all I could tell him, at that point, though. This was territory I was not ready to explore with anybody, not even Eric. It was good we could trust each other but enough was enough.

It was any easy segue to lighten the mood, though. "Kind of like the Zombiepocalypse, only with fewer walking dead people and more not moving ones." I had read about that particular version of Armageddon in a magazine.

He laughed. "That's why you're so prepared."

"That's how I know how to be prepared." The difference was important but I wasn't going there again. "You have to take zombies seriously."

Eric grinned.

"I am really sorry about your painting." I didn't want to get all maudlin again, but I really wanted to change the subject and we were going to have to address it if only to pick up the pieces to take back to the cabin for them to dry.

He leaned back into me, with his shoulder to my chest, and I put my arms around him once more. Holding him was the highlight of my year, well except maybe for the kissing thing. That was pretty fantastic, too.

"It's not my painting. It belongs to the world. But now it's ruined and can't be replaced." He didn't get upset this time. He was back to his *c'est la vie* self. "It's—It was—a masterpiece, a Goya, one of the lost paintings of the Nazi era. I was chasing it down when I fell—no jumped off the boat. This painting is—was... Shit, that's a hard adjustment to make." He laughed, a little self-deprecation in it.

"A couple of years ago, a cache of artwork was found—never mind. It's a long story and doesn't matter. The point is, the painting was genuine. Three different experts verified its identity, but on the way to the vault where it would have been kept until its provenance was figured out, it just disappeared. I was hired to find it and have been searching ever since. I had finally found where it was just as it was moved again. I knew it was on a boat bound for Anchorage and then probably to Russia, where it would be gone forever. That would have really sucked."

I worried he might be getting a little misty again, and I didn't like him hurting, so I rubbed my thumb up and down his arm.

“Jesus, I’m being so ridiculous.” I got the impression he was embarrassed by his deep emotion, so I just pretended I hadn’t noticed, and he didn’t say anything else about it. “The thieves were supposed to transfer the painting during a private cruise from Bellingham to Juneau. I hired on as a waiter. The ship wasn’t making any other stops, so we were taking an odd route along the west side of the passage to avoid the popular tourist lanes.” That explained how he made it to my beach. He had been much closer than I had thought.

“From there, the painting would have changed hands with someone else, who would then have sold it to who knows where. I don’t know why they did the transfer that way, and it was something I was hoping to find out. I still plan to figure it out.” There was a look in his eye that made me think that he looked forward to the hunt, that he found it exciting.

“They were keeping the painting in a tripod case.” He turned to look at me. “They folded it before rolling it up. *Folded* it. Heathens.” Disgust filled his words, but at least it wasn’t directed inward. He looked back at the scraps drying on the logs, although that would never happen in the rainy cold we called summer around here. I wasn’t quite sure what he was seeing in the wet canvas, but I didn’t ask. “If only it hadn’t been ripped into pieces, the painting still would have been fine.”

“The seawater didn’t ruin it?”

Eric shook his head. “Probably not. It wasn’t in the water that long. The sealant will have protected the paint well enough that any damage should be able to be repaired. I hope. That at least looks okay, although why that matters now is beyond me.”

He blinked and returned to his story. “Anyway, the case was pretty obviously what they were using to store the painting since none of them had photographic equipment, but I took a quick look to make sure it was really there—just a look—before I called in the Coast Guard. The thieves caught me and they had guns. Big guns. Like guns the size of my feet.”

That was pretty big, but it was a good thing. The cliché about big feet and penis size worked for me. I hadn’t seen him erect yet, but I really hoped to, and now that we’d kissed, I figured my chances were a little better. My thoughts distracted me and I almost missed what he said next.

“I tried to get away and hide but they were right behind me. I had to jump. Not even a masterpiece is worth my life. Thank my fairy godmother I was able to grab a life jacket. I knew they would take care of the painting; it was worth a lot of money to them. It would be fine.

“As bad luck would have it, though, my foot caught on the strap as I jumped over the railing, and the case almost went over with me. But, I was wrong about it being ‘almost.’ I only thought they grabbed it. They were reaching for it, and that water was so fucking cold I couldn’t even think straight let alone see. It was all I could do to get the life jacket on. The case was dark and that water was darker and by the time I spotted it, I couldn’t move anymore.”

Now he looked pensive like he was trying to figure out a puzzle. His expressions fascinated me. “The case must not have been all the way closed or maybe the zipper was broken. They weren’t very careful if they folded a painting. The canvas must have worked itself free somehow. I have no idea how it got into pieces like this, though.”

“Maybe a boat propeller, or it might have gotten caught on a long line.” At his look, I explained. “A long line is used in a type of commercial fishing. Basically it’s just an incredibly long line of fishhooks that is dragged behind a boat or left floating on buoys for a while. It can be messy.”

He shuddered.

“Maybe a shark got it, although that would probably result in more damage.”

Eric blanched. “Sharks? In Alaska?”

I nodded. “Lot of them, especially now. Salmon sharks come around during salmon season when the fish are heading for the runs. Summer is the season for most fish species around here.”

“Do they eat humans?” He was probably thinking of his own journey through open waters.

“I’ve never heard of a salmon shark attacking a human being. They bump into boats sometimes, and get caught in trawler nets, but mostly they leave people alone.” He relaxed at that but I couldn’t help myself. “The great whites, though, they can be a problem.”

The look on Eric’s face was priceless. “You’re making that up. You have to be making that up. Tell me you’re making that up.”

I grinned. “Sorry.”

“But they’re in places like Hawaii and the Bahamas.”

“You can’t beat a prehistoric body for its staying power no matter the environment. Sharks aren’t that common, though. There really are only a dozen species or so in Alaskan waters.”

Eric looked like he was frozen in place, and I felt a little guilty. I let him off my hook. "As far as I know, there has never been a shark attack on a human being in the state of Alaska. The one or two encounters between great whites and boats have been reported as combative rather than predatory, and I think there have been like five in the past fifty years in the entire state."

He released his breath. "You fucker."

I smiled and pulled him closer and angled my mouth over his. A few minutes later, he was jelly in my arms, sharks forgotten.

We sat up and he looked at the painting again. "Whatever happened, the painting has pretty much been destroyed as a whole."

It took me running over the events in my mind for his words to finally sink in, and this time it was my turn to freeze. "Wait. Your life was in danger?"

He chuckled. "Art thieves do not tend to appreciate my skills."

"They were going to kill you?" That both shocked and horrified me.

"Well, yeah. I didn't jump off the boat because I thought it would be a nice swim." He shivered, maybe thinking about his hypothermic brush with death, or possibly sharks. I wrapped my body around him and he continued. "That painting was worth a lot of money. Its estimated worth was upward of three million dollars, but really it was invaluable."

"Do you think the thieves are looking for the painting?"

"No, it's been almost a week. They were just the go-betweens. I doubt it was worth their time and expense. They're probably long gone." He grinned at me, but it was that charming one, the one he used when he was trying to convince me of something. It wasn't fake, just charming. Maybe he was just trying to reassure me.

"You'd tell me if you thought you were in danger, right?"

He laughed. "I'm not in any danger. I was only a threat in the moment. It's the painting they wanted, and now it's just a few scraps of material. Its destruction is just so awful. I feel sick."

I wasn't sure what to say. I was still a little unnerved by the thought that someone out there had wanted to kill Eric. "It's insured, right? They can't hold you responsible—"

He stared at me, appalled. "It's not about the money or my job or anything like that. That doesn't matter. This painting was magnificent, a part of history, a

link to our past and to the mind of a genius.” He sighed and looked grim, but then he brightened. “Perhaps there’s still value, though.”

Eric’s eyes focused on the pieces of canvas again as he thought for a moment. “Not even half of it is here but the pieces are big enough that maybe smaller portions of the canvas could be framed. Maybe it’s not a total loss.” His eyes narrowed. “That might work. I’ll have to suggest it.” He was nodding.

Eric had just impressed me even more. I saw a wonderful man who grieved over something truly precious because of what it was, not what it was worth, or who it belonged to, or how it could profit him, someone who risked his life for it. But instead of whining and beating his chest, he moved on and figured out what to do next and how to make the best of it. Here was a good man who I really wanted to prove worthy of.

In that moment, my barriers came down, and I realized I trusted him more than I had ever imagined I could trust anyone. In one week, Eric Atherton had managed to crack a wall inside me that had been erected over thirty-four long years of torment and fear. He was remarkable. He was someone who maybe one day I could—maybe I could get to... like... him... a lot. I tilted his head and leaned in to press our lips together so I could show him how much I liked him already.

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Touch

We stayed up late talking and doing quite a lot of kissing. I shared a little more of my background—that my childhood and early adulthood were focused on training and survival skills. I left most of it out, like what the training entailed, the dangers and the risks, and certainly not any of the real horrors that had happened. I didn't even mention WITSEC, let alone why I was in the program.

He still didn't know how I knew someone would kill me the first chance they got. I wasn't ready to talk about that yet. That discussion was for later, if there were a later, although I knew that was unlikely. The stories would fill days of telling and nights of bad dreams. I didn't want our last hours together to be about that, but I got the impression he knew how much I was holding back.

We didn't have sex. I wasn't ready, and he was trying to prove he cared about me and wasn't a playboy who had just been trying to get in my pants. We actually had a rather odd conversation about it that was somewhat uncomfortable for me and left me more confused than ever.

I was lying on my side and he was facing me, one shin between both of mine. We were clothed, but he was holding me close enough that he felt like a furnace. A really strong, handsome, sexy furnace.

"I love lying here with you." The desire in his eyes was real, and I knew that he hadn't tried to play me since he had decided to stay the week. As if he had heard my thoughts, he brought up the time before he decided to stay. "I want you to know that although I wasn't always completely honest with you in the beginning, I never lied about how I felt." He brushed his lips against mine before continuing. "From the moment I opened my eyes and saw your face, I wanted you."

"You tried to kill me."

"Oh that." He chuckled. "I was only trying to knock you out. Despite my desire, I didn't know who you were, or what you wanted with me. I thought it behooved me to get the upper hand."

"Behooved?" Even I didn't use such words in conversation. Talk about stuffy.

He ignored me. "If you remember, I didn't try too hard."

“You were barely able to stand. In fact, you couldn’t.”

“True.” His eyes roamed my face. “Damn, you are so handsome. That really was the first thing I thought, and then when you caught me, and I felt your skin on mine, I was a goner.”

Skeptical, I raised an eyebrow.

“I mean it. Although I tried to manipulate you, I wanted to touch you so much. Every bit of that hunger in my eyes was real.”

A tremor ran through me as I pictured the look on his face on the boat that day. I had to close my eyes just for a moment. “It was hard for me to understand what you wanted. I thought there was truth there but I couldn’t be sure.”

“There was. You were—are—so hot. I wanted you so badly. Yes I wanted to stay on the island, and I admit it was for more than one reason, but I want you to know that the most important reason was you. I should never have tried to be anything but honest with you.” He smiled. “You can always see right through me.”

That was true. I thought about making a joke. The intensity of the emotional intimacy was making me uncomfortable. The sentiments were way too honest and not the kind of things you said to someone you’d only known a week.

“You just wanted to fuck me.” I froze as soon as I said the words, realizing what I had just put out there. I wasn’t ready for that, not when I barely knew him, not when he was leaving the next day.

“Not exactly.”

I unfroze and deflated. He didn’t want to have sex with me? I might not be ready, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want him to desire me. True, I was very conflicted, but my past was hard to put aside.

“You misunderstand.”

My smile was as fake as his most smarmy. “No big deal. As long as you want to kiss me, I’m fine.” I wasn’t fine. Why wasn’t I fine?

He rolled me back to lay on me, and let his lust shine through. I hardened and felt his erection against my hip. He moved and his length slipped against mine, and I thought I might come just from that alone right there and then. “Do you feel that?”

I nodded, breathless, and clutched his upper arms.

"I want you, I do. But sex doesn't mean anything. It's just a means to an end. It's something I have to do to—" He must have realized how that sounded. "I'm not a playboy. When I come on to someone, it's because I have to, and I hate that. Sometimes for my job I have to do things in the interest of the greater good."

What was he saying? His eyebrows shot up as his own words sunk in. "I'm not a whore, I swear! That's not what I meant." What was the difference? Sex for a paycheck was still prostitution. "Fuck, no." He pressed his cheek to mine.

I wondered if he could read my mind. Probably not because at that moment he would have jumped up and run for cover. I was proud of myself for staying quiet and just lying there, unmoving. Rigid, in fact.

"That came out all wrong." He looked at me again and took a deep breath. "In my job, sometimes it's important that I get close to people. The hint of sex is something that can open all kinds of doors. I don't actually sleep with them; I just use a lot of innuendo to imply I'm willing to do something they want. It makes me feel dirty, and I despise it. The introduction of sex, even suggesting it, so soon after meeting someone cheapens it, it's just too easy.

"Because of that, I don't want it unless it's with someone who I've known for a while, someone I care about." He caressed my face. "I didn't want to taint you with that. I wanted something more. Even with my provocative words and actions, I just pictured us like this, holding each other, passionately kissing, being intimate without sex."

My muscles loosened even though he was contradicting himself a little. "If you didn't want me why did you play me so hard?"

"I didn't mean to, I swear. It was dangerous for me to leave the island, and I admit I manipulated you when I tried to get what I wanted." His motivations weren't so different than my own in wanting seclusion. What would I have done in the same situation? I really couldn't be sure.

"Please believe me." He grabbed my hand and pressed it to his groin. "I have been hard since that first day. If I had just wanted sex, I would have pulled you on top of me when you helped me lie down. If I had wanted to use the idea of sex to get something from you, I would have kissed you when you were untying the boat."

I still wasn't sure where he was going with this, but he hadn't moved my hand, and I left it there. I was really okay with that part too.

“I wanted to do that, fuck how I wanted to, but then I would have been using you, and I don’t use innocent people, not like that. Manipulate, yes, when I have to, but use? No.”

Again I wondered what the difference was, but his sincerity, and my belief that he was fundamentally a good person, allowed me to trust that to him they weren’t the same. I thought that maybe he was trying to say that his innuendo had been okay because he wasn’t asking for sex, just letting me know how attracted he felt. But it was terribly confusing. Talking about emotions out loud with other people was just weird.

“I would especially never use you. Never you. From the beginning I knew that. I wanted you so much that I knew I couldn’t try for you.”

“You aren’t making any sense.” This was a bizarre conversation, and I wanted it to end so we could make out some more. He wanted me, I wanted him, we weren’t going to have sex. It no longer mattered to me whether he wanted more or what his twisted logic meant or why he was telling me. He would be gone the next day, and I wanted to spend it in his arms doing something very different than talking. “It doesn’t matter. Just kiss me some more.” I tugged his shoulder.

Instead of doing what I wanted, he rolled off me and rubbed his face. No. I dragged him back and he didn’t fight me, but he still held back. “I need you to understand this.”

Why didn’t he just get to the point? I didn’t want to know more. I wanted to fool around. “Understand what? It’s not complicated. You use bad men by ogling them.” His eyes moved to the side. Oh. Not just men then. I felt a little unsettled by that, but he obviously wasn’t straight, so it wasn’t important. “Okay, you use bad people by ogling them—”

He pressed his cheek to my shoulder. “I’m gay. I swear I’m gay. I told you none of it means anything.” It really shouldn’t have mattered, but that did make me feel better. I had no problem with bisexuality, but I didn’t have enough confidence in my sexual wiles to think I could compete with a woman if he decided that’s what he really wanted.

I knew I was being stupid because monogamy is monogamy, and anyone can cheat with anyone, but somehow the thought that he might want someone who had pieces I didn’t (and didn’t want) was concerning. How could I compete with that? I chided myself. It didn’t matter; he wasn’t mine. He’d be gone in less than twelve hours.

“Okay, okay. You use bad people by ogling them...” I paused to see if there would be any interruptions this time but he remained quiet. “...by ogling them and alluding that you want to have sex but don’t go through with it. You do this to recover stolen art. You hate it and so you don’t use it on anyone who’s not bad. Right so far?”

He pushed himself back, presumably to see me better, and nodded.

“Because of this, you don’t want—and don’t have—sex with anyone unless you’ve known them for a while and really like them. Just thinking about it is cheap to you. You didn’t know me, therefore you didn’t want to have sex with me. See? Got it. Now kiss me.”

He tugged me close and tucked his face against my neck again as he held me tightly. “I’m so sorry.” His voice was muffled, but I could understand the words. “I should have been honest from the start. You deserved that. I should have trusted you.” He pulled back to look at me again. “Trust doesn’t come easily to me. I’m no different than you in that.” His eyes were clouded. “I wanted to.”

“It’s okay. Really, it’s okay.” Why couldn’t he let it go and get to the good stuff? He really talked too much sometimes. A lot of the time.

He still held back, and I stifled a groan. “You still don’t get the most important part.” He pressed against me, more forcefully this time, and I swear he was even harder. My own erection pressed painfully against my jeans. “I didn’t want to intellectually, but my body did. That hasn’t happened in a very long time.”

Oh.

“I wanted you so much that I had to masturbate that first night—well, the first night I was aware of where I was—just to get some sleep. I kept waking up, and you were lying there without a shirt, and all that milky skin was sweaty. If I hadn’t felt a connection with you already, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself from going over and climbing into bed with you.”

I laughed and kissed his nose. “I know.”

“What?”

Well I didn’t know all of it, but I did know the important part. “I heard you.” I lowered my voice. “I watched you.”

His eyes widened. “But you were asleep.”

“Not once you got going.”

His face heated but not from embarrassment. “I wish I had known. I would have put on a better show.” He was teasing, but I wondered how much truth there was to that.

“Will you please kiss me now?”

Finally, he pulled me close and got back to it. We just made out, murmured silly things, and caressed safe places. My erection never went down and neither did his, judging from how hard he always was when our groins pressed together. It was both amazing to prolong the pleasure and agony at the same time.

Eventually he excused himself to go to the outhouse, and when he came back, he was soft although that soon changed again. I was pretty sure I knew what he was doing out there because I considered going as well. More than once I wondered if he was waiting for me to tell him I was ready, or just make the first move, but he didn't say anything.

We held each other until eventually he fell asleep in my arms. At least a dozen times, I thought about waking him up and opening his pants to release the erection he still had and just going for it. There were a few moments where I did reach for him, intending to caress places not so safe, and see what happened, but each time I stopped myself and just patted his hip, or squeezed his leg. He'd rub my arm and then drift off again, never really fully awakening. I admonished myself for my weakness, but memories were hard to overcome. Although I loved the darkness and felt safer in it, imagining sex in such subdued lightning brought me back to a place and time I didn't want to go.

When I finally slept, I dreamed of us floating in the ocean, bobbing in the waves, somehow each of us inside the other in that weird illogical way dreams have. I was trying to achieve orgasm but couldn't. Just as I was about to peak, something would happen and it slipped away. I begged him to help me but he'd just smile and push me back saying, “No, you're not ready yet.”

Then I had my first nightmare in over a week. *He* was there, and I heard someone else nearby. I yelled at the person to run, but I couldn't make a sound. I was tied to a post and couldn't move while *he* did something horrible, telling me *he* was doing it because I was too weak. Then I thought it might be Eric *he* had captive, even though I couldn't see. My cries were muffled by the cloth in my mouth, but still I screamed and screamed and screamed.

I awoke shaking and dripping with sweat. Eric was instantly alert and pulled me close before asking me what was wrong.

“Bad dream.” I couldn’t look him in the face because the remnants of the nightmare still fogged my mind, and I refused to taint him with my memories.

He misinterpreted, though. He pulled back to look me in the eye. “Crusoe, I’m so sorry. I’m so bad at communicating about things that really matter.”

Not this again, not now. *Please.*

“It boils down to one thing: I’m not a playboy no matter how I come across. I just want you to know that. I don’t sleep around, it’s an act. Sex doesn’t mean anything; making love does. I don’t want sex with you. I want more, but there can’t be anymore, and I don’t quite know what to do about that.”

He was as confused as I was, and that made me feel a little better, although I needed him to quiet that mouth of his. My hands were still shaking where they clutched his shirt, and he pulled me close. Mercifully, he stopped talking, kissed my head, and rubbed my back until he fell asleep again, his hand still resting between my shoulder blades.

Sleep wasn’t going to happen for me, though. The dream wasn’t the problem, it was gone now. I was used to nightmares as they had plagued me all my life. Instead, I brooded, confused about our conversation and how I felt about it, frustrated and hungry for something I didn’t know if I would ever have. Eric didn’t wake when I climbed over him and went out back behind the outhouse to finally bring myself to that elusive finish. I cried out his name when I ejaculated, and then slipped down the wall, curling up with grief for something we would never have together.

When I got back to bed, I burrowed into his side and just held him, still unable to sleep. I clung to him, needy and wanting so much more than he had to give, until the sun came up and he awoke and it was time to go.

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Type 4: Throwable Device

Besotted

The next day dawned dismal and drizzly as usual. In July, the driest month, the area averaged over six and a half inches of rain; even in August it was close to ten inches. Why did I want to live there so badly? It was beautiful and peaceful, but was it worth the constant rain and the endless solitude? I had lived on the island for four years and never before had I questioned the weather. I was making up reasons to leave or to stay instead of focusing on what really mattered: my body and my soul.

Eric was equally pensive as we did the usual chores together, neither of us knowing what to say or maybe just not knowing how to say it. We spoke little when we gathered up his tiny belongings: a carving of a seagull I had done for him, an unusual shell he found on the beach, and the sad remnants of a masterpiece.

I gathered up my go bag as well as my latest carvings, figuring that as long as I was in port, I might as well drop them off in Yáxwch'. This time Eric asked what the backpack was, and I explained it was my emergency go kit. I always had one close by.

He said it made sense, but he uncharacteristically didn't ask what was in it, and I was glad. Our trek to the Knotty Lady was slow this time as we dragged our feet like we were heading to our doom. But in the open areas where we could walk side by side, he took my hand and I let him.

The one good thing was that I now knew he cared at least a little bit, for what that was worth. When we reached the boat, I cleared away debris that had accumulated over the week, stowed our things so they wouldn't slide everywhere, then did my prelaunch inspection.

I located two inflatable life jackets, the most comfortable I had found that still allowed me full maneuverability. I had planned to invest in full flotation wear, at least a jacket with arms, but I had never gotten around to it. We put on the flotation devices, Eric not only willing, but practically ripping his from my hands, he was so eager to wear it. I almost laughed at that but then I remembered he would have died without one and it didn't seem so funny.

Finally Eric helped me untie the mooring ropes, and I climbed up to the wheelhouse and got us underway. The trip would take two or three hours at the speed my small boat could reasonably take, depending on the current, wave height, wind, and so forth. The island where I lived really was that remote.

There was only one seat in the little cockpit so Eric stood leaning against my chair, his hand on my shoulder. The pilothouse was covered with an awning I had installed, but the side walls were only waist-high so within a short time he was soaked. He stood like a trooper, though, watching the sea until eventually he got too cold and went below for a blanket. When he came back up, he sat on the deck next to me, his back against my leg, and broke the silence.

"I've always loved art. I used to paint and draw and sculpt when I was younger. My parents thought it was a lovely and safe hobby for a young man, and they supported me in it in any way they could. They sent me abroad for summer art school twice, as well as on a masterpiece tour throughout Europe, and even to a two month long excursion through Asia, studying ancient techniques and artistry.

"But after years of classes, I finally figured out I didn't have any talent. By then I was living in a kind of artist community. Fortunately, it was college so I was still young enough that I had plenty of other interests and ideas for my future. So I turned to studying art itself. I knew technique, but the artists I lived with taught me all about the substance of art, what makes one work a masterpiece and another just a nice painting."

I reached down and ran my thumb along his jaw. He leaned his head back and looked up at me, and I smiled.

He returned my smile, and then reached up and touched my face once before continuing. "That was the beginning of my real education in the field. I had already learned French and Italian as a child, along with a smattering of German and Mandarin, enough to get around on my travels. But I kept studying languages so I could read about art from original source material."

The water was calm enough and there was nothing in sight so I turned my seat and pulled him sideways into my lap. He laughed and kissed me. "Say something sexy in Italian." I felt bold in asking, but in another couple of hours he would be gone, so there was no reason to be coy.

"*Sei molto bello.*" He kissed me lightly.

"What does that mean?"

"You are very handsome."

"Stop teasing. Tell me something else."

His brow furrowed. "I'm not teasing you. You're gorgeous. Don't you know that?"

I felt my cheeks heat up. Now I had forced him into complimenting me. “You are the devilishly handsome one here. Tell me something else. Um, maybe something normal, not sexy.”

Dropping the blanket, he stood up and turned to straddle me, which was a bit of a challenge given the arms of the captain's chair. His hands cupped my cheeks and he leaned down and kissed me deeply. “*Ogni volta che ti bacio dimentico dove sono.*” He kissed me again.

“Do I want to know what that means?”

“Each time that I kiss you, I forget where I am.” His eyes were filled with so much emotion, I wanted to run and hide from the intensity. What he said definitely didn't fit my “something normal, not sexy” edict. I thought of saying something. Instead, I pulled him back and kissed him again.

He shifted in my lap and pushed me back in the seat to get a better angle before diving in for more. My fingers dug into his back. He made a noise like a sighing gasp and tilted his pelvis into me. I felt his hardness pressing into my abdomen, which didn't surprise me because I was just as stiff.

His tongue swept my mouth, his hands clutching my shoulders. I wanted—I didn't know what I wanted but kissing wasn't enough. I wanted to climb inside of him and stay there. The feeling scared me, and I pulled back. “Eric...”

“Come downstairs with me.” There was no misinterpreting what he was suggesting. “Please. I know what I said last night, and I meant it. That's how you must know what my feelings are right now and how much I want you. So please come down there with me.”

Just the night before I had told myself that I wasn't ready for that. I didn't know him well enough, and he was leaving. But now I realized that I wasn't ready to just let him go, either. I had never felt this close to another human being, not ever. I closed my eyes, and I felt him kiss each lid.

“*Arrêter de penser.* Stop thinking.”

Easier said than done. He was right, though. Why was I thinking so hard about it? I was thirty-four, far too old to be a virgin, particularly when there was a gorgeous man who I really liked urging me to have sex with him. Had a week been enough time, a week of being together constantly, of sexual tension that drove each of us to masturbate in a fetid outhouse just to release the strain?

I reopened my eyes. The look of passion on his face was my undoing. I found myself nodding and crushing my lips against his. The kiss was our most

intense yet, and he moaned. Stars in Heaven, how he moaned, and that went straight to my groin. I pushed him away and pointed at the ladder. Nodding, he stood up and headed down while I turned off the engine and dropped anchor.

By the time I reached the galley, I was having second thoughts, but when I opened the little door to the bedroom and climbed down to stand in front of Eric, I saw not just the lust on his face but also the uncertainty, and I realized he was just as nervous as I was. Somehow that made me feel a hundred times better, and I crossed the tiny space to him and pulled him into my arms.

He buried his nose in my neck, and I pressed my cheek to his head for a moment. He had already removed his life jacket, and I quickly tossed mine on the stairs which would assure I wouldn't forget to put it on before leaving the cabin.

He pulled me to him again and looked into my eyes. "*Tu es si beau et si sexy.*" Although I was pretty sure he had said something about being sexy in French or some other Romance language—a more apt name for the grouping I couldn't imagine—he didn't give me time to ask what it meant, as he took my mouth again.

I felt his hands grab my buttocks—my ass. His crass words were so much better than my stilted ones. Why I had thought I was above using them, I didn't know. He kneaded my *ass* and I threw one leg around his to pull him closer. I felt his erection press against mine, and I rubbed them together. I had never been so aroused in my life.

We tumbled onto the bed, and he rolled us over so he was on top. Pushing himself up on his forearms, he looked at me with such tenderness I forgot to breathe. "*Du machst mich so glücklich.* You make me so happy."

The intense emotions were getting to be too much so I had to say something. "Y'all be makin' me feel a'right, too. That's mountain man speak."

He stared at me for a moment before bursting out laughing. He ducked his head as he let it out. When he looked back up he was smiling. "I was trying for a moment there, Crusoe."

I grinned. "I know. You need to work on that. Or maybe I do. Whatever. Come here." I pulled him back down and we kissed again. Within moments the levity was gone in a haze of lust. He pressed his groin into mine, and I gasped. He ground into me, moving up and down until I thought I might achieve—might *come* right there in my jeans.

He broke away to trail his lips along my jaw. I tilted my head up, and he licked and sucked my neck and throat. A hand slipped under my shirt and caressed my side. I wanted to reciprocate, but I wasn't sure what to do, so I just grabbed his ass and squeezed. He pushed back against my hands and rolled his hips, so I figured it was okay. What he was doing, though... The noises I made weren't ones I had ever made before.

"Fuck, Crusoe, what you do to me..." He bent his head and closed his mouth around a nipple. I nearly shot out of bed at the wonderful sensation. His fingers twisted the other one, and I gasped. I hadn't had a clue that men's nipples had such sensation. It had never occurred to me to test it out. He switched sides, and I arched my back and grabbed the back of his head.

After a moment he pulled up and his gaze was heated, his lips red and sexy. "I'm going to fuck you so hard." He dove back in to kiss me, and the hand that wasn't supporting his weight reached down and began kneading my groin. "I'm going to pound into that sexy ass until you're screaming." He was practically grinding into me. "I've wanted to fuck you for so long; I may not be able to hold back. I'm going to make you see stars." He tried to kiss me again. I was too frozen to react, although I may have squeaked. Eric noticed immediately. "Crusoe?"

At that point, I started shaking, and I couldn't stop, my fingers digging into his biceps.

"Boaz? What's wrong, what'd I do? You don't like dirty talk?" He looked anxious as he pushed up and away so he was barely touching me. "I thought—we don't have to—I mean... Did you want to top? That's fine, I can do either. Anything with you."

I let go of him and jammed the heels of my hands into my eyes. I couldn't get in air, let alone speak to answer him. I knew mental issues weren't sexy, and I tried to get myself under control. I thought of his instructions the last time I came unglued that first time he asked me to leave with him. *Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four. Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four.*

"Talk to me."

"Sorry. Just give me a minute." I tried to keep my palms in my eye sockets, but gentle hands on my wrists pulled them down.

"Just tell me what's wrong so I can fix it. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do. I didn't mean to push." He looked so worried, I felt bad for him, and my anxiety eased a bit in the desire to make him feel better.

“You didn’t—I want to. I mean, I want... something. I just... Damn.” I felt like an idiot.

Eric examined my face, and I could tell he was thinking hard. The moment he got it was obvious as his eyes went wide and he pulled off me. I grabbed for him immediately. I didn’t want him to leave. He didn’t go anywhere but he lay on his side, leaning on his elbow. Only his hand remained on top of me as he slowly caressed my stomach. I felt so pathetic.

“You’re a virgin.” I nodded, but there was way more to it than that. He leaned forward and touched his lips to mine and then pulled back. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “What was there to tell?”

“Well, I would have been a little less forceful, a little more tender.”

“You were—you are—perfect.” There was just that flashback. I hadn’t had one in years, but he didn’t need to know about that.

He smiled sadly. “I scared you.”

“You just startled me, is all. I hadn’t really thought much past the part with your tongue in my mouth and my hands in your hair.” Or really much of anything, if I were honest about it.

“What have you done in the past?”

“Nothing.”

“What does that mean? No intercourse obviously, but no blow jobs?” I shook my head. “Hand jobs?” I shook my head again. “Frottage?”

The formal term coming out of his mouth made me laugh. “No, nothing. I’ve done more with you than I ever had before. There was only one other guy, and we didn’t get to... It was just a kiss and a little groping.” Might have been more if *he* hadn’t found us. If the other boy hadn’t... I shivered.

For a moment, I thought Eric’s eyes were going to pop out of his head. “You mean—” His hand stopped moving, and he started to pull back, but I grabbed for it and tried to keep it in place. No such luck.

“You are my first in everything except what you’d call the basic kiss with minimal tongue and a wee bit of touching of nonsexual body parts.” Now I was terribly embarrassed. Thirty-four and barely been kissed.

He rolled on his back and rubbed his face. “I wish you’d said something. I can see why you didn’t, but still. Fuck.”

I must have misinterpreted everything. He either really did just want a roll in the hay, or he was only interested in someone as experienced as he obviously was. Damn. I sat up and pulled my shirt down then began to climb over him.

“Where are you going?” He sounded upset and started to reach for me but held back.

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to mislead you. I don’t know what I was thinking.” If I could just get to the head before I threw up...

Eric had other ideas though. He took my arm. “Wait. You didn’t mislead me. Please stay.” He gently tugged, and I relented and lay back. “It’s a huge responsibility, and I just want to do it right.”

“What is?”

“Helping someone with their first sexual experiences. Your first time can be exciting and fun, or it can be painful and scary.” He looked more upset than I thought he should.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m thirty-four, not fourteen.”

He pushed me back and leaned over me to run his thumb along my chin. “Right now, I’m the first man you’ve been around for more than a minute in how long? I’m also probably the first gay man you’ve seen in even longer. So I don’t want you doing something because you feel it’s your only opportunity.”

That did it. I punched him in the shoulder.

“Ow!”

“You deserved that. If you think I’m that pathetic, get over it. If I were that desperate, I could have gone into Ketchikan and found someone anonymous to have sex with. You think that I’ve gone my whole life without, to suddenly be unable to survive another day without knowing what it feels like?”

He had the grace to look sheepish.

“We have a connection, at least I thought we did. No one else was ever worth...” Letting go of my fears for, letting go of my past. “...worth the complications.” My face felt tight, and I covered my eyes with one hand. I was frustrated with myself and the situation.

Hopefully that was enough of an explanation. I didn’t have to go into how I didn’t dare get that close to anyone while in WITSEC, how even oral sex in a back alley could blow up in my face and make my moral character come into

question. As I was the only witness to many of the crimes, the case had hinged on my testimony, and I had to be beyond reproach.

The attorneys had never told me I couldn't have sex, although WITSEC had cautioned me against relationships in case they had to move me without warning. But after what I had been through, no way were *they* getting away with what *they* had done. After all that had happened, justice was more important than a quickie. Memories of what I had seen never played into choosing not to have sex; at least I hadn't thought so.

"Crusoe, look at me." He tugged at my wrist. "Please." I lifted my hand. His expression was tender, his smile gentle. "We do have a connection. If we didn't, I would have gone home that first time you showed me the boat." He took my hand and kissed it. "I would have pushed to have sex last night instead of waiting until you made the first move, although I'm sorry that up on deck I couldn't wait any longer. I had to ask you. I couldn't leave without..." He swallowed. "Without touching you like this." He reached for me and rolled me sideways until we were pressed against each other again. "I want you, but I don't want to do anything you aren't ready for."

"I want you, too. So much. I just... I just don't know how far I want to go." I closed my eyes. "That sounds really stupid. You'll be gone in a couple of hours, and I'm a grown man. I just don't want to mess this up. I want you to remember me and think of good things. I want you to remember this—" I opened my eyes and motioned between us. "—and remember it being hot and heavy and not me being incompetent. If what you thought didn't matter to me, I probably would have let you take me back at the cabin last night." Well, maybe. That level of intimacy was still frightening.

Eric pulled me forward and kissed me again. "If you're still interested, why don't we stop talking and just take it as it goes. I'll tone down on the language. I just got carried away because my need for you overcame my language filter." He had a filter? Really? "Do you need me to not talk? It's so hard when I just want to tell you how gorgeous you are."

My face prickled as blood rushed to my cheeks. "That's okay. If you tried to stop talking, you'd probably break something. It wasn't the language. It was the intensity coming on so quickly."

"I get it. You lead and I'll go wherever you take me."

That sounded better, although I wasn't sure about taking charge. Nevertheless, I leaned in and kissed him. The first two seconds were awkward,

and then it changed. Somehow talking about it made things better. It was as if now that Eric knew I was a virgin, I had nothing to prove and another wall had broken down.

Instead of going easy, we got fast and intense right away, me being the pushy one. There were no more flashbacks. This time when he swirled his tongue around my nipples, I slipped my fingers into the back of his pants as far as they would go under the snug fabric. When he lingered too long on my chest, I grabbed his hand and pressed it against my bulge to remind him there were other things on offer.

“Fuck, Crusoe. You are so hot.” He claimed my mouth again as he arched up and rocked his pelvis against mine. I gasped. Then he was back to caressing my sides, but I was done with that.

I reached between us and undid his pants. Giving him my old underwear had never even been considered, so he was loose and free, and my hands were soon filled with what I had been wanting since I first saw them a week ago.

The skin of his erection was soft despite the hardness of its core. It was different than mine, and I broke off the kiss to look as I explored. Above me, Eric sucked in a breath and swayed. I figured that was a good sign and moved one of my hands to his sac which I rubbed and tugged. His hips moved as I stroked.

“Your touch is like fire.” He fell back down and mashed our lips together and then all rules were gone.

I had never imagined kissing someone so intensely. I felt like he was devouring me, and I wanted him to. His hands squeezed one part of me and then another, exploring anywhere he could touch. Without conscious thought, I thrust up against him and whimpered. “More.”

“Fuck yes,” he said. In a matter of seconds he was naked, then he rolled us over so I was on top and he helped me undress. It was agony to stop touching him for the length of time it took to get my clothes off. Then I was back on him and there was nothing between us.

Eric rolled us over again and sat up. “Let me see your cock.” I let him but didn’t stop caressing his hips and arms. “You are so beautiful.” That baffled me, considering the numerous scars criss-crossing my body, but he didn’t seem to notice them. Maybe he was just focused on the important bits. He took me in hand and fondled me until I moaned. His eyes traversed my body. “I can’t believe I’m the first man to see you like this.” The fingers on his free hand

traced one of the bigger imperfections. Maybe he had a thing for disfigured men. "You are a gift you've kept hidden from the world, and I'm the one to get to open it." I rolled my eyes again, but he was looking at my—my *cock* now.

The word was foreign, and I let it flow off my tongue. "Cock. I want your cock." The word itself was mouthwatering.

He looked up at me and grinned before pointing at it. "Right here, all yours." *Yes*. I took all of him in my hands, his sac, too, which felt heavy and solid, yet soft and yielding, and just perfect. I could have held it all day, but his erection grew even harder and longer as I gently massaged it, and I began twisting and tugging the way I liked doing to mine. He groaned. "You're a natural."

All I was doing was what was obvious. I wanted to keep doing it, and also do something else I desired even more. "Stop talking and kiss me."

"Your command is my desire." Our mouths locked, our hands filled with each other's cocks, our hips rocking.

My pleasure was building. "More."

"You're going to be the death of me, Crusoe." He spun us again, and once more I was on top. "Show me what you want."

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and stared into his eyes. "I don't know what I want. I mean, I want to have sex, obviously. I want to... fuck. I want to fuck." Saying the word was surprisingly natural and I grinned. "Yeah, I want to fuck." I laughed. "I sound like a little kid who's never said a bad word before."

"We're not stopping right now for anything, but at some point you're going to have to tell me why you don't curse."

"That's a long, complicated story, and I agree that interruptions are unacceptable, so do something else with your mouth."

Eric chuckled. "Do you have stuff?"

"Stuff?"

"Lube. Condoms." Oh. That stuff. My face must have fallen because he quickly jumped in. "That's okay. We can get close enough for now if you have some cooking oil, or natural lotion. Not something with a lot of additives or chemicals." For now... I really liked the sound of that and refused to think about the reality of the future for the moment.

Instead, I jumped up and found an old bottle of vegetable oil in the galley and brought it back to him. "This looks old, but it hasn't expired yet."

“It will work just fine. Come here.” He pulled me on top of him again. “I need some more kissing. That okay with you, sexy?” I nodded so we did some of that for a while until I was becoming raw from grinding into him.

I was panting when I came up for air. “Please, now, I need more. Now, please.”

He laughed again. “Okay, I’ve got what you need. Do you want to pitch or catch?” Baffled I shrugged. “Do you want to feel like you’re fucking me or like I’m fucking you?”

“Which is better?”

“They’re both wonderful.”

“Why do you keep talking? Just go with it, whatever. I think I’m about to spontaneously combust.”

His laugh was so wonderful, like waves crashing on the shore. “You’ve got it.” He rolled us again and kissed me once more. Then he trailed his tongue along the cleft between my nipples, across my belly and still farther down.

The anticipation was killing me as he descended. Finally he licked the underside of my penis and then swirled his tongue around the tip and into my slit, and I cried out, thankful we were on a boat far away from anyone who might overhear. Eric slipped just the head into his mouth, and I had to grab the base of my cock so I wouldn’t come.

“While I love what you’re doing, I think that it’s going to have to stop if you want to do anything else.” I was like a teenage boy again, ready to go off within seconds of being touched. Only this time it wasn’t me doing the touching, and I wasn’t terrified of the ramifications if anyone found out, and that made it all the more pleasurable and exciting.

“Got it.” Eric pulled off and sat back on his heels. He poured the oil onto my cock and balls and slathered me up. He glided his hand up and down its length a couple of times. “Good?” I nodded. “Okay, my turn.” He oiled up his own erection then grasped my legs and pushed them up and back toward my face.

The magazines under my bunk back at the cabin weren’t there for nothing. I hooked my arms behind my knees and pulled them back. “Like this?”

He nodded and leaned forward to kiss me. I let go of my legs and wrapped them around his waist. It felt really good and then it felt even better as he took

me in hand again, and I reciprocated. We were working ourselves up, and then a finger touched a part of me that I had forgotten had a sexual purpose, too. "Is this okay?" he asked.

Oh my stars, yes. "More, more."

"Pushy." I felt him smile against my mouth. The finger circled around, oil letting it glide gently. Then I felt just the tip slip inside. "How about this?"

"More." I panted as I felt the finger go deeper. It didn't hurt at all, just a little pressure. "More, please more." The finger went in further. "More. More." I began a kind of breathy chant as I was penetrated and the finger pulled back out and then in again.

Then there were two pushing into me. That stung. "Push against my fingers." I tried that and the fingers slipped in more easily. "That's it. You are so tight. Fuck I want to be inside you so badly." I wanted him in there, too.

He began plunging his fingers in and out as he caressed my shaft with his other hand. That meant his weight was on my chest and I loved it. I began gasping with each thrust. He shifted and pressed his abdomen against me so hard I had to let go and grab his thighs before I slid further up the bed and banged my head against the wall.

Then he touched something inside, and I reared up almost throwing him off. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, do that again."

"What, this?" Again his fingers sent lightning up my spine. My prostate. That part didn't show in the pictures in the magazines.

"Yes, oh fuck yes."

"I never thought I'd hear good Boaz using such words." He laughed.

"Shut up, and do that some more."

He did and he did. Then he switched to three fingers and the pressure was more intense for a while until it eased, and I was feeling even more pleasure. Then Eric shifted again, and I felt his cock slide along the cleft between my ass cheeks. He pulled back and this time he shoved his fingers into me at the same time as he moved forward and pulled them back out again as his hand retreated.

He repeated the process, although he kept slipping out quite a bit. "Sorry, this is harder than it looks." It sounded pretty difficult to me, but I was too immersed in my enjoyment to say anything. We got a rhythm going, or rather he did. I did little more than clutch him and enjoy the sensations engulfing me.

“This is my dick inside you. You’re being impaled on me, and I’m filling you.”

I imagined that it was his cock pressing into me instead of his fingers. It was hard when his erection was also plowing between my ass cheeks, but I went with it. He paused to adjust me, pulling one of my ankles over his shoulder and then he was at it again.

“Do you feel it? Can you feel me inside you?”

“Yes. Yes.” The fantasy took hold. I moaned. I envisioned him driving into me and soon that’s what I felt. No longer was I being penetrated by mere fingers but by his sumptuous cock. “You’re fucking me. Please, keep fucking me.”

Soon he was hitting that amazing spot inside me each time he plunged in, shooting me with pleasure, and I moaned each time he touched it. I was lost in sensation, watching his face as he concentrated. When he looked into my eyes, I gasped at the intensity of his expression. He somehow managed to kiss me for a moment, amid everything he was doing, then he slid into me once more.

I really forgot that we were just pretending to be fucking. I had nothing to compare this to, and it was the most amazing sensation I had ever had. I felt like he was driving into me with his whole being. He held my gaze as he rocked, eyes glazed with lust, sweat flying off his forehead and plastering his hair to his cheeks. He was breathtaking. I never wanted this moment to end.

But then it got even more intense, and the moment had to end because I needed to come and badly. “Eric...” He twisted his head to the side and kissed my leg. “Eric, I need...”

“Ready for me to bring it home?”

I could only guess what he meant, but I begged him anyway. “Please, please.” Somewhere along the line he had let go of my erection, probably in the interest of remaining upright, and I was too busy holding on to take care of it myself. I cried out again. “Eric...”

“I’ve got you.” He shifted us again and took hold of my cock which he fondled and rubbed while he used the fingers of his other hand to firmly massage me on the inside, brushing my prostate over and over. His hips kept moving a little but he was no longer able to keep his dick between my cheeks. I started to say something but then he began sliding his fingers into me so fast, curling against the gland with every stroke, and pumping my cock with such

vigor that I couldn't think of anything but the mounting ecstasy as my legs bounced high with every thrust.

"Eric... Oh fuck, Eric? I'm going to—" I moaned loudly. "Eric—I'm, I'm..."

"Come for me, Crusoe, let me be the first person to see that joy. Do that for me. I want to see your beautiful face when you soar. Come in my arms. Let me watch you."

I clutched at the blankets and arched my back even more. At this point only my head and shoulders were on the bed. "Eric. I—" The building sensations were overwhelming me. I felt more pleasure already than in any previous orgasm and still the thrill was building.

My emotions were rising along with everything else. I felt... I wanted to... I was drawn to him in a way that wasn't just physical. Was that what people meant when they said sex was emotionally intimate? My mouth wanted to say things my heart wasn't ready to accept. "Fuck! I'm not a teenage girl!"

How he had a clue what I meant, I didn't know, but he smiled. "Men feel, too, baby. Now come in my arms."

So I did. I let the tide of passion wash over and around me, and push me up over the top. "Eric! I'm coming. Eric!" I shouted over and over as I erupted in spurt after spurt of creamy fluid. My orgasm went on and on, but I heard him yell my name as it was ebbing, and I opened my eyes to watch him peak, too. The look on his face was so breathtaking, it had me rearing up again, and I cried out as I spurted one last time.

We fell back to the bed in a heap. I gasped as tremors continued to wrack me. My lover, *lover*, pulled me close and lay back, covering his body with mine. *My lover*. I liked the sound of that. I pressed my face into his neck and breathed him in, the delicious, manly scent of him.

"Wow." My voice was muffled by his neck but I didn't move.

He laughed. "That good?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, I thought so, too."

Finally I pulled up and looked him in the eye. "Thank you. I never imagined it would be like that. That was incredible." My heart was still pounding in my chest.

"My pleasure. Thank *you*."

I tilted my head. “What for?”

“For letting me be your first. For letting me do that with you at all. For just letting me be here in bed with you.”

My face heated, in embarrassment or joy, or maybe both, I wasn't quite sure.

He looked like he was struggling with something. “I don't usually... it's not like that for me. For some people, sex is often just about power, or is a means to an end. It's not always about pleasure. I'm usually just fine with—” He shook his head and moved toward me to use his mouth in a very different way, stopping me from thinking about what he had said. When I came up for air, I could barely remember what we had been talking about. Eric could really kiss. “You are a gift, Crusoe.”

What do you say to something like that? Talk about awkward. Time to change the subject. “If you call me baby again, I'm going to kick your ass.” It felt freeing somehow to use profanity, like now I was a real man, a man's man. The sex helped with that, too, of course.

“I thought you liked my ass.”

I lowered my eyelids in what I hoped was a sexy look. “It's you who likes my ass.”

“Fuck yeah I do.” He pulled me close for another sizzling kiss and squeezed my butt cheeks—no, my ass—as he devoured my mouth.

Another few minutes passed before I had the strength to pull myself away from that incredible kiss. “I need to make sure everything is okay out there. We're not in a protected cove so I shouldn't leave her unguarded for too long even if we are anchored.”

I climbed out of bed and went up to the galley to fetch a towel to clean us up. As I got it wet in the sink, I peered out the portholes. Everything looked okay. There was a fishing boat a fair bit away but that was about it.

I climbed back down into the stateroom. “Looks good but I still need to get up there.” He reached for me and gently pressed his lips to mine. When I pulled away, he gave me his sexiest smile. I leaned in for another kiss and then a third. My pulse began to speed up again and other parts of me began showing renewed interest. “Okay, maybe it can wait a few more minutes.” His grin got even bigger and he pulled me back down.

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Boarded

At least another hour had passed before I was finally dressed and heading back up top. Outside, rain had drenched the deck so it shimmered beautifully. I loved my boat. Looking across the water, I noticed that the fishing vessel was closer now, and I could see that it was a purse seine. Suspicion entered my mind when I saw their behavior was more than a little odd.

I climbed up to the cockpit for a better look. The binoculars I had up there were expensive military grade field glasses, and they told me everything I needed to know: the seiner was up to something and it wasn't catching fish.

A moment later, Eric joined me, flushed from the sex, his hair mussed more than usual. He was breathtaking, and I wanted to kiss him, but there were more important things to deal with for now. "What's up?"

"Get down." I pushed him out of sight and kept my voice low.

"What?" He resisted, but I had the surprise factor, and in a moment he was sitting. "What the fuck, Crusoe?"

"Shh. Sound carries over water. Please trust me. There's something wrong with that boat out there."

"What's going on?" He now whispered, wary, but listening. His position on the deck kept him hidden by the wall of the wheelhouse, which was good. That meant he was safe for now.

We needed to get out of there fast, but we were stopped cold. I wanted to look cool about it, not like we were turning tail and running, and the time I was taking to get the engine properly warmed up as I would normally, was agonizing. I wanted to push her to full throttle and peel out of there as fast as I could, but that was much too risky.

I was still looking through the binoculars but as discreetly as I could. They had an antiglare coating so there wouldn't be a reflection to give me away, but the boat was close enough that someone might notice that I was watching and not piloting my craft. "Fishing boats don't usually throw their entire catch back. A purse seiner, like that one, might reject some stuff because the whole point is that the net ensnares everything, but they wouldn't throw away the whole haul."

"A what?" He crawled over to the wall and peeked over. The crew was dumping buckets of squirming fish back over the side. The things writhed,

struggling for breath as they fell back into the water. Eric couldn't see that much detail without revealing himself, but the fish dumping was more than obvious. "What the fuck are they doing?"

I had watched them pull up the seine net and dump it on the deck. Now the crew was scooping up the fish with plastic buckets and crates and throwing them back into the water. They weren't even looking at the fish, just shoveling and dumping the enormous haul.

"A purse seine is like a trawler except that instead of having a net that drags through a portion of the water, its net is huge and grabs everything from the surface to the ocean floor. It catches anything too big to slip through the holes. So a crew might throw some stuff back that isn't what they're looking for, but not everything. I think they're looking for something specific. Something big enough to be so obvious in a pile of huge fish that it isn't necessary to look closely." Something big enough to hold a large painting.

He didn't need to ask what they might be searching for. "Shit."

Shit was right. We needed to get out of there, and Eric needed to hide. All bets were off if they saw him. The Knotty Lady was facing slightly away from the other vessel, which meant her stern was visible enough that anyone watching would see Eric descend. The helm was just forward of midship, and the upper deck, which had to be traversed before getting to the ladder to get below, was mostly open.

I would have to turn the boat until it faced full forward, and even then, Eric would need to be careful. Turning toward them also might make them nervous. There weren't any good answers. Although the waves were bobbing us about, currently we were moving in the wrong direction. "We need to get you out of sight but that isn't going to be easy." I explained the problem to him.

He laughed. "There is more than one way to climb down." I hadn't thought of that. My brain was thinking "civilian" not "strong man capable of more than quivering in fear." I didn't insult him by asking if he was strong enough to cling to the side of the cabin and slip in a porthole while avoiding the more exposed windows that left much of the boat open to sunlight.

Fortunately, I had closed most of the curtains when I first saw the big vessel, before I had gone back for another round. I cursed my libido. We would have been out of there by then if I hadn't stayed for seconds.

One of the biggest problems was that the vessel stood between us and our destination. "Okay. We can't go to Yáxwch' right now because the seiner is in

the way. Nor do I want to lead them back to the island. I'm going to set a course for a large land mass in a third direction. It would be better to head in the opposite direction from them, but I don't want them thinking we're heading straight out to sea. That would be rather suspicious."

"Makes sense. What do you need me to do?"

"Hide. I need my go bag, though. Can you grab it and pass it back up?"

He rolled his eyes before carefully slipping over the side. A few moments later, he called up softly, and I reached over the side to grab it. I had the SIG Sauer out and loaded, and the spare clips in a pocket in seconds, just as Eric reappeared over the side. I slipped the gun into the back of my pants, hopefully without him noticing.

It was a stupid place to keep a gun—I could literally shoot my ass off—but the big pockets in the cargo pants were too low to get at quickly, and the barrel would bang against my knee. At least I had taken the time to strap on my knife when I got dressed. I had almost forgotten it—Eric did that to me—but seeing that other boat out there as I came through the sitting area had me returning to strap it on.

"I thought I told you to hide." I covered the gun with my shirt.

"And I thought I was a grown man who might need to know what was going on." He had a point. I didn't like it but he was right.

"Sorry. There's not much to do, though. I'd say act normal but I don't want them seeing you. I need to think."

By now the engine was warmed up enough that we could get going without looking like we were doing anything abnormal. I pretended to finish checking the dials then pulled up the anchor. The engine revved a little as we moved off, despite my attempts to keep silent, but it wasn't loud. A quick glance at the seiner, though, showed that we had been noticed. Someone was already at the side watching us through their own binoculars. Damn. I did my best to look like I wasn't paying attention and went about my business.

"What's happening?" Eric took the binoculars from where I had stowed them and moved to look over the railing.

"No, they're watching us." He sat back. "I think they're turning to come investigate."

"Fuck."

“No kidding. It will take them a while though. They’re bigger than we are, and although their top speed is probably higher due to the bigger engine, maneuvering is more difficult. I don’t plan to be here when they come around.”

“This is my fault, Crusoe. They’re after me and that painting.”

It had been clear to me for a long time that he had stayed on the island because he was afraid of whatever or whoever had landed him in the water a week ago and not just to “regroup.” But I was pretty sure he had believed the thieves long gone before we left that morning. “It’s not your fault. Please stop.”

I eyed the boat briefly as I pretended to adjust something overhead. This wasn’t good. No way would I let them get my lover. “Change of plan.” The best option was to go in the opposite direction than my boat was currently facing. Still trying to move the Knotty Lady as nonchalantly as was possible for a boat, I turned us and slowly sped up.

There were a lot more islands in the direction I planned to go, although we would have to cross the route the other vessel had taken earlier. It would take us closer to the other boat, but it would take them longer to get to us because it was a sharper turn and they were currently attempting to turn in the opposite direction.

I explained what I was going to do. “Maybe they’ll just ignore us when they see we’re just a pleasure craft, but I’m not holding my breath. You need to hide. If they get close enough to see you, we’re in even bigger trouble.”

It was a relief that he didn’t play macho and instead acknowledged that my idea was the best course of action, but he didn’t go quietly. “I’ll hide, but I’m coming out if they board us.”

“No!” The fear that shot through me was concern for his safety, with no regard for my own except that I needed to stay alive to make sure Eric did too. It wasn’t something I was used to. “You need to stay out of sight. I can handle them.”

He looked skeptical. “Don’t be stupid. You’re one man. That ship has to have what, twenty people?”

I scoffed. Ship. Twenty people. The craft was a tiny little thing, barely more than a barge. “Hardly. It looks like they’re carrying more than the usual crew of five, but not by much. I’d say there probably ten people aboard in total, maybe a dozen.”

“Still, that’s more than one person can handle.”

“First, they’re not all going to board us. Most are just men and women who fish for a living. Second, I’m hoping it won’t come to that, but if it does, I’ll just show them around and we’ll be fine. You’ll be hiding in the cargo hold.”

“I’ll be what?” He looked less than thrilled.

“It’s the safest place. They won’t think this is anything more than a pleasure yacht, and it won’t occur to them to look for hidden compartments.”

Even a frown was beautiful on my man’s face. My man. When had I started thinking that? Of course, his consternation didn’t stop him from talking. “You’re being too optimistic.”

Me? I had never been accused of that before. Ever. “Please, Eric. I need you to be safe.”

“What about you? You want me to sit back while you put yourself in mortal danger because of something I’ve done?”

That made me mad. “You didn’t do anything except your job. It’s these jerks’ fault we’re in this mess, not yours. Now please, just get below. You don’t have to get into the hold unless they come really close.”

He growled. “Still, ten of them, one of you. I don’t like those odds.”

I leaned down and kissed him. “I trained from birth for this, remember? Trust me.”

For the first time, I was grateful for all the action movies the marshals watched in our hotel rooms during the early days of my protection because Eric replied with, “I do trust you, but even Jet Lee would have trouble dispatching this many people at once. This isn’t a movie.”

“You’re right it isn’t a movie, and maybe Jet Lee wouldn’t be able to, although I think you’re wrong, but Jackie Chan could do it with his eyes closed and so can I. Well, probably not with my eyes closed. J.C. is way cooler.”

My attempt to ease the tension failed miserably. If he had tried to defend the merits of Jet Lee over the man Chan, we would have been okay, but he didn’t. Instead he kept up with his doubts. “What if they have guns?”

Damn. I was hoping he wouldn’t think of that. But he did, so I pulled the SIG out along with a Glock I retrieved from under the decking. There was a least one other gun in the wheelhouse alone, all licensed and registered, but I didn’t think he needed the details.

His eyes widened for just a brief moment then narrowed. "How could I forget? You always come prepared."

I grinned. "Always."

"You probably have half a dozen different weapons stashed around here, don't you?"

"Fifty-six, but who's counting?" That didn't include the kitchen knives and forks, and the myriad other household (boat-hold?) items that could be used in more deadly ways.

"More guns?"

"And other things."

"Did you hide them better than in the beach shack?"

Oh that. "You're the only one who could find them, I bet." I caressed his upper arm.

He smiled. "I'm feeling better already." The smile disappeared. "But not good enough that I want to hide while you do the fighting. I work out. I can bench press two forty. That's more than you weigh. It's more than I weigh."

Our boat was getting up to a good clip while the other vessel was still turning around, but we didn't have time for this.

"You haven't been trained as a mercenary, right? I have." More like assassin or black ops spy, but that was immaterial and would only serve to make him distrust me as a person. "Eric, it will make my job harder if I have to worry about you. Plus, you need to keep the painting safe."

"Oh please. You sound like some idiot action flick guy, right before he does something that's impossible within the laws of physics. As hot and sexy as you are, you're still human. And I can put the painting in the secret hold."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The other boat had turned around now and was speeding up. I needed to focus before they caught up. "Well, how about this reason? You're untrained and we haven't worked together so you're unpredictable. I don't know what you'd do in a given situation. If some guy pulls a gun, I know which way I'm going to zig to unarm him, but you might zag and end up getting one of us shot."

He paled. "Fine. But if shots are fired, all bets are off." He crawled for the wheelhouse wall.

“Eric!” He turned back. “Please listen to me,” I begged. “That’s the worst time to come out. That’s when *I’ll* be trying to hide.”

His hand paused on the railing while he at least hesitated.

“Please. I’m anxious just thinking about your safety. I need to get in the game. Please don’t come out for anything. Please.” He had to listen. I had to make him hear me.

White-knuckled and with steam practically coming out of his nostrils, he glared at me while he spoke through gritted teeth. “How will I know when to come out?”

Relieved he had acquiesced, I thought for a quick moment. “I’ll tell you it’s time for Knotty Lady Shrimp. And keep your life jacket on. I don’t have time to save your hypothermic butt again.”

That didn’t get the grin I was going for, but he didn’t argue. “I won’t get into that claustrophobic hole in your hull, though, until I hear you say the word ‘crab’. Be loud.” He turned away, then angled his head back slightly so I could hear him over his shoulder. “If you get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive you.”

Then he disappeared over the side, but I was sure I heard him whisper “jackass” as he went, which almost made me smile. I didn’t think to tell him to put something waterproof in the hold for him to sit on so he wouldn’t get soaked by the cold water, but he probably would figure that out by himself, perhaps the hard way.

I was relieved that I could now focus on what needed to be done. Eric had gotten me all turned around on the island, not knowing who I was inside or what I truly wanted. He’d ripped apart the hidden loner and pulled something better from within my heart. He knew me as an awkward softy with a dry sense of humor who liked to share random trivia and carve wood into rodents and historical playwrights.

But now it was time to become the person I was literally born to be, the man I kept hidden, the one who had been conceived for just one purpose. Eric needed me to be on my game, and I slipped into my cold, emotionless, survival mode, familiar and natural.

Only this time there was something deep inside that inner shell behind which I stuffed anything distracting like emotions, and it wasn’t entirely hidden. A small but powerful flame burned, reminding me of the absolute necessity of preventing the death of someone I cared about. That was my mission: Keep Eric alive.

The seiner was my primary concern for now, and I ran through different scenarios and possible outcomes while keeping an eye on our course and heading. There was no longer any doubt that the other craft planned to find out what we were doing. Her nets had been reeled up, no longer piled on the deck, and she was heading straight for us at a much faster clip than was really reasonable.

Going about my business with a feigned indifference, I tucked a few more goodies into my pockets. I kept my life jacket on but made sure the straps didn't block my hands. I still needed to play the dopey boat owner out for an afternoon cruise, so I slowed down as the seiner drew closer. I wasn't sure I could outrun the other vessel anyway.

By the time she was within shouting distance, I had stopped the boat and was clinging to the railing with a rain hat on. If we were anywhere else, I would have added zinc to my nose. Here, though, that would peg me for a poser for sure. I pretended to stumble as small waves rocked my rum-runner as they pulled close. I had to admit the fishing boat's skipper was excellent. She reversed engines at just the right time to coast up and match my speed even as I was decreasing to stop.

"What the hell are you doing?" I tried to look indignant but as innocuous as possible. "You could capsize me with that thing!" The other boat pulled up alongside, a mere twenty feet between us now. "Watch out!"

Still maintaining the fiction of an ignorant landlubber, I hurried across the upper deck and jumped down to the lower. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" No acting had been included in my training and only sheer luck would help me pull this off.

A man walked over to the bulwark of the other boat and smiled at me as they pulled closer. The vessel was much bigger than The Knotty Lady, but the deck was about the same distance above the water, standard for a purse seine. "Sorry about that, man. We've got a bit of a problem. Permission to board?"

I shouted as loudly as I thought sounded reasonable. "Hell no! I don't want my boat stinking of CRAB or whatever it is you're hauling." Hopefully Eric had heard that and had gotten to safety.

The man didn't notice how loud I had been on that one particular word and just smiled and spread his arms. "Do I look like a fisherman? I've only been on board a couple of hours. I just want to talk."

“You can talk from right there. I don’t let strangers on my boat.” The seiner was practically on top of me now. A couple of big men had grappling hooks which they were using to latch onto my railing and pull us closer. “What are you doing? Go away!”

“Aw, don’t be like that. I’ll only take a few minutes of your time.” Now that he was closer, I could see that he was completely average. I’m not sure what I was expecting, maybe a dirty scoundrel, arms-smuggling type or a debonair aristocrat, but this man was ordinary, completely forgettable.

He was average height and weight, had brown hair cut in a nondescript style, and was wearing clothes you’d find in any department store. Over these he had a clear rain poncho that covered most of his top half, just his soaked forearms and lower legs sticking out from underneath the plastic. A moment later he was joined by an equally average woman similarly attired. It didn’t look like either was wearing flotation gear. So, not experienced sailors.

I didn’t make the mistake of thinking they were harmless, though. There was no telling what was hidden beneath their bland exteriors. “Well you’re not being very polite, and I’m not in a talkative mood.”

They ignored my words. “Where’s your friend?” The woman’s voice was as average as she looked. The whole normalcy had me on edge. If I were trying to hide in plain sight, that’s exactly how I would dress and hold myself. It actually was what I was trying to do.

“What friend? I’m alone.”

“Now don’t be that way.” The man’s voice was grating. “We saw him. We just want to have a little chat.”

No way had they been able to recognize him if they really had even seen that there were two people aboard. If they had identified Eric, they would have headed over sooner.

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m alone. Now release my boat and let me be on my way.”

That wasn’t happening anytime soon. The two vessels were now flush, and the men had dropped their hooks to rope the boats together. Another woman, previously unseen, stepped up to the edge and climbed over. She was someone new, not the captain who now stood on deck ordering her people about. After securing the vessels, the two big men joined her. All of them looked and dressed like thugs.

"Now see here. You are trespassing. You do not have permission to board me." I sounded like I should be wearing khakis and a polo shirt. Perhaps I was playing it a bit too strong. I wished I had Eric's skills.

Thug Woman snorted. "We gave ourselves permission." Her cronies laughed.

"I want you to leave." Obviously that wasn't going to happen, but I wanted them to continue to think I was stupid so they would underestimate me.

"I'm sorry, but that isn't going to happen. We really just want to talk," Ordinary Man said as he hopped over. By now Ordinary Woman had also joined us on my deck, which was getting much too crowded.

"Then talk."

"Well, we really want to talk to both of you." I was really beginning to hate the man's voice.

Thug One poked his head into the cabin. "No one right here. We'll check the rest." He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket and stepped down into the salon, followed by Thug Two who had a hand in a pocket, as well. Subtle.

Thug Woman not so gently pushed me to sit on the far bulwark. I went along with it for the time being, but slid over until I was in the corner. She didn't stop me, thankfully, probably figuring that "corner" meant "cornered." Wrong.

"What do you want? I don't have anything. I'm just out for a cruise. Getting away from it all, you know?" I realized I had no compunction about lying and evading the truth with criminals.

Ordinary Woman sighed. "Knock it off. Where's the painting?"

Ordinary Man glared at her. Most likely he was going for a more indirect method of interrogation.

"What are you talking about? What painting?" This was getting tiring.

Thug woman glared back at Ordinary Man, then looked at me. "Don't play dumb. We ran your vessel name while you were just sitting out here doing God knows what. There's no Knotty Lady licensed out of Alaska, Washington, or B.C. other than a single commercial fishing boat out of Juneau. You don't look like a commercial fisherman to me."

She crossed her arms. "Your boat is too big not to be licensed. You're either a long way from home, or you're hiding something, or you're an idiot for being out in open waters without a legally licensed boat."

My license had expired? That was news to me. Guess I had missed that notice in my nonexistent mailbox. Oops. The bank probably wouldn't be too happy about it, either. The woman was right that it was suspicious for an average weekend boater to forget to relicense his vessel.

"I'm guessing you're hiding something." Ordinary Man had decided he was no longer playing Mr. Friendly. "Where's the painting?"

"What painting?" I hated repeating myself. I hated talking in general.

He sighed. "Okay, we'll play along for the moment. If you aren't looking for the painting, why are you sitting in a vessel in the middle of nowhere doing nothing in an unregistered boat?"

They thought I was looking for the painting? Huh. All right, time to drop the idiot tourist act and move on to annoying jerk. So, what was I doing? "I like fish."

Ordinary Woman narrowed her eyes. "Why aren't you fishing?"

"Why aren't you?"

Her nostrils flared but she didn't take the bait. "I repeat the question. Why aren't you fishing?"

I shrugged.

She slapped me, but I saw it coming and flowed with it so it barely registered. "Try again," she snarled.

"Don't feel like it." Neither fishing nor answering.

Ordinary Man stepped in. "Then what are you doing here right now? Why did you drop anchor?"

"Sleeping."

"In the middle of the afternoon?" Thug woman looked dubious.

"It's called taking a nap."

Ordinary Woman butted in. "You're a very active sleeper. We saw you walking around. Naked." She smirked. Thug Woman chuckled.

"\$200 for the peep show. That's U.S. dollars in case you get any funny ideas. Pay up."

Her smile disappeared. "Do you think this is a joke? Mr...?"

"Yep." Did she really think I would give her my name?

She growled. "This isn't going anywhere. Where is your friend?"

"What friend?"

"Don't play coy. You were naked. You fags were undoubtedly playing hide the sausage." Ordinary spat the words with disgust.

"I'm not sure what that is. Maybe you could demonstrate."

This time the slap missed me completely. Ordinary Woman wasn't as good at hitting as Thug Woman, no surprise. The latter was built like a cement truck. The male goons reappeared. "Nothing below."

"He's got to be somewhere." Ordinary Man grabbed my jacket. "Where is he?"

"Fishing?" I found I loved being annoying.

Ordinary Man not so much. He slugged me. I rolled with it, grabbing his arm and twisting him. He was in front of me, blocking my body and head, my knife at his throat, in seconds. I was still perched on the gunwale and most of his body was between my legs, but I had the knife angled in such a way that if he tried to drop, he would slash his own throat.

A moment later, three guns had left their pockets and were now cocked in my direction. Luckily for me, I had a nice big shield blocking my important bits. From my position in the corner, no one could get a good angle from which to shoot me.

Keeping my head behind Ordinary Man's, I raised my voice to make sure they could hear me. "Now that wasn't very nice. I thought you folks just wanted to talk." Since I had showed my cards, the game had changed. I was very proud of the metaphor as it came to me. It felt very pop culture, a particularly weak area of mine.

"Let him go." Ordinary Woman was not pleased.

"Get off my boat." I pulled the knife toward me a little and felt Ordinary Man's skin give. The cut wasn't deep, but I could smell blood. He whimpered.

"Give us the painting." Thug Woman wasn't happy, either.

"Get off my boat."

For a moment, I thought Ordinary Woman was going to stomp her foot. "Where is the other man that was here?"

"Get off my boat."

Broken record was a good technique for not getting into arguments. On the other hand, it tended to make people angry. Thug Woman was no exception. "I'll give you to the count of five before I shoot your face off."

That was unexpected. "You may have failed to notice that someone else's head is in the way," I pointed out.

She broke into the nastiest smile I had seen in quite a while. "I don't care. He's expendable." The whole situation shifted on its axis as I realized I had been wrong about who was in charge. Looks can be deceiving.

In my arms, the man jerked a little but didn't say anything. Maybe he hoped she was bluffing.

"Ferguson! You can't shoot Steve!" Ordinary Woman shouted. *Ferguson. Steve.* That totally fit him.

Ferguson snarled but she didn't take her eyes off me. "Good fucking job saying our names, *Cathy*. I didn't want this jackass to know who we are." *Cathy.* That fit her, too.

Cathy glared back, hands on hips. "Oh shut up. You're going to kill the guy anyway. Who cares if he knows our names?" She turned to glare at me.

Ferguson's jaw tightened. "I wasn't planning on sharing that particularly tidbit just yet. Tends to stop cooperation."

"Like he's cooperating to begin with." Cathy rolled her eyes as she said the words, still glaring.

Thug One stepped in and asked, "What now? Atherton's not here."

Cathy was getting exasperated. "Where the fuck do you think he went? That water's too cold and there's nothing nearby. He couldn't have gone anywhere. Look again."

"Fucking bitch." Thug Two said the words quietly, like he meant to keep them under his breath, but he hadn't been trying very hard. Cathy ignored him. She had probably been called worse. I had some ideas if he was interested. Most were less gender specific and sexist, and more anatomical.

"Where is he?" Ferguson enunciated carefully, her attention back on me.

Hopefully safe. I had a sudden vision of someone accidentally pulling the secret lever while searching, releasing the contents of the hold into the water. Talk about cold shock. Then figuring out how to get out from under the boat

without being cut on the rotor, which although stopped now, was still sharp enough to be dangerous. Or it could catch the strap of something, say a life jacket... I needed to stop thinking about it.

"How about you all introduce yourselves so I can put names with faces?" Apparently they didn't find me as funny as Eric did because no one even smiled. *Eric*. I hoped he was okay. I didn't allow myself to dwell again, though. I really needed to stay focused since I wanted to get us both out of there alive.

"I'm getting sick of your shit," Ferguson said to me as she cocked her gun and pointed it at Steve's head. A horrible stench filled the air. Yuck. I couldn't really blame him, but I wanted to throw the man and his urine soaked pants away from me. I wasn't that stupid though. Perhaps Ferguson had no compunction about shooting Steve, but I wasn't going to take her word for it. I still wanted his body blocking mine.

"Don't kill him yet. We may still need him. We'll go look again." That said, Cathy looked at the two thugs and pointed at the entrance to the cabin. The men headed inside with her trailing behind.

These were much better odds. Over on the fishing boat, only one person was paying any attention to us. He stood smoking a cigarette and drinking something from an insulated mug, sitting on a crate like he was watching a show. All he needed was popcorn. I didn't discount him, but I doubted he was much of a threat at this point. He was dressed in fishing gear including a thick flotation coat. Unless he had a gun, he was not an issue at the moment.

Ferguson's voice pulled my primary attention back to her. "It's just us now, and I've already made it clear I don't care about Steve. Give me the painting and tell me where Atherton is, and I'll make your death quick and painless."

"Forgive me if I don't quite trust you." I sounded calmer than I felt.

She grinned. "You're forgiven since you're right not to." She lowered her gun and shot Steve through the chest, but the movement before she pulled the trigger gave me time to dive out of the way.

Steve's screams punctuated the air as I flipped and came back up with throwing spikes in my hands which I proceeded to fling at Ferguson. Cargo pants were cool. I thought I heard a muffled bang from inside the cabin just as one of my projectiles hit Ferguson in the hand she was aiming with. The other sunk into her hip.

"Motherfucker!" she yelled.

The gun went off again, but I was already swinging myself up the side of the cabin to the upper deck. I took in that the gunfire on deck had drawn other members of the team outside.

I also noticed that the fishing crew just stood there with their mouths open. Idiots. None were taking any precautions that I might be the one with the gun and might turn it on them. Not that I would have. Their biggest crime was probably greed.

Thinking about them, was a waste of time, so I ignored them and bolted across the upper deck. No one had thought to take out the radio and hopefully I had a chance to signal the Coast Guard. I hadn't called them before the jerks boarded because I hadn't had anything to report. Now was a completely different story.

But I didn't have a chance to do more than lift the mic, because I heard one of the goons already scaling the ladder and probably drawing a bead on my back. I dove through one of the side openings of the wheelhouse as bullets began flying past me, shattering the windshield. I heard Ferguson screaming to maim not kill me, and Cathy screaming that she hadn't signed up for this. Well neither had I, so I didn't have a whole lot of sympathy.

I caught a handhold on my way over and used it to twist myself around the corner of the cabin and onto the foredeck just in time to avoid the bullets flying along the gangway. The deck was bigger and wider up here, which meant it had fewer hiding places, but it did have a porthole to the main sleeping compartment below.

I turned as Thug Two rounded the corner. It was hard to hit a moving target, but I was still very good, despite being somewhat out of practice. Twice a week I shot at stationary objects, but it had been a while since I'd had a live adversary. My bullet met its target, though, and I heard the guy cry out, but I was already aiming at the smashed windshield when Thug One peered down.

As I shot him, I heard a loud splash from the other guy hitting the water. The boat was bobbing roughly from everyone running around, so my aim suffered, and I only grazed him. He grunted as he fell back.

Cathy poked her head around the corner just before I dove head first through the portal to the stateroom. Rainwater was now leaking onto the bunk, but that was probably a lower priority than staying alive. It still came a close second. I had plans for that bed when we got out of this. They would have to

wait, though, because when I sprang up from where I landed, Ferguson was waiting for me with a pistol in one hand and Eric in the other.

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Besieged

My heart fell through the deck when I saw him. Survival mode went out the window, and all I could think was that I had failed him.

"I'm so sorry." My words came out in a croak but he grinned and shrugged. How he could look so calm, I had no idea. Inside I was falling apart.

"Drop the gun," Ferguson instructed. I dropped the gun. "Move it or boyfriend gets it." She stood to the side, pistol jammed in Eric's ear. Smart choice. Most people would have aimed for the temple, but the ear would keep the weapon pointed at the brain and such a close range shot would kill just as thoroughly as one from anywhere else.

I noticed that she hadn't removed the throwing spike embedded in her hip. Also smart. That deep, it had hit enough blood vessels that right now it was probably the only thing stopping her from bleeding heavily. She moved a little stiffly but not too badly. Apparently she was resilient in addition to being intelligent. Her hand wasn't doing as well, judging by the red paper towels twisted around her fingers, but she still had a tight grip on my lover. Apparently I needed to sharpen my weapons.

Ferguson's voice betrayed her pain. "I said move it!"

I moved it.

The galley and salon were quite hazy as we passed through, and smelled of sulfur. Back outside, the deck was awash with Steve's blood, although he wasn't anywhere in sight. A wide stripe of red across the bulwark made it clear where he had gone. He probably hadn't died from the gunshot, but it didn't matter anymore. Eric and I were the only ones wearing life jackets. Hopefully Davey Jones's Locker had room for non-sailors, too.

Thug One was checking the clip in his pistol, looking hale and hearty, no blood even showing through the tiny hole in his jacket sleeve. Thug Two was clutching his collarbone but was breathing when he hauled himself over the stern and fell onto the deck to join our little party.

There was a quip there somewhere, but I wasn't in a mood for games anymore. With Eric's appearance, everything became real to me. Not that it hadn't before, but I had spent so much of my life surviving what well-trained killers thought was childrearing, the situation really hadn't phased me.

Seeing my peaceable lover held hostage by these vile people had brought home the finality of the situation. When I had the upper hand, it was fun to banter. Now they had everything that mattered to me, not that the list was long, but the two things on it were priceless, and really, I was pretty sure I could survive without the boat. I had nothing.

“Pat him down,” Ferguson instructed the men.

Thug One strode over. It took a few moments for my weapons to be found and deposited in a nearby bucket. He looked impressed. Ferguson looked appalled. I just shrugged. Eric looked like it was exactly what he expected and maybe a little proud. That made it worse somehow. I had wanted and hoped that he would never see this side of me.

“Get rid of it,” Ferguson ordered.

The man looked a little reluctant, and maybe a little envious, but he picked up the bucket and dumped it over the side. The weaponry didn't matter. There were plenty of other deadly things within reach. What I needed was to get control of the situation as soon as possible. It was ridiculous that five people had managed to outsmart me on my own boat.

Cathy came around the side, and although I kept my focus on the gun Ferguson had sticking in Eric's ear, I noticed that Cathy was limping. “Why didn't you kill the bastard?” She directed a venomous glare at Eric.

Ferguson looked furious. “We need him.”

Amazingly, Eric was smirking.

I looked from him to Ferguson and back again. “What happened?”

“Ask lover boy here.” Ferguson snarled as she shook Eric.

His easy grin was disconcerting. “The short one's smart enough but doesn't have any common sense.” He must have meant Cathy. Ferguson was huge. “While everyone else was going after you, she stayed behind to look for me. Alone. Unarmed. I wasn't.” I narrowed my eyes, and he shrugged again. Why hadn't he stayed put? “This boat is a floating arsenal. I bet you've forgotten most of what you've stashed here.”

I wanted him to stop talking and giving away my secrets, but Ferguson didn't look at all surprised. Eric kept going as was his habit. “She found me—” Oh. “—but I used some kind of smoke bomb thing I found before I hid.” That was the bang I heard and also the smell.

My little pocket smokers also made noise in order to confuse someone into thinking they were hearing gunfire while impeding their ability to see what the sound really was. The odor was just from the components. Smoke bombs were one of my favorite weapons, but it sickened me to think of Eric having to use one.

"The woman now was startled, and when she backed away, she slipped and fell. She was getting back up when this woman," he indicated Ferguson with his thumb, "came running. By then the smoke was pretty thick and she tripped over the other one. I had grabbed the coffee pot, and when she fell, I took the opportunity to smash her head with it."

That was when I noticed that Ferguson had blood clotting her hair, and if I wasn't mistaken, a lump growing beneath the mess. She also had blood dripping from her jaw. My own jaw dropped a little, but I managed to keep my lips closed. My wonderful Eric had subdued two professional violent criminals with a smoke bomb and a coffee pot? He even looked pleased with himself. I could have kissed him. In fact, I very badly wanted to.

"I would have gotten the short one, too, but she's wily," Eric said with a smirk.

Cathy glowered behind him. "Shut up."

"She's more agile and slipped out the window. I only had time to whack her in the leg before she was gone." He grinned as he spoke.

"I said, 'Shut up'!" Cathy yelled at him.

"However, unlike Jet Lee or Jackie Chan, I can't handle even two people at once. It was still hard to see through all the smoke, so I tried to sneak back to the... bathroom?" He looked at me, eyebrows raised.

"Head," I explained, although I really wanted Eric to stop talking. Maybe he was trying to distract them to give me time to do something. But at the moment, there were too many people for me to get us out of the situation and still keep him safe.

"Head, right. I went for the head and almost made it. The big one couldn't see, either, so she grabbed for the closest thing to pull herself up. Unfortunately, that was me." He looked regretful. "Sorry. Although I have to say she fell again when I wasn't a sturdy enough wall to use to pull herself up. That's when she banged her chin. I felt bad about that." He didn't look at all apologetic. "Okay, I'm lying. It was the highlight of my afternoon. Since they boarded us, I mean. The things before were *much* better." He winked at me.

Now I wanted to punch him. He wasn't taking this seriously. Still I was impressed. How he had done all that in the space of about two minutes, I had no idea. I also wasn't sure what his plan was. Maybe he was trying to keep them angry and liable to make mistakes.

That sort of made sense, if you watched too many action movies, and I appreciated the attempt, but it was a dumb move. Making people like these angry was likely to push them into doing something rash. Unhinged bad guys made for dead good guys. I probably should have remembered that earlier when I was using Steve as a shield.

"Ferguson." Next to us on the fishing vessel, which I was beginning to think of as more like a pirate ship, Thug One stood with his foot on the gunwale. "These assholes are trying to leave. They're saying guns aren't in their contracts."

It hadn't escaped my attention that the crew had finally all disappeared, which was quite impressive given how small the pilothouse was and how open the deck.

Ferguson swore. "Let them. This boat will do just as well. The painting is here somewhere." She jabbed Eric with the pistol. "Where were you hiding? Where's the painting?"

"What painting?" Eric was still egging them on.

I glared at him and shook my head. Stop baiting the guys with the guns.

"Very funny. Where is it?" Ferguson shook him a little.

Cathy chimed in. "It wasn't in the bolt-hole where he was hiding." It wasn't? Then where was it? "The thing is sloshing with water."

"Where is it?" Ferguson shouted at Eric and jammed the gun in his ear again.

I jumped in to distract her. "What painting are you talking about? I haven't seen any painting. This is a boat not a museum."

Ferguson gave me her full focus instead of just half. "The Agony of the Martyr, and I know you have it because Atherton would never let it out of his sight." It wasn't in his sight right now, but unlike Eric, I wasn't about to bait them anymore.

"I don't know what you've been drinking, but this man washed up on my shore without even a stitch of clothing on. There was no way he was hiding any painting."

“You’re lying.” Ferguson spat the words.

Thug Two was clearly in a lot of pain, and he finally lost it. “Give us the painting, you dumb fuck!” He stood and tried to march over but he had lost too much blood, and he staggered and fell to his knees. He wasn’t doing very well. I was pretty sure I only hit his collarbone, but maybe I nicked something major. Whatever thing he had wadded against his neck was completely saturated in blood and he was very pale.

The jerk on the seiner threw a few bags of crap onto my deck and started to untie us. The bleeding man looked panicked “Carmichael, wait. Get me over to that ship. They can get me help. I need a hospital ASAP.” *Carmichael*. Thug Two’s words were slurred and blood began dripping down his chest.

“Scholtz, are you nuts? We’d all be arrested. We’ve got at least attempted murder now. That crew isn’t blind. The only way we’re getting away is if we all go. If they don’t have you lying there bleeding, it will take a lot longer for anyone to believe their story and come looking for us.” *Scholtz*. Now I had all their names. Carmichael returned to his task.

Scholtz wasn’t giving in. “You guys’ll be long gone, and I’ll make sure nobody says nothin’. I’ll tell ’em I got harpooned or somethin’.” An image formed in my mind of him lying on deck with a spear sticking out of his gut, and I almost laughed. Well I thought about it anyway.

Carmichael was clearly disgusted. “On a trawler?” Purse seiner, but the point was moot. “You’ve got a bullet in your neck. You’re a fucking idiot.”

Ferguson apparently agreed. “Scholtz, shut up, you’ll survive.” I wasn’t so sure. “Cathy, get us underway.”

Cathy groaned. “I haven’t driven a boat in years, Ferguson.”

“I’m sure it’s like riding a bike. Take us back to base.” Ferguson still hadn’t broken eye contact with me or I would have made a move.

“Fine.” Cathy climbed up the ladder and disappeared. I hated the idea of her touching the helm of my boat. If she damaged anything, I would take it out of the woman’s insides.

Carmichael finished untying us, jumped aboard, and called out to the crew on the other boat. In moments, the vessel was pulling away. He grabbed the bags and disappeared below.

Ferguson stared me down. “One last time. *Where... is... the painting?*” Good question.

Mimicking her, I spaced out my words, too. "I... don't... know." I wasn't even lying. I really didn't have a clue as to where Eric had hidden it.

"Well then, if there isn't anything you can tell me, I suppose I can just kill you both now." Her finger moved on the trigger.

"No!" I yelled. She probably didn't have any intention of shooting him, but I couldn't take that risk. "It's back at my hideaway. We were just hanging out there, until you folks left. We thought you were long gone, so today we were going into port to call the authorities." I felt the boat rumble under my feet as Cathy got us underway.

"Hideaway? Are you for real?"

Sue me for not being up on the jargon. "Whatever you want to call it, it's a remote beach house and there's no one else there. That's where we left the painting." Eric looked at me like he couldn't figure out what my plan could possibly be. That was two of us.

"You expect me to believe Atherton would let that thing out of his sight?" Ferguson looked skeptical but not completely disbelieving. Behind her, the fishing boat was gaining speed, leaving us jostling in her wake.

"Do you really think he would let something that valuable onto a ship this size in this kind of weather and environment? The thing already got soaked. It's still drying." That much was true, wherever it was. Evading the truth without lying was one of my better honed skills.

Her eyes bugged out. "It got wet?"

"Your stupid case was open when it fell off the boat. Water got in," Eric chimed in. His charming grin was gone, and in its place was a snarl.

"Fuck!" Ferguson was red in the face.

Near the stern, Scholtz was prone on the deck. Blood was running down his side, joining the pooling water, painting the whole deck pink. It was not a good color for my boat. I nodded in his direction. "Your buddy doesn't look good at all. He needs a doctor ASAP."

"Who cares? Less money I have to pay out. Where is this 'hideaway' of yours?" Nice woman.

"Let me up into the helm, and I'll get us there." I tried to look cowed, but it apparently had been too long since I had practiced that particular ability.

She laughed and growled at the same time. "Oh you're funny." It was worth a try.

I decided to bargain. "Get that gun away from Eric's ear, and I'll give you the coordinates for my estate. You'll have to take us with you, though, because the painting is hidden." She had no idea how tiny my little cabin was. Calling it an estate was a riot.

Ferguson stared at me for a moment. "Carmichael."

He came up from below. I hadn't forgotten him; I wouldn't make that mistake. He was very dangerous, the kind of miscreant who listened rather than spoke, who watched and waited for the right moment. He was like me, although lately I had been doing a lot more talking than I had ever done on any training mission. Yes, he was just like me, and he was truly deadly.

"Toss Scholtz overboard." Ferguson didn't look at either one of them as she spoke. She wasn't dumb; she had her eyes locked on mine. She knew I was the Carmichael of our side.

Scholtz was unconscious, so he couldn't protest as the other man dragged him to the side of the boat and threw him over the gunwale. The body barely made a splash as it hit the water. Carmichael didn't even get any blood on his clothes. I would have to learn that trick.

"We'll do it your way, but you're only buying time. We're going to get the painting, and you're not going to stop us from selling it." We didn't need to. The Pacific had taken care of that for us. "Cathy!" Ferguson shouted.

The woman appeared above. "What now?"

"New plan." Ferguson raised an eyebrow at me. I gave Cathy the GPS coordinates and she disappeared again. A moment later, the deck tilted a little as our course changed.

The rain was already washing Scholtz's blood away. Steve's was mostly gone from the gunwale. Eric was staying quiet, but he didn't appear to like that we were heading back to the island. I didn't either, but as she said, I was buying us time.

"Carmichael, I think the boys here need a little assurance that we mean what we say." Like live people being dumped overboard hadn't already cleared that up for me. "Take him." She shoved Eric at the killer. I sucked in a breath, but I waited to see what her plan was. The gun was now pointed at me. "Rough him up a bit." Although she directed her comments to the man behind her, she never took her eyes off mine.

Panic, a heretofore unknown-in-adulthood feeling, slammed through me. It was all I could do to not shake and somehow appear outwardly calm. "That's not necessary," I managed.

"Oh I think it is." But she didn't let go of Eric yet in passing him off. Her hand had stopped bleeding so her grip was tight, but she still looked like she was hurting from the wound in her hip. I hoped I could use that at some point.

I looked at my lover, and I was sure he could see the fear in my eyes, but I didn't see any in his. He smirked as if to say, "I can take it."

No he couldn't. Maybe he was planning something. That was even worse. "You know, I don't know where the painting is hidden. He doesn't trust me enough. We've only known each other a week. He took care of hiding it." I was babbling, anything to keep her attention on me and away from Eric.

"Like you wouldn't know where it was stashed in your own home," she jeered.

"It's a big house, and he hid it while I was getting the boat ready. It's beautiful, by the way, the painting, although the manor is too." My little hut was getting delusions of grandeur.

Ferguson scoffed. "You expect me to believe he just happened to land on your island without planning? That he drifted all that way to conveniently wash up at your door—naked as you claim—convinced you of his story, you bonded and started fucking, and then you planned this elaborate scheme? That's ridiculous."

Well put that way, it did sound a little far-fetched.

"Carmichael, just hurt him a little. Don't want to mess up that pretty face of his." Eric was handed over, and I stifled a shout. Nothing I could do would make it better, and getting upset would only make it worse. If they knew how much he meant to me, they'd be that much rougher with him.

It almost killed me, though. I didn't want to watch while the reprobate pounded Eric's body. My lover fought back, and he got a few blows in, but he was no match for superior skills and was quickly overcome. Eventually, he just lay on the ground trying to protect his body from the kicks and punches. He grunted as the air whooshed out of him, but he didn't make any more noise than that.

I had never felt more rage and helplessness than in that moment. This was even worse than when Eric was so upset on the beach. He wasn't just feeling emotional pain; someone was inflicting physical pain in addition to the

psychological kind, and on top of his existing injuries that were still healing. I was against needless death. This man's was necessary. I vowed he would get his just reward, and Ferguson, too, for ordering it.

For her part, she was leaning back against the cabin wall, a smirk on her face, the gun loose in her hand. I wasn't fooled, though. She wasn't stupid and had never taken her eyes off me. She was still well balanced, and though I was fast, she would shoot me before I could reach her, despite her obvious pain. If I jumped out of her way instead, she'd shoot Eric, an easy target. I hated her.

Finally the beating stopped, and Carmichael stood back. I was pleased his lip was cut and his face puffy. I would bet money that in a few hours he would be sporting some bruises the size of my lover's fists, assuming Carmichael lived that long, which wasn't a bet I would make given the way things were going. So probably it wouldn't be a good idea to make the first wager either. I could see Eric breathing, but my anxiety wouldn't ease one iota until I could examine him and make sure he was okay.

This had to end. I looked into Ferguson's eyes and showed her all the cold-blooded, raging evil that I had suppressed all those years. I wanted her to see who she was really dealing with. I wasn't disappointed when I saw a moment of fear in her eyes. I dismissed her with a lazy blink and then turned back to my lover.

He was slowly uncurling until he was sitting, breathing heavily, but in one piece. To him, I only showed affection and concern. I wanted to say something reassuring, but I wasn't good with empty platitudes. I was beginning to think I wasn't much good at all.

Eric didn't pause more than a moment. He slowly pulled himself to his feet and to his full height. He straightened his shirt and life jacket then looked at me with his customary grin. "Well that was invigorating. What's next on the agenda?" Although I wanted to hit him myself for goading them, inwardly I smiled at his inner strength and audacity. I really, really liked him. A really, really lot.

"I would like to sit down. Is that all right with you?" My sitting would make everyone relax which could only help. I was just as lethal sitting on my ass as standing on my feet, which I had demonstrated when I had injured Ferguson earlier.

Her memory was failing, or maybe she was just tired and in too much pain. She nodded, no longer smirking, most likely still reeling from my stare earlier. It was a pretty scary look; I had practiced in the mirror.

I sat down and stretched my legs. On the other side of the boat, Eric did the same. I met his eyes and again let him know how much I cared. He blinked in acknowledgment and then sent the same emotion back at me. If I hadn't already been sitting, I might have fallen.

His emotions were staggering. If it hadn't been only a week, I would have sworn what I saw was... but no. Intense situations, like the many that had happened over the week, heightened feelings, made people believe things were real that weren't. Regardless, I vowed I wouldn't let him down. I would get him out of this.

Carmichael had been thorough when he searched me, but he hadn't gotten everything. I still had a garrote inside my waistband. I would have to get close to make use of it, but it was still something that I knew I could utilize. I didn't really need it, though. There were plenty of things within reach that could be used as weapons, not the least of which were my hands, arms, legs, feet, and teeth. I didn't fight fair when I was fighting to survive. I just needed the right opportunity.

It came sooner than expected. The place where I had lived the past four years drifted into view only a few minutes after I sat down. Eric was sitting slumped on the bulwark while Carmichael stood at ease but wary, a few feet distant. I could work with that.

I had slowly maneuvered the garrote out of my waistband while we'd traveled, and as I had pulled it out, I had fed it under my T-shirt. Now I had it ready and waiting. I pointed to the island with my chin. "There it is. Told you."

"Hmm." Ferguson glowered but she took her eyes off me for just a moment to peer around the side of the cabin to see for herself. That was all I needed. In one swift move, I kicked her legs out from under her and used the slickness of the deck to slide across to Carmichael.

He had noticed the moment I moved and grabbed for his gun, but he made a fatal error. He turned to point it at Eric, but my lover was already gone over the side. I was only a little worried; he was wearing a life jacket. As long as I took care of these beasts while he was still in sight, he'd be fine.

In fact, I was going to thank him slowly and thoroughly when we were done. If he'd still have me... Who knew what he would think about the trained killer he had probably figured out I was. I hadn't killed anyone directly, but Scholtz had died from my bullet. Maybe with luck, Eric would think it had just been a lucky shot.

I could dwell on that later. I used my momentum to spin and kick at Carmichael's legs, but he was up on the gunwale already searching the water. Oh no, that wouldn't do. I screamed at him, not in anger, but simply to distract him from looking for Eric.

It worked and he turned quickly, but not soon enough to avoid the small buoy I had launched at him. He stumbled, but didn't fall. Behind me, Ferguson had quickly recovered, and I hoped her aim wasn't as good as mine. It wasn't, at least on a rocking boat, and the shot went wide.

I was already on my feet, and I swiveled away from the direction Carmichael evidently expected me to go, avoiding his shot, too. Creatively, I used the garrote by casting it out, flicking it around his wrist, and pulling. His gun flew from his grip, and I caught it in midair turning as I did so to shoot Ferguson as she aimed at me.

Her bullet grazed my foot but she went down with a thud as her pistol went flying off the boat. Then Carmichael was on me and we struggled, fairly well matched. He tried to get the gun but I sent it sailing rather than let him get his hands on it. It wasn't the right weapon for a struggle that close. Unfortunately, the man managed to flip me, and as I swung around, he whacked my head against a ladder strut.

Although it only kept me down for a second, it was enough, and he had his arm around my throat in a choke hold he knew how to use. He also knew how to protect his body from my flailing. I couldn't reach his eyes, ears, or genitals. Gouging his legs and arms was ineffectual, but I didn't give up easily. Eric was out there and needed me.

I moved us and tried to bash his head against the same strut. He coiled up and avoided it, but I had already seen what I needed. Ferguson had managed to get her hand on Carmichael's gun and was aiming it at me, so I used the motion he had started to roll us straight into her path.

The bang was loud but the concussion was more distracting as the bullet plowed into Carmichael's back behind me. For once my luck held, and what must have been hollow point rounds shredded his insides instead of traveling through him to hit me as well.

We weren't done yet, though. Even as I felt Carmichael's body go limp, I was flipping over and onto Ferguson in seconds. She was too weak from her injuries to aim quickly enough, and I knocked her out easily.

I quickly whirled around to take care of Carmichael but he had already joined his comrades in death. Ferguson might wake up, but I doubted she would be able to do anything. Still I chucked the guns into the cabin—they would be needed for evidence—and rushed to the stern to find Eric.

He was nowhere in sight, and I lost my mind. “Eric!” I screamed his name as I jumped up on the gunwale to get a better view. How could I not see him? We were no longer moving, and even at sea level, from my height I could see at least three miles. I screamed again. “Eric! ERIC!”

“He’s long gone.”

I spun around. *Cathy*. In my terror, I had forgotten there was someone steering the boat. Sloppy, sloppy. In my head, I heard *his* sneering recrimination. I had messed up, and Eric was going to die.

The monstrous woman stood at the top of the ladder, yet another fucking—yes, fucking—gun pointed at me. “He’s dead, and now that I see your little island, with the tiny little cabin over there, so are you.” She pulled the trigger. I only had a second to think anything as the projectile sped toward me, but my grief for Eric was overwhelming. And here I had thought she was the least dangerous of them all. Sloppy, sloppy.

I felt the bullet slam into my chest, puncturing not just my flesh, but my inflatable life jacket as well, rendering the flotation aspects useless. I should have shelled out for the full parka that didn’t need to be inflated. Cathy wasn’t using hollow point bullets, although it hardly mattered. Those just would have killed me more quickly.

I was unbalanced by the impact and the motion of the boat sent me dropping off the stern. But as I fell, I saw Cathy collapse in a spatter of blood. Behind her stood Eric wearing a look of horror and anguish that I could just make out before the waves closed over me.

The effects of the gunshot and the look on my lover’s face wiped my training from my mind, and I gasped and breathed in water. I shouldn’t have been able to think of anything in that moment, shock should have wiped my mind, but I did. I thought of Eric, and I was glad he was alive and had survived. I succumbed to the cold, the drowning, and the loss of blood, my mind at peace.

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Bloody

Cold.

It was so cold. The chill entered my very soul and endured for eternity. Blessed numbness should have taken it away, but there was no reprieve. And there was pain, so much pain. Cold, cold pain.

Shouting. Movement—like waves. My name. Movement not like waves. My name being screamed. *Crusoe*.

Icy torment pulling me from the peaceful dark. It hurt so much.

“Goddamnit, Crusoe, don’t you fucking die on me!” Something clawed at my arm and blinding agony shot through me. I might have screamed.

“Boaz, listen to me, you goddamn motherfucker. You fucking stay with me or so help me—”

Loud noises. Thwap, thwap, thwap.

Sobbing? Someone was crying. *Don’t cry*.

Other voices. Shouting. Words I couldn’t understand. Even more pain. How could I hurt any more than I already did? Why couldn’t I get warm?

Someone please turn up the heat.

Eric’s voice, *Crusoe*.

Eric.

Say it again. Crusoe. I loved that name. How could I have ever not loved that name?

Really loud noises. Other movements. Falling. No, rising.

Eric’s hand. That was Eric’s hand, I knew it was. I would always know Eric’s hand.

Eric. Alive. He was alive, that was what mattered. *Thank you, God.*

I felt the passage of time but still the iciness inside endured. It was so very cold...

“Crusoe.”

Fuck off.

“Crusoe, I know you’re in there.”

Fuck off!

“Crusoe, come on, baby, wake up. Please. You’ve had your fun. It’s time to come back to me.”

FUCK OFF!

Cold...

Blinding pain shot through me, pushing back the arctic chill just a little. I screamed.

“Crusoe? I’m here.”

Hurts. Breathing was excruciating. This pain was as bad as anything I had felt in my life, maybe worse. I was still freezing. Breathing was becoming a problem.

The sound of something hitting hard plastic came from by my ear. A button being pushed frantically? *Eric.*

“I’m calling a nurse, Crusoe. They’ll help you. You’re going to be fine.” He didn’t sound like he was telling me the truth, and that concerned me. Even when he was lying, Eric sounded like he was being truthful. I could sometimes see through him at those times; I thought that maybe I was the only one who could. But barely. Now he sounded scared, and like he was lying, which was disturbing. I didn’t want him to be upset.

I opened my mouth to reassure him, but the pain was too much, and I ended up crying out instead.

“Stay with me, baby, it’s okay.”

Someone else was there. Then something filled me, wrapping me in numbness, away from the hurt. Hauling me back under.

“You’re going to be just fine. The doctor said so.” Eric’s voice was beautiful, a rich and solid sound, but now it was thick with emotion, and he still sounded frightened.

I heard what sounded like a snuffle. “Please be okay.”

I was freezing, and I was tired of it.

Somewhere deep was horrible pain, but a wall of something thick and cottony inside kept that at bay.

But not the cold.

“Crusoe, if you don’t wake up I’m going to scuttle your boat.”

Why couldn’t I get warm? I had never been this cold in my life. I would rather have the pain.

“Seriously, the thing is old and worthless and now it’s covered in blood and bullet holes. I think we should just burn it.”

What was happening to me?

“Although if we did that, what would be the point of Knotty Lady Shrimp?”
Shrimp?

“You got your Ketchikan shrimp, your Seattle shrimp, your dog shrimp...”

Eric?

“...hard shrimp, easy shrimp...”

Eric.

“...the tried and true Rock ‘n Roll shrimp, *Rocky Horror* shrimp...”

Enough with the shrimp. I tried again. “Eric.” Well I made a noise anyway, although it sounded nothing like a name.

“Crusoe?” Blazing, fiery heat touched my hand. It was the most wonderful sensation ever. “Hey baby, that you in there? Did you say something?”

“Not... baby...” It would have been easier to speak with rocks in my mouth than with whatever was misfiring somewhere inside. I tried to open my eyes but they felt glued together.

“Crusoe. Thank you, every god that ever lived.” My face was peppered with dabs of white hot heat. I revised my earlier analysis; *those* were the most wonderful sensations ever. They even made the aching barely noticeable. Then the warmth left for a moment that felt much too long, and I heard shouting. “He’s awake!” Then the sensations came back, white hot strokes on my cheeks and one hand. “Open your eyes, baby. The lights are really low, it won’t hurt.”

Liar. Everything hurt. “Not... baby.” That sounded a tiny bit better.

“I couldn’t quite hear you.” I could hear his smile. “You have to open your eyes so I can figure out what you’re saying.”

That made no sense whatsoever. I tried to open my eyes. This time I managed just a crack, not much more than when I had watched Eric jack off. I smiled inwardly at that. He fucking jacked off in my bed and didn't even ask me to join in. *Fucking jacked off*. Why had I refused myself such delicious language? The words tasted sweet.

"Did you just say 'fucking jacked off'?"

I smiled.

"Oh Crusoe, baby, I love that smile."

"Not baby." Inside, the pain barrier cracked and the hurt started seeping through. I think I whimpered.

The infernos he called hands rubbed up and down my wrist and across my brow. "What, baby?"

Someone else came in the room and bustled about. Things beeped and plastic snapped. It got even colder as the covers over my other hand pulled away and someone else touched my arm.

I jerked away from icicles masquerading as hands. I managed to push my eyes open a bit then snapped them shut. Yes, Eric had lied. It was way too bright.

"I'll be just a minute Mr. Egan, then I'll get you a fresh warm blanket." A deeper voice, not Eric. "We're glad you're back. How are you feeling?"

In pain that was beginning to be something much worse. The dam staving off that hell was beginning to crumble. I didn't like the man with the hands that were like ice floes sliding along my skin. I tried to ignore him.

"I'm here Crusoe."

I shivered. "Hurts. Cold." An overwhelming crush of agony flooded me as the wall came down inside. This time I whimpered for sure.

"I'm giving you something for the pain now, Mr. Egan." Deeper Voice.

"Okay baby, okay." *Eric*.

He rubbed my hands and then pulled away. I tried to reach for him but sharp, frigid, spikes of pain lanced through me.

"I'll be right back. Where are the heated blankets?"

"Just across the hall. I was going to get them in a minute." Deeper Voice sounded annoyed.

“Let me. Be right back.”

“Eric.” It was all I could manage.

He chuckled. I loved that sound. “I promise.”

I figured I would reward him when he came back, so I practiced opening my eyes. It hurt like hell, but nothing like what was ravaging my chest. By the time Eric came back, I was squinting.

His smile was so bright I almost had to close my eyes again. “There you are.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed it, then kissed my forehead.

“Hi.” I almost sounded human, if human meant dying frog beast.

“Hi yourself. You’re going to be fine; the doctor said so.” He took away the old blankets, and I nearly screamed when the air touched me, but he immediately laid the new ones down, and I felt a very slight bit better. He piled the old ones back on top, and I appreciated their reassuring weight. “She’s a really good surgeon. Fixed you right up.”

I reached for him. “So fucking cold.”

My lover’s brow furrowed as he stopped fussing over me. I really hated seeing him unhappy. “Still?”

“Yeah.” Coughing sent more spikes of agony into my chest.

He looked behind me, at the nurse, I presumed. “Can you do anything for the chills?”

“Sorry. I just gave him more antibiotics and pain medication in his IV. Maybe that will help. I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake, Mr. Egan. I’ll see if you can have anything to drink.” The nurse finished his duties and left.

Eric still looked worried. I wanted to make him happy. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” He looked baffled, not happy.

The pain had ebbed enough that I could get out a few words. “For letting them hit you.”

Now he looked angry. “I’m not a child, Crusoe. Just because I’m not a secret spy, or whatever the hell you are, doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself.” He stilled, and his face fell. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get her before she shot you.”

“You did get her though. I’m proud.” I smiled and blinked sleepily. I didn’t think I was supposed to be happy Eric had killed someone. Still. Something

was coming over me that made me fuzzy and a little giddy and a lot tired. I nearly giggled. That would never do. The wall blocking the pain was being rebuilt and the discomfort receded. Discomfort. *Is that what they're calling it these days?* I remembered hearing that recently but I couldn't quite place it. "So proud."

"I did, didn't I?" His grin was worth the freezing cold that wouldn't go away, but I didn't have much time to enjoy it as I gave in to that woozy, floaty feeling and slept.

Next time I awoke, it was dark, and I was alone. For what was probably the first time in my life, I hated it, both the dark and the loneliness. And the cold. It was still freezing, and I started to shiver. I suspected I would never be warm again. Eric had left. He knew I was alive and would survive, so he could leave guilt free.

I tried to tell myself that was okay. I had known he would go soon. I had just hoped he would have said goodbye. Now I was shaking and in pain, and the dark wasn't curbing my fears. I was alone now for real.

What was I going to do? I didn't even know where I was or what was wrong with me. Well, gunshot wound, yeah, but how bad was it? What damage had been done? Was I paralyzed? Moving my feet and arms a moment helped push that particular concern down, not that the limbs moved well. But other doubts surfaced.

Light. I needed light. Where was the call button? Where was everyone? Maybe some plague had flooded the earth and only isolationists survived. I was so panicked, I didn't even realize how stupid that was.

I had worked myself up into quite a state when just a couple of minutes later, Eric walked in holding a large cup of coffee and a bag of chips. "Hey, you're awake." He smiled in the dim light coming in from the door, but that quickly turned to a frown when he looked at my face.

"Light, light—I need the light." It came out in an anxious rush.

"Of course." He put his things down and turned on a light that lit half the room. "That enough?"

"Yeah." I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax. "I just—" Talk about being a child. Even a little kid would tell me I was being a baby.

"What is it?" Eric sat down and took my hand. His heat trailed up my arm.

“I was just scaring myself. Must be the drugs.”

He smiled. “That, and being shot can really fuck with your head. Are you still cold?”

I nodded.

“Here.” He pulled off the lid to his drink and slipped in a straw he took from the rolling table. “It’s just hot water. I was going to make tea. The doctor said you could drink now that the anesthesia has completely worn off.”

I took a sip. A little warmth spread from my mouth to my throat and down my chest. Better. I took another sip.

“Want more blankets?”

“No thanks. They don’t do much.”

“Does anything help?” He caressed my forehead. It felt wonderful.

“That.”

He raised his eyebrows then squeezed my hand. “How about this?”

I nodded.

“Well then, scoot over.”

Yes, that might work. I scooted back. The pain was a lot more bearable now.

“The other way.”

I shifted forward. Eric had to help me when I got tangled in cords and tubes and blankets. But he got me straightened out, blankets properly arrayed, then he kicked off his shoes and climbed in behind me. He curled around my back and put one arm under my head and the other around my waist.

“That better?”

Yes, finally. I felt heat seep into my back and from there spread into my arms and legs. For the first time since I had fallen into the water, I felt warm. “Mm hmm.” In moments I was asleep.

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Type 5: Special Use

Hospital

The next day I felt much better and the next better still. It turned out that I wasn't in Anchorage or Seattle as I had feared, but a hospital in Ketchikan to which I had been airlifted. The trauma center was plenty sufficient to handle a gunshot wound. In Alaska, with all the hunting, they probably got them in all the time.

Eric stayed, and they let him. Despite how conservative the state was, no one gave us a hard time. I figured his big bad muscles didn't hurt, and I was none too scrawny myself, if a bit shorter.

When I worried that Eric was needed back at work, he brushed off my concerns. "I'm the boss. If I can't take a few extra days off, what's the good in owning my own company?" He had a point.

Eric also explained where the pieces of the painting had been. When he was belowdecks waiting for my signal, he had taken the time to hide the pieces properly. He knew that if the thieves found him, they would have the painting. Even though the art was in pieces, it was still extremely valuable, and he didn't want the thieves anywhere near it. He was even more concerned that if the villains (his word, not mine) realized the painting was destroyed, they would have no reason to keep us alive. He wasn't as confident of my secret hold as I was, thank God.

He had taken the scraps and rolled them up in one of the dry bags that contained things I wanted to avoid getting wet, an ever-present possibility given it was a boat and all. He grimaced when he described how he'd had to coil the pieces to fit them into the sack. Not trusting the technology of the waterproofing, he had placed that bag into another, and the whole thing into a third. My lover was nothing if not protective of artwork.

He had thrown in anything heavy he could find to weigh the bags down so they didn't float to the surface. He had then tied not one but two cables to it, just in case one failed, he said, which he had then looped through holes in the edge of the hold's grate floor and fastened them tightly. He had flipped the hidden lever, which dropped the whole lot into the water and closed it again. The bags trailed below the boat, hidden from sight, and all that could be seen were two little bits of cable looped through the grate.

Knowing nothing about boats let alone secret cargo holds, Cathy had no idea that those loops meant anything, if she could even see them above the

water sloshing up from below. All she did was lift the tarp Eric had been sitting on, in order to check for the painting underneath. Seeing nothing but seawater, she had assumed the painting wasn't hidden there.

I was really impressed. It had never occurred to me that the hidden hold wasn't secure enough, and the only reason I wouldn't have been quite as inept as Cathy in finding the bags was that it was my own boat and hopefully would have noticed something amiss. I assured Eric that he was brilliant, and that if my rum-runner's boat makers were still alive, they would throw him a party and offer him a job with their next project. He rolled his eyes but accepted the compliment with a kiss.

When I was well enough to carry on a conversation, including not only staying awake for one but also leading it, I thanked Eric for saving my life. I wanted to be really alert for the discussion because it was important to me that he knew how much I appreciated him. My discomfort had receded to where I was able to do with only a couple of blankets and could sort of sit up in bed if it were angled just right.

Thankfully, Eric refused to let go of me, always touching my arm, my leg, or holding my hand. Although he acted like everything was normal, I thought that maybe it was his way of assuring I was still there and hadn't died. He played it cool, but I could tell that inside he was still getting over the ordeal. As for me, the physical connection was a reminder that I wasn't dreaming.

"I can never thank you enough for what you did."

"Well, I figured I owed you." He grinned.

"No, rescuing you was the best thing that ever happened to me." Being shot had made me a little demonstrative, and I was still adjusting.

"It was good for me, too." The sexual innuendo and the lewd look was vintage Eric.

"Sure. Being alive is generally better than being dead."

He nodded. "That it is." He trailed his finger along my arm, and I realized he was trying to avoid the subject. It looked like he was as uncomfortable with praise as I was. "There are so many great things you can do when you're alive." He tried for lecherous, but he was obviously more affected by the conversation than he wanted me to think.

I was flooded with memories of the day when I had found him lying among the flotsam and jetsam. It seemed so long ago. Then I pictured that gun pressed

to his ear, and Carmichael beating him, and I had to swallow hard. Driving the thoughts back took a bit of effort, but then I was able to ask questions about my rescue.

“How did you get back on the boat and up to the wheelhouse while I was fighting Carmichael?”

“Before I fell in, I grabbed one of those white things that hang by a rope...?”

“Ship bumper?”

“Yeah, that. I grabbed it because I saw that they’re tied on, so when I fell in, I was still holding onto the ship in a way. A bonus was that I kept my arms and hands out of the water so they took longer to go numb.

“Mercifully, the fall was a lot shorter this time and less painful. I held on until the boat slowed to a near stop. I’m glad that was fast because I wouldn’t have been able to hold on much longer. At that point, I swam toward the prow. That’s the word, right?”

I nodded. I hadn’t thought about the boat still moving, and it rattled me that he could have been lost from sight so quickly. The ocean is big and a person is very, very small in comparison.

“So I swam toward the prow but I could see it was too high up. I was so pissed off, I barely even felt the cold. It was probably numbing my aches and pains.” That made sense. “I had to swim back a ways, but no one was watching. Climbing back on was still challenging with my fingers nearly numb, but I obviously made it.

“The cabin wall kept me hidden until I got up over the side of the wheelhouse thing. That woman who was supposed to be steering was over by the ladder watching what was happening to you in the back—”

“Stern.” I corrected him because I knew it would be distracting, and he looked like he was working himself up a little. He was swallowing a lot and the knuckles of the hand that wasn’t touching me were white.

He rolled his eyes. “Stern. She was watching the stern and didn’t even see me coming. Thankfully she was in the process of stopping the boat before I even fell in, maybe as soon as she heard the first shot. It still took me a while to catch up and reach the front.”

I was pretty sure shots weren’t fired until after Eric fell off the boat, well except in the beginning before he was even captured. The timeline of events

was still mixed up in my head a little, though, because of the physical trauma, so I went with it. It hardly mattered.

“By the way, you really aren’t as great at hiding weapons as you think you are.”

That was amusing. “No one other than you has ever found my stashed inventory.”

He looked smug. “Well, you had one under the dashboard which was in plain sight.”

“Only if you were lying on the deck and craning your neck up underneath and behind the wheel. And it’s called the helm.”

“Whatever. I found it easily. Criminals always hide guns there.”

I frowned. “I’m not a criminal.”

“I know.” He kissed me lightly on the lips. “You just think like one.”

He was right. I had been trained by the best. I would have to find new places to stow my weapons. “You knew how to shoot.”

“It’s not difficult when you’re two feet behind your target.”

Good point. “Great job anyway.”

“The hard part was getting your scrawny ass out of the water. Your life jacket failed to inflate.” For a brief moment, I thought I saw fear or horror in his eyes, then he blinked and it was gone.

“They tend to do that when they have holes in them. And my butt isn’t scrawny.” Okay, still working on that profanity thing. “Butt” was better than “bottom” or “derrière” at least.

“But you, my brilliant man,” Eric leaned over and kissed me again, “were wearing one that the Coast Guard guys called something like a hybrid? One that’s supposed to be inflated but also has stuff in it that will float on its own?” Oh yeah. “The jacket didn’t inflate, but there was still enough buoyancy to keep you afloat until I got to you. Plus it was the type that you can survive in the longest.”

Nodding, I explained. “Most of the ones I looked at were too bulky around the neck. The sales guy said these were more comfortable and safer and that a lot of seasoned boaters use them. I just thought it looked cool.” No I didn’t, I couldn’t care less about looking cool. I had just bought what he showed me to

get out of the store as fast as possible because I was getting claustrophobic, but of course I looked it all up because knowledge was power.

I continued. "There are five types of life jackets, and I had a choice between Type 1: Offshore Life Jacket, and Type 5: Special Use, which is what all the people on commercial fishing boats use. They're the ones that are full jackets like a parka, or complete suits. Type one can be made of foam which is why it's bulky, or completely inflatable, or a hybrid of both. The others types aren't good enough for our waters so far from shore. I should have gone for the full suit that protects you from the cold—What?"

He was grinning. "I love it when you talk all smart." He kissed my forehead. "I'm glad you got the right kind." He looked a little upset again. "I would have been really pissed if you had just had an inflatable one."

Okay, subject change. "This gut shot in me is pretty big. I'm kind of surprised I didn't bleed out." For some reason, Eric looked guilty. Maybe that wasn't the best new subject I could have chosen.

Eric bit his lip. "I called for help before I got you." He wouldn't meet my eyes, and instead turned his head away a little. His expression was dark, which wasn't like him at all, and I hated it. "I was already up top, and I really didn't know if any of those assholes were still alive, so I radioed for help before I jumped in after you. It was so hard, and I feel really horrible that I did that first."

I reached for his chin and turned him to face me. "Look at me." He lifted his eyes warily. "That was probably one of the smartest and bravest things you've ever done."

"Huh?" He looked puzzled.

"An average person would have panicked and either started screaming or jumped in after me. You kept your head and called for help first. If Ferguson had gotten free, she could have killed you, and no one would have ever found our bodies, let alone rescued us. If you weren't able to get us back to the boat, we would have eventually frozen to death or drowned. It's the whole putting on your own oxygen mask first thing. That's why what you did was so smart."

I saw that he was at least listening and continued. "Despite your indifferent facade, you are a good guy and care about people. I know it was hard to see someone go down. But still, you did what needed to be done before you came after me. That's why it was so brave."

His eyes were intense as he stared at me. “You’re not just ‘someone.’” He fisted his hands in the front of my hospital gown where it peeked above the blankets. “I thought you were dead.” The cloth pulled further around my body as his fists tightened. “I’ve never been so scared in my life.” He pressed his forehead to mine. “Don’t ever fucking do that again.”

“Okay.” I tried to laugh to lighten the mood, but my chest still hurt, and I was a little emotional, so all I managed was to titter a little. “Don’t worry. I’ll try to avoid getting shot again. It really isn’t very fun.”

He chuckled at that and pulled back to look at me. “Good. I’m kind of fond of you.” He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine and that ended any conversation for quite a while. I thought I should write a book: *Fast Healing through Kissing*. But then I would have to remove my tongue from his mouth long enough to even dictate the thing, and I really didn’t want to ever stop kissing him.

When he slipped his arm around me to pull me closer, I forgot about the book idea and the pain, and just melted into his embrace. Yeah. Making out with Eric was way better than getting shot. The only thing better was having sex with him, and although that was not in our immediate future, I pulled him down onto the bed, and showed him that I was kind of fond of him, too.

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Hotel

I healed quickly and grew stir-crazy fast. I was used to being alone, living by myself in a shack where I could not only smell the waves, but practically feel their thunder from my bed. It had been days since I had even been outside let alone going the miles I was used to walking and running every day.

For his part, Eric did his best to keep my mind occupied and as many people away as possible. But there were doctors and nurses, and detectives with questions that were difficult to answer. When an adorable therapy dog and her equally adorable human came bouncing into the room one day and I nearly bit their heads off, I knew it was time to go, regardless of doctor's orders.

The hospital didn't really fight me. I was much better and they needed the bed. Medical facilities kicked patients out as soon as possible because insurance companies didn't want to pay. I didn't even want to think what the stay was going to cost me since I didn't have insurance, living off the grid as I did. The hospital probably worried that I would stiff them.

They might have been right, as unintentional as it would be on my part. I had some money, but this could end up costing a fortune. Hopefully they had a payment plan. Someone just made me sign a form, took one last set of vitals, then plopped me in a wheelchair and shoved me out the door, good riddance. I agreed.

Eric had booked a hotel on the outskirts of town for me to stay in until I figured out what I was going to do. I couldn't go back to the island yet, not when the nearest medical care was hours away by boat. I needed antibiotics, follow-ups, and physical therapy for starters. So a hotel it was, at least until I was well enough to live on my boat. I could moor it nearby and have access to what I needed.

When Eric opened the door to the mini suite, my jaw dropped. "This is your idea of a low to midrange hotel?" He must have had a lot more money than I thought.

He surveyed the room. "Not nice enough? I can get you something better. I thought you'd be more comfortable here since it's close to the water and quiet—"

"It's huge. You could fit my whole cabin in here and still have room for the outhouse and my boat."

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, and since your boat is quite a bit bigger than your cabin, you should have mentioned that one first.”

“It sounded better the way I said it.” I looked at the room again. It was luxurious. Perhaps my judgment was a little off, given my recent living accommodations, but this was nicer than any hotel I had ever stayed in, and I told him so. “I’m a simple guy, I don’t need this.”

He looked sheepish. “I just wanted you to have a nice place to recuperate. It’s the least I could do. I nearly got you killed.”

“Don’t start that again.”

“Okay, fine.”

I sat on the bed to test it out. It was very comfortable. I leered at him. “This is the biggest bed in the biggest room we’ve had access to together.”

He grinned. “That it is.”

“I think we should see if it’s worth the money.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough? You don’t want to pull your staples out.”

“I can handle enough movement to make it work. We can’t do what we did last time, but we can still have fun.” Anything more strenuous would have to wait.

Erik leered. “I’ll just grab the free lotion from the bathroom.”

So much for using something without a lot of additives or chemicals. Well, needs outweighed preferences sometimes.

Sometime later we lay in each other’s arms, sated, and I would daresay glowing. I was content and drowsy, but I didn’t want to go to sleep just yet. I was enjoying myself too much.

Eric turned to look at me. “I love being here with you.”

I grinned. “It’s not bad.”

He smiled, too, but his face was sad. “I can’t stay here forever.”

Why did he have to go ruin a perfectly good moment? But he was right. “I know.” I shrugged. “You’ve got responsibilities. Life goes on.”

“You almost died.” His voice was thick. “I almost lost you forever.”

“But you didn’t. I’m here. I’m fine.”

“Yeah, but—” He choked on his words.

I pulled him close, and we held each other awhile. Eventually we slept.

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Hope

"It's time to go." I was trying to look strong and cool, like Eric's leaving didn't matter, but inside I was such a mess of emotions, I couldn't sort them all out.

"I know." Outside, the town car he had rented was already packed with the clothes he had bought while in town and the souvenirs he was taking back to his employees and friends. He wasn't pulling off his whole "whatever" look any more than I was.

He put on his coat, then I handed him a bag with food for the plane. I picked up the portfolio with the remaining pieces of the painting and held it out. Eric still had to deliver them to his employer. Their final disposition would be up to whoever it turned out had owned the original work. For now the remains would be sealed away in a vault as previously planned.

The case hung between us for a moment before he took it and put it down. He pulled me close. "Come with me. There is so much more I want to know about you. I think I got maybe a paragraph of that complicated biography of yours. I want to hear all of your stories." He laughed. "I never finished telling you about my scintillating art and language studies. I have a whole lexicon of romantic phrases in Russian, Hindi, Indonesian..."

I pulled away, and he ran his fingers through his hair like he wasn't sure what to do next, like he knew he needed to go but wanted to wait until the last possible second.

"I should use the bathroom one more time. I hate airplane toilets." He walked away from me to do just that, and I didn't point out that he'd have another opportunity at the airport.

My breakfast was fighting back. I rubbed my stomach to alleviate the nausea and walked out onto the balcony to get a breath of sea air. Were there even natural bodies of water where Eric lived?

He had a point about there being so much more for us to share. I had never confessed my sins, and I knew that soon he would have to deal with the psychological ramifications of killing someone. Maybe sharing my past could help him through it. He was strong, but the worst days were yet to come. He pretended that nothing bothered him, but I knew this would. Could I leave him to that?

Maybe I needed his help, too, because by my count, I had killed three people that day. Although technically Ferguson shot Carmichael and threw Steve overboard, I had shot Scholtz, and the reality was that I was instrumental in all three deaths. I doubted it was very likely, but maybe I would need someone to talk to at some point as well. Maybe, and it was very much a maybe, someday I could tell Eric a lot more about my past, things I tried not to think about, things I only remembered in dreams.

Then there was the fact that this whole thing wasn't over. Ferguson had confessed she had been hired and wasn't the originator of the crime but didn't know specifically who was, what with all the black ops-like precautions the person (or people) had taken. She had also revealed that her employer had masterminded other heists, at least one of which Eric had thwarted. Whoever it was must still be angry with him. I looked back at the bathroom door. Was he still in danger? Who would protect him?

The toilet flushed and water ran in the sink. Finally Eric emerged. "I just remembered something else. You also agreed to let me sell some of your art. I can't do that easily with you hell and gone." He lifted his eyebrows expectantly like that was a huge selling point.

I smiled. "That's what the U.S. Postal Service is for." At his look, I shook my head. "Yes we have mail service in this 'hell and gone' place. We even have the Internet, I've heard. Now that I'll be living on my boat, I can come into town, and we can email each other whenever we want. We can even use that Skype thing." The look on his face made me feel like a salmon shark had bitten into my heart.

"Crusoe, please. You nearly died and that... that kind of freaked me out." He looked at the floor. "I've realized that I'm not ready to let you walk out of my life just yet. I'm still getting to know you, and I'm just not done with you yet." His tone was light, but his words still surprised me. "Email isn't good enough." I could tell that admitting that made him uncomfortable when he went back in the bathroom like he had forgotten something.

It was true; I had almost died. I almost died doing what I had considered safe: going from where I lived to Yáxwch', something I had done more than a dozen times over the past four years without incident. What was safe? I could die at any time. There were numerous things out there that were deadly, not just the people I was running from.

I could blame Eric for bringing Ferguson and her cronies to my world, but there were many more nasty people out there. Even if Eric hadn't washed up on my doorstep, the art thieves might have found the island and the bits of painting in the shallows and tried to kill me anyway. Without Eric, no one would have even known I was dead until months down the road when Dzóox' worried because I didn't show up for my seasonal supply run and sent someone to check up on me.

Eric hadn't chosen to bring misery to my door; he hadn't done anything wrong. Bad people were out there and if not those men, probably someone else would have shown up eventually. Could I really stay hidden away from the world forever? Did I want to be alone and isolated the next time something bad happened? Hell, I could choke on a piece of crab or get appendicitis and die simply from being alone out in the middle of nowhere.

When Eric came back in the room he looked at me intently, waiting for an answer, as if the question were simple, like whether I wanted an apple or an orange with my lunch. He knew I was hesitating. I had been going back and forth on the decision since we'd left the island, and I was obviously still waffling. We both knew that when he left, the urgency would diminish and we both might just let it go.

He tried one last time. "We haven't had a chance to make Knotty Lady Shrimp. I'm sure I could come up with something fantastic, and you have to be there to taste it. I wouldn't want to inflict it on any unsuspecting person without trying it out on someone with poor taste buds first." His smirk was impossible to resist, and I chuckled.

What would my world be like without Eric's sense of humor? Being around him was so wonderful. Could I go back to that sad, lonely, nonexistence I had been surviving? Five minutes of thinking I was alone when I was in the hospital, and I had nearly fallen apart.

It wasn't that I couldn't be physically alone or away from him. We hadn't been around each other 24/7 since I had gotten out. He went browsing for gifts, and I abhorred shopping. I went on my daily runs, well more of a fast walk right now, and I enjoyed some alone time when he slept in. But knowing he would be in my bed at night felt so good.

It finally sunk in that he was right: email wasn't enough. I wasn't ready to give him up yet, either. With the decision finally made, I felt depression seep out of my bones and something a little like joy but a lot like terror work its way in.

I pretended to weigh my options. “We do have great sex.” We hadn’t had much; I was still in considerable pain, and I hated how the strong analgesics made me feel. But what we had done so far was mind-blowing, at least for me.

Eric nodded thoughtfully. “It would be a shame to give that up. It’s hard to find a compatible partner.”

“You’re still the preferred choice in being the first person to stick his dick up my ass.”

My lover looked surprised at my wording but he rallied. “It’s a big responsibility few would be willing to take on. I’m really your best bet.”

“It wouldn’t be the same returning to the island now. The place will be crawling with investigators, journalists, and thrill seekers trying to find the rest of the painting. I do need to find somewhere new to live.”

“Good point.” He nodded. I couldn’t miss the hope in his eyes.

“I’d need a place to dock my boat.”

“There’s a marina or two around my town.”

“I’d have to find a way to ship it, because I’m not rounding the Horn.”

“The Panama Canal would probably do, but neither would be preferable.” He waited, his knuckles white on the bag of food, and his jaw clenched.

“I guess your town is as good as any other.”

The decision was worth it just to see how his face lit up. Heavens, he was a beautiful man. “Yeah? I mean, yeah. Of course. Good choice.”

I laughed and pulled him into my arms for a deep, toe-curling kiss and then another and another. Breathless and panting, I somehow managed a grin when we finally parted. Eric’s smile outshone any I had seen before. “Let me just grab my go bag.” And I did.

The End

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Author Bio

S. H. Allan has been a therapeutic foster parent for fifteen years, focusing on teenagers—which is a lot like herding cats, but a lot more rewarding. Dogs make her happy, and the senior dogs for which she provides hospice have to tolerate a giddy younger pup or three. Whenever possible, she ignores them all in favor of reading smutty gay love stories. S. H. knew writing was her destiny when her classic, Mr. Cuke and Mrs. Tomato, was put in the school library in third grade (coincidentally, along with the stories written by all her classmates). Politically active and socially conscious, with a useless M.A. and over twenty-five years working in high tech, S. H. fits in well in her beloved Pacific Northwest, except for that health conscious stuff. Tofurkey is one thing, but she says, “Seriously, no fry bread?”

Contact & Media Info

S. H. loves to hear from readers. She can be reached at

[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Facebook](#)

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INTO THE WASTELANDS

Gwynn Marssen

Love's Landscapes 2014

INTO THE WASTELANDS

By Gwynn Marssen

Photo Description

A simple sepia drawing of a lean man lying naked and unconscious on a sand colored background. He has one hand curled up next to his head, one leg bent.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Riding through the desert on a routine patrol, I come across this... He's been left in the sand to die... by who? What is his crime? And dare I rescue him? He won't survive the heat of the coming day. It would be so easy to let the sun make my decision for me, and truly, that's what I should do. But there's something about him... I find I cannot turn my back on him.

Fantasy or post-apocalyptic/dystopian sci-fi would be awesome... other than that, go for it.

Sincerely,

Jaye

Story Info

Genre: post-apocalyptic, dystopia, fantasy

Tags: adventure, tattoos, intercultural, animals, gods, first time, magic users, a smart-ass pony, corvidophobia

Word Count: 53,844

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Dedication

This one is for Jaye McKenna for the awesome, awesome prompt that helped me create a world that is too interesting to leave after just this one book. So yes, I have a sequel planned ;)

Acknowledgements

Thumbs up for the Love's Landscapes crew who gave up all their free time to make this event so freaking awesome!

I want to thank Rick for your thorough beta-reading and helping me see problems I would've never spotted on my own. Also many thanks to Nicole from Angel Edits for the amazing edit job you did.

And Karen: thank you isn't enough for how grateful I am for all your help. Without you, the book wouldn't have been what it is now. I highly doubt I would've finished it, and even if I had, the process wouldn't have been half the fun.

INTO THE WASTELANDS

By Gwynn Marssen

Chapter 1

I was bored. And lonely. And although I was getting mightily sick of the way my life had turned into a pit of emptiness with nothing to entertain me, I was diligently ignoring both sensations, since there wasn't anything I could do about either. I was stuck here until my uncle *or my mother*—I still wasn't sure which of them had come up with this punishment—allowed me to come home. For three long weeks, I had been alone in the middle of nowhere, right where the driest, most barren part of our lands bordered on the Wastelands.

Over a thousand years ago, the Great Cataclysm had obliterated the world. It was so long ago no one truly knew what had happened—no one but me. A cruel twist of fate had given me visions in which I witnessed the past, and forced me to live through all the horrors of the world's violent history. In those visions, I'd seen the rest of the Earth evolve and recover from its wounds until it finally settled into some sort of equilibrium.

The Wastelands, however, had remained dead and empty for many more generations. Only during my lifetime had plants and small animals returned here. Granted, all the plants looked somewhat off, the colors too bright, leaves moving even though there was no wind. It felt like everything was still changing here, and in a way that was too fast and slightly wrong.

I had to admit the Wastelands were beautiful in an almost otherworldly and disturbing way. The endless miles of red sands and bizarre rock formations constantly changed color as the unforgiving sun made its lazy way through the ever cloudless sky. Not that the beauty of the scenery made me enjoy spending time here. The fact that I didn't foresee an end to my forced isolation made me cringe in misery whenever I thought about it. But even the all too likely reality of being stuck here until I died of boredom had me no closer to changing my mind about any of the disagreements I had with my mother and uncle. I had no intention of helping to reproduce the ancient technology my uncle had found in those priceless old books of his—machinery which had helped create this broken world in the first place.

Not that I was able to give them the information they searched for anyway. They very well knew this and chose to ignore it. I had no idea why sending me to patrol the Wastelands' border with just my loyal pony, Bane, for company was supposed to have any effect on my capacity to focus my visions of the past. Perhaps they figured I was only being stubborn and faking my complete inability to give them what they wanted.

I agreed—and that could very well be the only thing we had ever agreed on—with their repeated arguments that it would be “nice” to have more control over the visions flooding me with the terrors of the past. I would like not having to spend half my life immersed in horror, and to be able to see what I wanted to see, when I wanted it. If they’d only be honest and admit they didn’t give a fuck about my well-being—or my sanity, that I was hanging onto by my fingertips—and simply desired to use my dysfunctional brain as a means to conquer the world.

So far, I had made no progress, mostly because I hadn’t even tried, and also because this place gave me the creeps. The heat and eerie silence were getting to me, as was the constant itching of the lines etched into my skin. The air itself felt charged, something that had gotten worse and worse as the days went on. It made me restless, jumpy, and simply miserable. Things had happened here. Terrible memories hovered just beneath my consciousness, leaving me half-immersed in visions all day, and had me suffer haunting dreams at night.

The endless morning turned into an endless afternoon, and following a brief break for a meal and a nap, I turned around to retrace Bane’s steps through the same mind-numbing emptiness. Going insane with boredom, I decided to discard all warnings and take a shortcut home through the Wastelands.

“I’m going in,” I mumbled to Bane who didn’t answer because, of course, he was a pony.

Bane refused to obey my orders. The stubborn beast kept going the same way he had been walking for the past hour, following a line that only he could see. He walked with his head stretched out, nose not quite to the ground, now and then taking a bite out of whatever seemed appetizing to him, one ear pricked towards the Wastelands, the other towards me. I always rode without a bit and mostly without a saddle too. My leather riding pants, a thick blanket and simple halter were all I needed. The fact that these mountain ponies had survived the disasters that almost ripped the world apart practically unchanged was evidence enough for me of Bane’s intelligence. So if he wanted to run from something, I was going to let him. Which was why I didn’t force him to go into the Wastelands and instead, wished something, anything, would happen.

The loud cry of a carrion bird shocked me from my half-slumber when I was about an hour away from the cabin I now called home. I halted Bane and peered into the direction of the noise. As expected, it was not just one bird. An entire flock of what I supposed were ravens circled a spot about half a mile away in the desert. I hesitated. I was not much interested in what they were

preying on, but the birds themselves made a pretty good meal for those crazy enough to hunt them.

Once again, I tried to get Bane to walk into the Wastelands, and now that wacky pony obeyed, ears pricked forward. He even quickened into a trot. That was weird. Horses normally hated the huge, black birds that preferred their meat dead and ripe but weren't above attacking a fully grown horse if hungry enough. The ravens were highly intelligent and more than a bit nasty, and I wasn't too proud to admit they scared me a little.

I grabbed my bow from my back and fired a quick volley of arrows. Most found their goal with a little nudge of my mind. That not all did, said something about the intelligence of the ravens and more about my incompetence. My twin brother wouldn't miss. He'd probably hit several birds with a single arrow. And my little sister didn't even need a weapon. She'd take a handful of sand and kill the entire flock by sending the particles at them with such speed, the heated grains would roast the birds while killing them. But neither of them had to try keeping visions of horror and pain at bay at the same time.

I guess my attack was impressive enough for the birds which fled after a last cacophony of croaks. I didn't like the fact that they headed further into the Wastelands. Things that spent time inside the Wastelands changed. The thought of ravens even bigger, more intelligent, or with evolved powers of their own freaked me out.

I halted Bane and slid off his back to gather my supper, my mouth falling open now that I really had the opportunity to study my surroundings. I stood at one end of a half-circle of ten-foot-high mushroom-shaped, pink-striped rock formations with pointed hats. They surrounded a hollow containing sand that was so white it looked like chalk. Only when I was crossing the sand to get to the fattest of the ravens, I saw what the birds had been circling. It was a man, naked, and near death. He was obviously left in the sand to die, considering his predicament was an all too common form of punishment.

But by whom? My clan had no villages close by, even though this was technically our land. No other clan would dare to cross our lands, not even in a place where we didn't do much to enforce the borders. And even if they did, they had no reason to come here to dispose of a criminal.

For the first time today, I extended my senses. My tattoos came to life, feeling like burning ropes across my skin and giving off a white light that was even visible in the bright sunlight. The power of the reaction scared me, but I

resisted the urge to shut it down. I wasn't all that certain I could. In the span of ten heartbeats, my awareness magnified until I could sense everything alive for miles around me.

Curiously enough I felt no humans nearby, not even the man lying at my feet. That was pretty odd considering I could see his chest moving in labored breaths. I didn't think too much of it. This place was obviously addling even those of my powers that should be fully functioning. And my talents had always been a bit different from everyone else's. Erratic, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. The same way my brain worked. The same way this place felt.

I pulled back my senses before the visions could overwhelm me. The haze of memories was already creeping in at the edge of my vision, but for once they were kept at bay. Maybe it was the sight of the man in front of me. His skin was almost as white as the sand he was lying on—at least in those few places where it wasn't blotched red from the exposure to the sun. His blond hair was only a shade darker than his skin, and it was long enough to cover him like a blanket.

I wished there was something I could do to help him. Having no idea what his crime was, who his people were and what they were capable of should be enough reason to back off. I didn't know of any clan that went easy on others meddling in their affairs. Not to mention, there was no saying what my clansmen would do to him when they finally came to test my progress with my visions—and to see if I was done being stubborn—if they found me sheltering a stranger. We Nahuel had no mercy on the weak and most certainly no mercy on the enemy. The man most probably was both. It would be easiest to let the sun make the decision; that way it wouldn't be on my conscience. He wouldn't survive another day in this heat.

With a last glance I whistled to Bane, who took his time munching on something neon green before plodding toward me with bright green drool dripping from his mouth. I jumped back before he could push his nose against my face, so he settled for nuzzling the pale man. The man moaned and shifted, which just about killed me, as the movement revealed well-formed, long limbs that made my mouth go dry. Bane might've agreed with me because he snorted, splashing the man with the bright green muck.

"Leave it, Bane. We're not keeping him," I said to the horse, while I bound two of the ravens to Bane's surcingle. My pony whinnied in protest and nudged the man again. I shook my head and scratched him behind his ears. "You're too friendly, boy. Not everyone is meant to be loved by you."

I turned Bane away from the naked man and mounted the pony. I felt horrible about it, felt I should leave the stranger a blanket or some water, but knew that would only delay the inevitable. Bane seemed as unenthusiastic about leaving as I was. He pranced and even bucked a bit, constantly trying to look back as we rode away. It was almost like the horse knew we were leaving the man to die.

“Stupid Wastelands,” I muttered. “Stupid place with your stupid mysterious powers. Stop driving me nuts.”

Bane whinnied in agreement and turned his head back again, as if to check on the man. I groaned and turned my horse around. I might as well live up to my reputation of acting foolishly and illogically and rescue the stranger. At least it would be a welcome break in the endless monotony of my isolation.

“Yeah, boy, we’ll take him home. I’m probably going to end up dead because of it, and you’re gonna get eaten.”

Bane snorted, which I interpreted as him saying he was much too cute to be eaten, and I agreed. If only I could be sure it applied to me as well. Didn’t I hear some rumors about a cannibalistic tribe a while ago? Of course, that might as well be some contrived nonsense my uncle used as an excuse to wage war on innocent people.

I bundled the man into the blanket I had brought for my much coveted after-lunch nap and draped him over Bane’s hindquarters at my back. If I was going to get myself killed, I refused to let that happen after spending the last five miles lumbering home next to a pony that was perfectly capable of carrying us both. Bane might be small, but he was strong, and I highly disagreed with attempts to mess with nature by breeding mightier horses. In my not so humble opinion, there was nothing as mighty as a five foot pony that could carry near his own weight without a problem.

Bane pointed his nose in the general direction of my hut and started walking straight through the Wastelands. That oddball of a pony didn’t need any encouragement to do so and seemed to feel right at home now. He stopped every once in a while to grab some suspicious looking plants, and I let him. I highly suspected Bane was smarter than me. And who knew, maybe he’d sprout wings or something equally cool.

It took some effort, but Bane, the mysterious man and I made it back to my hut in one piece. After taking care of Bane, I slung the man's dead weight over my shoulder, brought him inside and dumped him on the bed. The wooden cabin was roomy and far more comfortable than I had expected before I was abandoned here. It was equipped with sturdy wooden furniture: a bunk bed, a cabinet and a table with four chairs, as it was meant to give hunting parties or scouts protection from the elements and the predators that roamed freely in the night. The air was stale and warm in the hut, but at least he was out of the sun here. I opened the little window to allow some fresh, though even hotter, air in.

And now what? Dehydration seemed to be the stranger's most immediate concern, so I dripped some water onto his lips. I took it as a good sign that he swallowed and didn't choke on it. Upon further inspection, I found no evidence of injuries other than the sunburn, meaning my new friend had somehow allowed himself to be stripped naked and left in the desert without a fight.

Strangely enough, the sunburn had already disappeared in places, giving the man a weird spotted appearance. It looked too random to be some kind of advanced healing system. In fact, it looked a lot like someone had sneezed on him. Another mystery, unless... Bane had dripped the juice from those odd neon-green plants on him. Could it be that?

I rubbed him with an ointment that my clan used to treat burns, though it didn't work nearly as well as the neon-green plants had—if indeed the plants were what produced that almost miraculous healing. The only other thing I could do was give him water. Since I had no grasp of my powers whatsoever, learning how to heal had never appealed to me. It was an all too easy way to die. He didn't regain consciousness, so I decided to let his survival be up to nature and went to take care of myself.

I peeled off my leather pants and linen shirt, both soaked with sweat, and took a quick shower in the outdoor bathhouse, which was nothing more than a rainwater tank with holes in it. It was yet another thing that I missed about home while living in this primitive hut. I might not always see eye to eye with my uncle, but I had to admit his view on hygiene was admirable. He built amazing bathhouses in our capital of Masahiro, with hot and cold running water, steam rooms, and saunas, where only the Tattooed were admitted. I never minded using the privileges that came with my position, but I would have liked to share these luxuries with all my friends. Hell, I'd have settled for even being allowed to hang out with all my friends, rather than just the ones my family approved of.

I wandered back inside stark naked, the tattoos that covered my entire body glowing a soft white to dry my skin. A sharp cry had me jumping into a defensive position with my hands raised and my tattoos blazing blood-red in reaction to my fright. My reaction had the stranger whimpering and trying to crawl as far away as he possibly could in the small cabin, mumbling words I couldn't understand. He almost looked like he was praying. And then, a vision overtook me, and the hut and everything in it were gone.

I stand in one of the cities of the ancient ones; buildings towering around me so high that although I crane my head all the way back, I can barely see the tops. The sound of explosions around me is deafening, the smell of blood and smoke so thick the taste makes bile rise up in my throat. Mountainous black clouds cover the sky and spit out ash and fire and lava. The earth shakes, the buildings topple over.

I'm too terrified to move, and stare, instead, at the people running around me, trying to find cover. I wish I could tell them it is useless, tell them they are destined to die whatever they do. The Great Cataclysm has only just started, and in a few months the living will envy the dead. I know. I have seen it all countless times.

A man gets hit by a burning rock. I can feel it burn right through him. Another is crushed by a flying metal vehicle. The weight of it squashes my spine as well. A child wails; her parents lost. Her grief is mine. Thousands of people are in indescribable agony, stricken with terror and grieving for loved ones lost, and I feel it all. I beg for an end to the madness, for death to soothe me. The whinny of a horse breaks through the haze, and I wonder what a horse is doing here, in a place that is made of iron and concrete, of glass and smoke.

A splash of water on my face woke me from my terror. I blinked. Shaking my head to rid my eyes of the water, I opened my mouth to thank whoever saved me from the nightmare and saw luminescent blue eyes only inches from mine. I screamed, launching myself away from the man.

It almost started again; the shimmer of another vision already replacing the last. I pushed it back with gritted teeth and a force I never knew I possessed.

"There is something wrong with you." The stranger studied me curiously but warily, like you'd study some unknown species.

"Do you think?" I bit back sarcastically. It shouldn't have pissed me off. After all, it was a remark I was quite familiar with.

The glowing eyes widened, and he took a step back. I didn't blame him. My tattoos began that blood-red smolder again, and the look of concentration on my face to force the reaction down must be frightening.

"I did not mean it as an insult, sir. There is simply something not right about you. I wish I could discern what it is."

I laughed harshly. "I can tell you that, friend. I'm plain crazy. Seeing things that aren't there. Shit like that."

"Friend? You are calling me your friend?" The lilt of the stranger's accent was very alluring.

"Yeah. Just saved your life. Grabbed you from the desert before the ravens had you. We might as well be friends. I swear to you that I'll go mad if I have to spend more time without anyone to talk to."

As usual, the realization of how stupid it was to tell a possible enemy I was all alone—when he might know my tribe and our not-at-all favorable reputation—sunk in just after the words left my mouth. My sister likes to tell me I think too much, only not when thinking is actually required. A smart one, as well as extremely powerful, is my little sis. I tried to blame my shortcomings on poor breeding, but my mother kept insisting we all had the same father, so it couldn't be that.

Another realization finally dawned. I was still butt naked, and so was the strange man. It was hard to keep my eyes on his face, beautiful as he was, even blotched with sunburn like this. Though it wouldn't be the first time I was caught checking out a potential enemy, in the past I always had been surrounded by people that could save my life when said enemy took offense.

Without turning my back to the man, I crossed the room to get some clothes from the wooden chest I kept my belongings in. The man circled so he could keep his eyes on mine. The hut was already half dark, but my mutely glowing tattoos and his eyes lit the room plenty. What was up with that? Could he see in the dark? In all my lessons, I'd never heard of a people with glowing eyes. Granted, paying attention wasn't exactly my strongest suit.

Clothed, I felt a bit more comfortable, and I wished the same for my guest, so I grabbed him some trousers and a shirt and held them out for him.

He looked at the clothes and back up to my eyes. I shrugged with a slight grin. Very careful not to touch me, he took them and fumbled while trying to get them on as quickly as possible. You'd almost think the guy had never worn

pants before. He grimaced with pain when he moved. I had given him the lightest and loosest clothing I had brought with me, though I'm sure even the thin linen felt like sandpaper against his burnt skin. I didn't envy him at all. He might've enjoyed staying naked more, and I would not have objected at all.

He was still staring at me as if I'd sprout horns any moment, and it wouldn't surprise me if he really thought so. For very valid reasons, I actively avoided thinking about how other tribes regarded us.

"I'm Keric," I said. "You probably guessed I'm Nahuel. The tattoos tend to give that away."

"Why am I still alive?"

I chuckled. "Because I was in the mood for roasted raven. And my horse liked you. And as I mentioned earlier, I'm desperate for someone to talk to. Also, I really wanted to know why the hell you were left to die in the Wastelands. Which makes me even more insane because it probably means you're a criminal and you're going to kill me and eat my horse. Or eat me and steal my horse. That reminds me, are you a cannibal? And do you like roast raven? I'm starving."

He stared at me with open mouth and big, unblinking eyes. That happened a lot when I spoke. My powers are not the only thing out of control.

"I was supposed to die. The Gods have destined it," he said, making even less sense than I did. I knew nothing of gods. I only knew politics and manipulation, and as far as I was concerned, those ruled the world.

"Maybe your gods destined for me to save you?" I responded impatiently. "Now, are you planning to kill me? Because otherwise, I'm gonna make us some dinner."

"Why feed me when you are only going to torture me later?"

I groaned. "Look, I don't know what you heard about us... Well, I can guess, and I hate to tell you that most of it is probably true, but I personally don't go around torturing random people. It might be easiest if you believe me. Anyway, please explain to me why I'd save you, treat your burns and have you walking around free if I had any intention of hurting you? I mean, I have no freaking clue who you are or who your people are, so you might be able to blow me to bits with just a thought for all I know. Now, roast raven?"

"You talk a lot," he said, sitting down in confusion. He grabbed his head. "You talk way too much, sir. My head hurts a bit, I am afraid." His formal way

of talking was amusing, to say the least, and the singsong accent made it even funnier.

I threw him the waterskin. He caught it with an easy motion, betraying the superior reflexes that were expected of anyone who made it to adulthood in a world as deadly as ours.

“Drink. It’ll help. You probably have heat stroke. You’re dehydrated at the very least. I have some herbs that might help with the headache, but water, shade and rest will do the trick a lot better.”

He drank with gusto. “I am named Dolen. I belong to the wandering people of Ehecati. We call no place home but the earth beneath our feet. We try to avoid contact with others that claim to own a piece of the world. My people believe...” He stopped talking, making an agonized sound in the back of his throat. “I guess I have no right to say that anymore. I am Dolen of no people, now.”

Poor Dolen looked crushed. I knew that any good Nahuel would be interested in his tribe, especially if they insisted on wandering through our lands, but I was more interested in the poor guy, himself, and how I could make him feel a bit better.

My stomach grumbled loudly, reminding me that my belly had no intention of being patient anymore.

“Yeah, yeah, dinner first,” I told my stomach, which of course got a startled look from Dolen. I grinned at him with a slight shrug. “Don’t mind the mad man. I talk to myself. I talk to just about anything, in fact. But don’t worry, most of it doesn’t talk back. Yet. Although I’d swear my horse understood me earlier. Guess it’s the seclusion. It’s not natural being alone.” While I talked, and he tried to ignore me, I cleaned and plucked the ravens and arranged them on the spit over the hearth.

There was something strange about the feathers. Earlier I’d have sworn the ravens shone a polished black that gleamed almost blue and red in the sunlight, but now the feathers seemed to soak up the light, creating little black holes in the room. It was interesting, to say the least. With a cloak made from them, I might be completely invisible in the dark. Of course, that plumage also meant that an entire flock of ravens could approach any town unseen, and I didn’t like that one bit. Still, I’d look mighty fine in a feather cloak.

The food was finally cooking and smelled amazing. Wasn’t it great how something so scary was so delicious at the same time? Too bad it’d take another

hour before the ravens were done. I should've put them on before my shower. I rummaged in the cupboard and came up with dried flatbread that I smeared liberally with butter and apple jam. It wasn't much, but it'd keep my belly from bothering me for now.

"Want some?" I asked with full mouth. "Dinner'll take a while."

He shook his head.

"Suit yourself. Best jam in this part of the world. My friend's mother makes it. She..." I sat down across from Dolen at the tiny table. "Sorry, rambling again. Why don't you tell me your story?"

Dolen tilted his head. His eyes were mesmerizing. I wouldn't mind staring into them all night. I felt myself getting tired, dozing off—

"What the fuck? Stop hypnotizing me! I'm not your damn enemy, so stop trying to make me one!" I violently shook my head in an attempt to shake the remainders of the spell off. My tattoos were burning a cool blue color, which was not how they should react to danger at all.

"Excuse me," Dolen said, looking partly confused and partly terrified. "I did not... I have no notion of what happened. I am attempting to figure you out. Sometimes that happens when I look at people. I shall stop."

"In that case, we have a lot in common. A lot of things happen to me without trying as well. Never seen my tattoos do this," I said, studying the pretty blues and greens that now danced over my skin. Curiously, I felt calm and sharp, neither of which were familiar sensations to me. I decided to forgive him. And, once I'd figured out what mysterious talents this man had, I might let him do it again.

"That... It does not occur to me, normally. Sir." The sir was an afterthought. Cute.

"Call me Keric," I said, leaning back and grinning at him. "Nobody in his right mind calls me sir. Now, tell me something about you."

Dolen sighed and looked completely miserable again. Good. He deserved that for trying to bewitch me. But again, he was stupidly silent. If everyone my uncle tried to talk to was this unbelievably stubborn, I almost didn't blame him for resorting to threats and torture. In my experience, though, acting friendly and innocently worked much better.

"Well, I'll start. I'm from the Nahuel capital of Masahiro, and I live with my mother, my amazing little sis Dylwin, and my infuriating twin brother

Yorrit, who thinks he's great but isn't half as powerful as Dylwin is. His attitude's not hard to explain since he'd spent years competing only with me before our sis came along and started kicking both of our asses. I also have a million cousins, uncles, and aunts, who all think they can tell me what to do." Only one of them actually could, and it was his damn fault I was in the middle of nowhere. "Ehm, what else—"

"What are you doing here now?" Dolen asked, shocking me by asking a direct question that didn't have anything to do with me intending to harm him.

In the flash of a moment, I thought of several more or less believable scenarios that didn't completely give away my weakness—and would be less embarrassing—than the truth. I settled on spinning a tale of an isolation ritual that was common for Tattooed my age. Something about finding my inner core and grounding my powers and nonsense like that. When I start fantasizing, I don't know when to stop, and I rarely remember what lies I tell at the time. Most of my friends know when I'm making stuff up, and no one else takes me seriously anyway, so I never get called on it. But considering the attentive way Dolen was listening to my story, I had the idea I'd better try to remember at least the gist of what I was telling him.

"So I've been alone for the last three weeks, with some unplanned visits to test my progress." Not true. I've been alone since I was dumped here. They would come sometime though, and it was safer to let Dolen think I could have backup at any second. Of course, it might very well scare him to death, but I had no way of preventing that. I liked being alive, thank you very much, and I wasn't sure, yet, if I could trust him.

"That must be hell," Dolen said softly. "I have never been alone... before." He looked so miserable it hurt to witness. I don't think I'd ever seen someone in so much need of a hug.

"Tell me, my friend," I encouraged.

He stared at me for a long moment, this time without trying to hypnotize me, and finally laid his head on his arms and started to cry. So I stood up to give him that hug after all. He stiffened at first, but then took the comfort that only human contact can give and started to cry pitifully.

Again my tattoos acted strangely, giving off a soothing warmth that should only happen in close contact with another Tattooed. I didn't give it any more thought, as my powers acted wacky all the time. Still, I wished my sis was here to help me figure things out.

He started talking between choked sobs and anguished hiccups. "I ruined it all... useless... good for nothing... I could not even die when I meant to."

Oops. Sounded like Dolen wasn't a criminal after all. Had I accidentally prevented his suicide?

I tried, "Why did you want to die?"

"I did not want to die," he bit back to my astonishment. "I had to. It will all end because the sacrifice was not completed."

Wait... What?

"Sacrifice? You mean... Why? To whom?" I asked with a frown.

Dolen pulled away and threw me an exasperated look. "To save the world of course. The Gods have willed it."

It took most of the evening, and all through an exceptional dinner, for me to understand what he was talking about. It turned out that the Ehecati believed their "gods" caused the accumulation of disasters that had nearly ripped the earth apart, transforming everything that didn't die. The world was apparently saved only because Dolen's ancestors returned to the old ways of human sacrifice, and those idiotic people believed their sacrifices were why the world kept turning.

It was completely deranged of course. People had been killing each other, and themselves, for as long as the human race existed; so in my humble opinion, Dolen's imaginary gods got all the blood they needed. I knew, having been forced to witness too much of that in my visions. Not to mention, my clan made it their mission to continue those practices. I really didn't understand why it mattered if a death was especially meant for some god. Dead is dead, right?

I learned quickly that arguing with an overzealous devotee that thinks he'll be personally responsible for everything dying—again—is absolutely pointless. What I couldn't understand was why a young, healthy man who still had a lot to offer his tribe was used as a sacrifice. It was a damn waste. Why not offer someone who was old or sick? Or simply offer a horse. In most territories, horses were more expensive than human slaves and a lot less common.

Dolen told me those selfish gods chose him, for some obscure reason, in a ritual that sounded dodgy. The entire thing was something that could've sprung from my uncle's mind, and that's never a promising thing. He was expected to take off his clothes, lie down in the desert and enjoy the process of dying.

"I did not want to die." He had stopped crying and was now speaking softly. "That must be why the Gods did not deem me good enough."

So those gods not only expected him to die of dehydration and hyperthermia but also wanted him to enjoy it? It seemed a lot to ask. I said as much, which caused Dolen to stare at me like I was an idiot.

I was a bit taken aback. It was not that I never got that particular look, but now I was pretty sure he was the one being a moron.

"It is an honor to die for the good of mankind," he said slowly.

"But that doesn't make it pleasant!" I declared, throwing my hands in the air. "Why not kill you in a less uncomfortable way, like err... slit your throat or throw you from a cliff or pierce your heart..." I ran out of options. I had to admit that most of the killing I was forced to witness, both in the present and in my visions, was not exactly painless.

"The suffering is part of the test. One must stay devoted in times of adversity."

"I give up," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Let's agree to disagree. There's no way I'm gonna get how you're supposed to enjoy suffering. I've seen too many people suffer, and none seemed particularly happy about it. Not even if they thought they were suffering for the greater good. If you insist, I'll bring you back to the Wastelands and let you try dying again tomorrow. Now, I'm tired and I wanna sleep."

"You walk in the sunlight?" Dolen asked me the next morning when I was getting ready for the day.

"Yeah, of course." I studied him, for the first time thinking about the reason behind his pale complexion. "Your people don't?"

Dolen shook his head. "The Gods gifted us with the ability to live and survive in the dark. Our histories tell They saved us from dying in the endless winter. Now, we share the night with the moon and wander unnoticed by all."

"So you can see in the dark!" My excited reaction made Dolen jump back, and I burst out in laughter. "Stop acting like I'll eat you. I just wondered what the heck the glowing eyes were for."

His eyes didn't glow in the daylight, not even in the slightly dimmed atmosphere of the hut. I'd opened the window and door to let in the warmth and the sun and to let out the stale air, but it appeared my guest didn't appreciate it.

Dolen looked at me with his eyes slitted against the light. His irises were an amazing silvery blue, his pupils mere pinpricks.

“Do you still insist on dying?” I asked him. “I would prefer you didn’t after I went through all that trouble of saving you, but if you really want to?”

Dolen shook his head slowly, looking as depressed as ever. “I think... maybe the Gods have something else planned for me. Perhaps They want my blood to continue to stream through my veins, at least for now.”

“That’s the spirit!” I grinned at him, but he didn’t see anything amusing in the situation. I wasn’t sure what I wanted more: to smack some sense into him, or to make him laugh.

He kept staring at me with those big, morose eyes in a way that made me uncomfortable. “Please tell me that your gods haven’t decided that my blood needs stopping. I like staying in roughly the same arrangement I am now.”

“You have something to do with Their plans,” he said slowly. “But I do not know what. Mayhap I am meant to fix you.”

I burst out laughing. “Good luck with that.”

While I was brushing Bane, I was still snickering with laughter. “He wants to fix me,” I said to the horse with another burst of giggles. “Like I’m some sort of broken toy!” Bane was smart enough to ignore me and kept on chasing the last bits of food in his manger.

Today I had no intention of going on patrol, even though I was curious to see if I could find traces of Dolen’s people. I might be crazy, but I’m not stupid enough to go looking for an unfamiliar tribe all by myself. Instead, I’d decided to go back into the Wastelands to forage some plants to experiment with and to get the feathers from the ravens I’d killed and left on site yesterday.

Dolen posed a problem, though. He was by no means strong enough to come with me and might not even be able to stand the direct sunlight when he was fully recovered. Did I dare to leave him in my hut on his own? There was not much to steal or destroy, but still, I didn’t care to camp out under the sky if he decided to burn the place down. I liked the comfort of a warm bed, not to mention that spending a night outdoors was a great way to become food for whatever happened by.

In the end, I poked my head back inside and tried to look threatening. “I have to go away for a bit. Are you going to be here when I come back?”

Dolen slowly nodded. "If you do not mind, sir. I am not strong enough to travel yet, and I prefer to leave at night. I will depart this evening or the one after, if you allow me to stay that long, sir."

I groaned. "Stop calling me sir." It annoyed me, even though it meant I had managed to look mean. It didn't fit him somehow, like it was something imprinted on him but never quite his own.

"You can stay as long you want to, Dolen. I like the company. And remember, you're not my prisoner. You can leave whenever you want. Just remember that I might be a lot more peaceful than most of my tribe, but I will not take kindly to being robbed. If you're planning on leaving, and take anything more than a waterskin and the clothes you're wearing right now, I will find you, and I will kill you." I glared at him, and he nodded. Uncle Deke would be proud of me.

And then I ruined it all by adding, "Oh, and you can take some food if you like and maybe an extra blanket. And please, please, please, take a shower. You stink. Shower's behind the hut. It's in the shade, so you should be able to handle the light. I've heated up the water for you." Guess I liked taking care of the poor bugger more than frightening him. If only I had been born in a world where such kindness wasn't looked at as weakness.

"I am capable of heating water to bathe myself. You did not have to go to such trouble for me."

I laughed out loud. "Oh man, you are so right." The idea of me taking the time to heat all that water over the fire and then carrying it to the shower in the back was comical. I didn't envy the people who had to go through so much trouble to get clean, which in all honesty, meant most of the population. I had mastered the feat of heating my own water when I had gotten my first tattoos at the age of four, so the concept of not being able to do such an easy thing was completely alien to me.

"It wasn't any trouble, truly." I raised my hand and let the energy streaming through my body heat the air around my hand. The heat was so intense, the air shimmered and steamed in the cool morning.

Dolen blinked at me, and then for the first time, he cracked a smile. "You have used your magic? For me?"

I shrugged. I had no idea what the big deal was. "I hate cold showers," I mumbled, feeling heat rise up my cheeks. "I thought you might too."

“The priests say it is a sin to use magic for one’s enjoyment. However—” Dolen hesitated.

“Lemme guess, they use it to make themselves comfortable all the time? Well, my friend, we Nahuel think that our powers are meant to make living as enjoyable as possible. This world’s wretched enough without having to suffer through cold showers, don’t you think?”

Bane nickered as if in agreement or simply to tell me to hurry up. He put his head over my shoulder so he could look into the hut and uttered another soft nicker in greeting. He’s a social one, Bane is, and I felt bad that this isolation kept him away from his equine friends. Besides trying not to die of boredom, entertaining Bane was the main reason I went on my daily patrols.

Dolen came forward to stroke Bane’s nose, eyes big in astonishment while he pet my horse. He must’ve been one of those people never to see a horse up close.

I studied Dolen’s face, the straight nose, the high cheekbones and his pink, full, soft-looking lips. But the most stunning thing about him were those wide-set, huge, almond-shaped eyes. His eyes shifted from Bane to me, still with the same kind of wonder in them. He was close, so much closer than was comfortable, and I liked the shiver that his proximity sent through my body. For a moment, it seemed like he felt the same thing, that he’d step closer and give in to the moment, push his body against me, fit those pretty lips against mine—

Bane sneezed, and Dolen jumped back to avoid being showered with horse snot. The sound Bane made sounded a lot like laughter when he pulled back and pushed his nose into my back.

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Chapter 2

“Huh?” I rubbed my eyes and looked again.

The dead ravens were gone. I was sure I was in the right spot. Those giant, striped, pointy rocks were hard to mistake. As I looked around, I thought this seemed like an excellent place to sacrifice someone. It looked like it could be a god's playground. The entire Wastelands did. Only I knew gods had nothing to do with anything. My dreams had been full of the horrors that had truly befallen this place.

Although strange things happened here all the time, I had never expected ten dead birds the size of newborn lambs to disappear. It was like they dissolved into thin air. If they'd been eaten by scavengers, there would be something left: feathers, blood, or at least traces of the scavengers, but there was nothing. It was too creepy, not to mention terribly inconvenient. The birds I killed yesterday would've been enough for my cape. Now I had to start hunting ravens, and though I had no problem with the principle of killing those horrible creatures, I cringed at the amount of work it would be.

“This place is scary,” I said out loud. This time Bane snorted before taking another bite of a big pink flower that didn't seem to enjoy being eaten. It actually moved its leaves away. Bane snickered at the plant and tried again only to have the plant hit him on his nose. Bane jumped back and whinnied in distress, but after brief consideration, he jumped forward to trample the plant. If ponies could smile, Bane would be grinning right now. Happily swishing his tail, he continued his meal with gusto. The coolest thing was that he deliberately put a hoof on the next flower before devouring that as well. It seemed to me that Bane would be well suited for life in the Wastelands.

I was not so sure I would do as well here. I felt sleepy and restless at the same time, and my tattoos itched like crazy. Something seemed to have put a hook in me and tried to pull me further into the Wastelands, and this feeling scared me as much as it excited me. I'd never been much of an adventurer, but I felt a burning need to explore this place and become one with it.

On an impulse, I pulled off my boots and socks, plunked down onto the sand and buried both my hands and feet. The prickle in my tattoos increased until pure electricity ran through my skin. The sensation was almost overwhelming until it became a part of me. My tattoos burned an intense white

light that I had never seen before—on anyone. I hesitantly extended my senses, terrified of the visions this place could give me. There was that single moment of complete stillness, that moment when you know you're going over the cliff but not falling yet, and then the illusion of control was yanked from me, and I was aware of everything.

I drifted in a place of feeling all, of being one with all the life-forms of this alien landscape, of being one with the present and the past and even witness to the many possible threads of the future. I was everything. I knew everything. I understood everything. This place, that had been insignificant during most of the history of the world, that was deemed useless by humans, now, and in the past, wanted to play a crucial part from now on. It was sick of being ignored.

Bane's nose in my face brought me back to reality. He seemed anxious, prodding at me until I got up. When I did, the pony immediately pushed against me, like he was trying to hide behind me. I blinked while the last remainder of the dream faded away. I was left with the feeling that I knew nothing. That there were things to understand that I didn't. That there was a meaning to it all that I had grasped and lost.

A gurgling croak broke the silence. I looked up to see ravens perched on every rock. All of them repeated the croak at the same time. I extended my senses to them, sending out a wordless question usually reserved for other Tattooed, meant for separating friend from foe. It was answered with hostility and contempt. These beasts didn't want me here, and it felt like so much more than just an animal's need to defend its territory. The cold intelligence behind their enmity made my blood freeze and my stomach clench.

When the first bird spread its wings to take flight, I realized the danger of my situation. Yesterday I had the element of surprise and my bow. Today, all I had was the sand I was still cradling in my hands and the power racing through my veins. Without thinking, I raised my hands to my face and blew.

The sand shot to the ravens. Before I, or the ravens, understood what happened, they toppled from their pedestals as their lives burned away from them. The light of my tattoos flickered and dimmed. I was left depleted and with the feeling that I had lost something important but gained even more: the approval of the Wastelands, a place that understood that death might be the most important thing about life. The sobering thing was that I was not so sure it would not feel the same if I had been the one to lose my life. The Wastelands seemed a cruel place, harsh and unforgiving, a place that would test me until I proved worthy.

I scratched Bane's face and shook the weirdness off. I may not understand what had happened, but at least I had killed enough ravens to sustain Dolen and myself for a few more days and provide plenty of feathers to make myself an invisibility cape. My arrogant brother would be green with envy when he saw me in it.

By the time I exited the Wastelands with Bane, who was laden with plants and dead ravens, my head was even more chaotic than usual, my skin felt like it was a size too small, and I was plagued by images of destruction. I was dead tired and not at all in control. My senses pulsed inward and outward in an erratic pattern that had nothing to do with what I wanted. I rode in a haze, only partly aware of what was real and what was not.

Only the feel of Bane's mane under my hand kept me grounded. The horse paid no attention to the shaking earth, the screaming people, the death and destruction all around, so those must be in my head. Somewhere in the part of my mind that was still sane, I realized I was letting too many important decisions be influenced by a pony, and that had me wondering whether that was smart. A second later, I decided it wasn't about how smart I was; it was about staying alive, and in that, Bane served me well.

A nagging thought emerged from the mayhem. *And what great things are you doing with that precious life of yours?* It was not a thing I often wondered about. I wanted things. I wanted to make the best of the moments not spent in nightmares. I wanted to keep far away from all attempts to bring back what my uncle called the Age of Excellence, hated the idea of the world being tamed, and was getting more and more nauseated by the violence around me. But apart from protesting every step of the way, I never actually did anything, nor had I seen it as my task to. And now Dolen had appeared in my life, blabbering about purpose and fate and shit like that and—

Another vision threatened to overwhelm me, and I screamed in frustration. No wonder I could never finish a thought. No wonder I was deemed useless, a disappointment, a disgrace to my race. No wonder they sent me to this hellhole to drive me mad and make me forget what was important to me. They would mold me until I was that good little Nahuel who did what he was told without a word of protest or an original thought. They wouldn't stop until I didn't question what they wanted to pluck from my mind, until I'd agree to let my body be used to breed others who'd be cursed with these horrible visions. Over

my dead body. Over my fucking dead body. This world was mine as well as theirs, and I would fight to keep it as it was.

The anger cleared my head enough to notice that I was already home. Bane had come to a halt next to his shed and was trying to reach the plants that I had bound on his back behind me. He might not be that smart after all, since he didn't understand that the whole purpose of tying them there was so he couldn't reach them. He pivoted a few times, nearly throwing me to the ground, then settled on eating the grass beneath his feet.

I dismounted and got some water from the well. I dunked the entire bucket over my head. The force of the water flattened my unruly curls against my scalp and shoulders. The cold water cleared my mind, so I did it again and again, until I was shivering in the setting sun, and Bane was pushing the bucket from my hands to get to the water. I locked him up in his shed after feeding and brushing him down, double checking to see that the door was secure against the wolves I'd heard last night and the mountain lion that I had seen traces of a few days ago. It would not hold against anything bigger, so Bane and I just had to hope we would get no visits from a bear or something worse.

"I understand you, now," I said to Dolen as I entered the dim hut. "I get you wanting to save the world. Still don't get why you dying is instrumental, but we'll call that philosophical differences, okay? Anyway—"

The hut was empty. I peered around trying to figure out where Dolen could be, then tentatively poked with my senses and found nothing.

"Well... damn," I mumbled. I couldn't believe he'd left after all. With a deep sigh, I put down the plants and ravens I'd gathered and stripped out of my sodden shirt. Dolen's disappearance was more of a disappointment than it should have been. I had liked talking to someone who talked back, even if he mostly talked nonsense.

After starting a fire to make a stew, I made myself some bread with cold raven and apple jam and attempted to comfort myself with the food. A sorrowful moan had me jumping up from the table, hitting my knee and almost choking on the huge bite I had just taken. The sound came from the top bunk. I crept towards the bed, then stood on tiptoes to look into it. And there, rolled into a little ball and whimpering pathetically, lay Dolen. If he hadn't been making sounds, I'd have sworn he was dead. He was dead to my senses anyway.

Or were my senses dead to the world? What on earth was going on with them?

“Dolen... Open your eyes, Dolen. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Dolen didn’t react apart from a small moan. I reached out to touch his forehead. He felt like he was burning up. Was it a fever, the sunburn, or still the hyperthermia? Did heatstroke cause fevers? I didn’t have a clue. What I knew was that he needed to cool down, that he needed water, and that his burns needed treating. So that’s what I did.

I undressed him, wincing when I noticed that some of the burns had blistered and stuck to the soft linen of the clothes I’d lent him. I covered him with a wet blanket, force-fed him water, and then I turned my attention to the plants I had gathered.

After washing them, I crushed the stems with the blunt end of my knife and was surprised when they disintegrated into a rough, neon-green powder. I had expected something foamy or at least a liquid. This was a stupid experiment. I didn’t discover medical treatments. I was the one who needed them.

Another drawn out moan of pain echoed through the room, and Dolen complained hoarsely of pain and heat and thirst. I gave him water and the reassurance he was not alone, then I turned back to the bowl with the weird powder. Yesterday Bane had chewed the plants, but I had no intention of putting something this alien in my mouth. The only thing I could do was mix it with water and hope for the best. The green muck that resulted looked disgusting enough to be medicinal.

Call it stupidity, or call it heroics, but I decided to test the stuff on myself. I wasn’t quite stupid enough to put my hand in the fireplace, so I took the iron poker, heated the tip and touched it to the palm of my hand, one of the few places on my body that held no tattoos. I wouldn’t risk disrupting the flow of energy that was the basis of my powers.

“Fuck, fuck, fucking hell!” That hurt. I gritted my teeth against the pain and realized I should’ve used a candle, instead, or tried the muck on Dolen. Injuring myself was of no use at all except for proving how unselfish I am to... well, nobody. It was, as with so many things I did, completely useless and illogical.

Still cursing, I dipped a finger in the bowl and cautiously touched that finger to the burn. For a moment, the pain flared up, then it melted away. I let the paste stay on a minute more, then wiped it off. What had been an angry red stain before, was now only a slight redness that hardly hurt at all.

The end result was all I could have hoped for, but, but oh... poor Dolen was not going to like getting there.

Under different circumstances this might have been a very pleasant task. Dolen's body was toned and firm, with long limbs and, as I witnessed on those few places that weren't burned, a beautiful pale complexion that shone like the moon in the late evening light. I could spend hours exploring a body like this, learning taste and texture and reaction.

As it was, neither of us enjoyed this. I hated the way he whimpered in pain, at times not able to catch his breath when I treated an especially vile burn. I tried my very best to ignore his suffering. The fear in his eyes when I picked him up to carry him outside—so I could help him without having green mush all over my bed—was a lot harder to handle. I would happily have traded everything I had, including both my balls, to never have someone look at me the way Dolen did then, like I was pure evil. It made me hate myself and my entire clan. It made me hate my tattoos and my powers and made me wish I was someone else entirely.

I had never voluntarily hurt anyone. I had refused to go to war and thus got saddled with a reputation as a coward and a slacker. I had talked about the value of peace and kindness to anyone who stood still long enough for me to try. I had fought and argued with my mother and my uncle and my peers about the way most Nahuel saw the world, and I had become an outcast because of that. Despite that, everyone who met me was either hostile or scared. I might be stubborn and stupid and most likely insane, but I was not evil, and neither were my friends and family.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Nahuel did not do what we did in the desire to hurt or even out of a desire to rule. My uncle had a grand plan for the world, a plan to make the future better than ever for all of mankind. The main problem—apart from the insanity of striving for a world that was safe and at peace—was that he believed with all his heart, and my clansmen believed with him, that the only way it would happen was with us firmly in charge of as much of the world as possible. And heinous was the best word to describe his methods for getting that grand peace.

“What is this salve?” Dolen asked with a croaky voice when he woke up a few hours after I had treated him with the medicine. He sat up and scratched his arms. Green dust particles exploded from his skin. He startled. “Is it supposed to do that?”

I shrugged. "I don't have a clue. About both questions. I'm glad it helped because it might as easily have killed you." I snapped my mouth shut. Great move, Keric. Scare the poor guy even more.

"Are you a healer?"

"Ha! No way. I stumbled on the stuff and hoped it would help." I sighed. "Wait, it did help, right?"

"It did. But may I wash it off now? It itches tremendously."

"I guess," I said without much conviction. "Maybe you should. I have more of the plants anyway. Want me to heat the water for you?"

Dolen still seemed to find the thought of me using my mojo for mundane things like that mind-boggling. He called it magic, as if he thought it something supernatural, while for me, it came as natural as breathing. Idiomatic, because I highly doubted that he found his glowing eyes and ability to see in the dark anything special.

While I waited for him to return from his bath, I continued the work on my cape. It was precise and painstaking work, but I found it grounded me. I soon wished I had Dolen's eyes though, because the feathers had disappeared from view. As long as the sun was above the horizon, they shone in the firelight, but as soon as it had set, the feathers seemed to echo the darkness. I didn't like that one bit. I hadn't had much love for the ravens to begin with—beside their meat—and these too-intelligent, invisible guerrilla ravens inhabiting the Wastelands scared me to bits. They made me want to crawl back to uncle Deke and have him send the army to kill them all.

Dolen's voice broke through my thoughts. "Are you looking towards something specific? I was under the assumption that you could not see well in the darkness."

"Huh?" I realized I had been staring in the direction of the Wastelands which still had some sort of a magnetic pull on me. It took a conscious effort to look at Dolen, instead. And wow... was that a nice view. He was clean now, waist-long hair bound into a loose braid, and his skin was smooth, and so pale it shone red and orange in the light of the fire. He was still naked and didn't seem embarrassed about that at all. I wondered if nakedness was considered normal in his tribe. For the first time, I ogled his body, his broad shoulders, narrow hips, and smooth stomach. He didn't have the bulging muscles that were so desired by the male Nahuel. He was built like a runner instead, sleek with long

muscles. If he had hair on his body, it was as light as his eyebrows and hair and invisible in the dim light. With difficulty, I forced my eyes away from his body—refusing to stare at his crotch and check him out like I'd check out a potential lover—and looked up into those dazzling sapphire eyes.

He either ignored or didn't see my scrutiny. "You were staring into the distance."

I shrugged. "Just staring at nothing. The Wastelands are that way."

"Wastelands?"

"The place I found you."

"I assume you mean the Hollow Plains. Those are sacred lands. You should not venture there, not without the proper rituals and preparations."

"What preparations?" My stomach gave a lurch. Did Dolen know something about the place I didn't?

"We spend a week fasting and praying before we may enter. And one may only enter during the appropriate phase of the moon, and when the Gods have deemed the reasons for the venture worthy."

I bit back a smile. It was simply Dolen's superstitious nonsense, nothing important.

"You should not treat entering the home of the Gods as a joke," Dolen said with an accusatory glare. He walked inside and came back a moment later with a blanket that he wrapped around himself to form a garment. The result looked so simple, but I'd bet I wouldn't be able to repeat his motions. "Do you not honor Them?" he asked, puzzled, while sitting down on the ground. He nearly sat on my bow and picked it up to study it, turning it round and round in his hands.

"No," I said, scratching my head. "We don't really believe in any gods."

This made him look up from my bow, which he was bending slightly to feel its pull. "Then what does your clan believe in?" He plucked at the string of the bow and frowned.

What was going on with that? Had he never seen a bow before?

I thought for a moment before answering. "We don't believe in a higher being that controls the world. My clan... I guess they believe in the superiority of mankind. They believe that the world is ours to tame, ours to control. Having

these powers proves that to them. They believe in kill or be killed. They believe in strength and intelligence and doing what's best for the human species. They believe that the weak have no right to exist, that the stronger you are, the more rights you have. They believe in creating weapons and armies and going back to the days of old—" I snapped my mouth shut before I could go on a rant.

"And what do you believe?" Dolen looked at me with unblinking eyes that showed me he heard more than I was saying.

Bitterness and fear coiled in my stomach as I swatted visions away. "You don't want to know. It's stupid. I don't make sense." That was what my friends always told me when I tried to get them to see things differently. *You're stupid. You're crazy. Those visions are meddling with your mind.* On a good day I could ignore them. But most days weren't good. Most days, the words hit a little bit too close to my own fears.

By now Dolen had untied the string from the bow. "Do you have a knife?" I frowned and gave him one. I just hoped he wouldn't ruin my bow. It was my favorite one. "And Keric, I do wish for you to explain. I want to understand you."

"Good luck with understanding me," I murmured under my breath. "Let me know when you do, so you can explain it to me."

"What did you say?" He was still focused on the bow, rummaging with the string and the knife. He was definitely ruining it. Not that I was in the mood to do anything about it. I'd just fix it tomorrow.

I let myself fall to my back on the ground and looked at the stars. "Never mind." The earth felt cool against my bare back.

"Tell me, Keric." The roll of the "r" in my name made it seem like a lover's caress. "There is something important about you, and I need to figure out what it is. Tell me about how you see the world. I told you what my views are." He gulped and sounded small and miserable. It reminded me that I had practically laughed at him yesterday when he told me about his beliefs, and that I had done so, again, a few minutes ago. I was an asshole, and the realization hurt.

"I'm sorry, Dolen." I didn't elaborate, and I didn't need to. Dolen's small smile said enough. I sighed and guessed I owed him one. "I believe that we shouldn't have survived the Cataclysm. I believe that the world would be better off without humans. If there are gods like you believe in—gods that created this world and everything in it—they fucked up big time by ever creating mankind.

I believe that my clansmen have it all wrong. I think that there would be no bigger disaster than going back to being trapped in cities of iron, glass, and stone. I believe the world doesn't want to be tamed. I believe that the world fought back and that is what nearly destroyed everything. I believe in nature and chaos and that we cannot win a war against the earth beneath our feet. I don't understand why there has to be a war at all. But nobody gets it. Nobody understands what the world was like before." I gritted my teeth to force myself to stop talking. I sounded like I was mentally challenged. Without saying another word, I went inside, undressed and crawled into my bed.

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Chapter 3

I woke up screaming, with Dolen's glowing eyes hovering over me. I pushed him away on instinct, blinded by the fear from my nightmares, and—thanks to my stupid out-of-control powers—Dolen ended up on the floor halfway across the room. I tried to catch my breath, not quite back in reality. I was still feeling the toxic fumes scalding my skin, burning in my eyes, choking me. I was still coughing and checked my hands for blisters.

“Sorry,” I said between bouts of coughing. “Bad dream. You scared me.” Talking was a mistake. It robbed me of the little oxygen I had managed to inhale. I took big gulps of breath. Another mistake. I started hyperventilating, desperately trying to keep from suffocating in a gas that wasn't even real.

Dolen pushed himself up and sat down next to me on the bed. He took my head in his hands, fingers outstretched over my temples, through my hair, grasping my scalp. His glowing eyes stared intently into mine. Immediately I felt myself calming down. The last tentacles of the vision released me from their grasp. “Slow breath,” he ordered. “In through your nose. Keep it in your belly five seconds. Out through your mouth. Slowly.” I sucked the air in quickly. “Slower. I will count: one... two... three... four... five... now hold. Hold. Out. One... two... three... four... five... six... seven. Again.”

He counted with me until my breathing evened out. I became aware of the heat of his hands on my face, his fingers touching the roots of my tattoos, the reassuring cool shimmer of his eyes that kept me in the here and now, my tattoos pulsing in blues and greens. Instead of letting myself get dragged away by the calm that seeped from him, I seized that calm, somehow, and used it to rid myself of fear and to wipe away all traces of the vision.

Dolen was trembling when I finished, as if I had sapped him of his strength. His hands fell to my naked shoulders where he let his fingers trace my tattoos.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I want to make things better, but I do not know how. It is what I do. I find out what is wrong with things, and then I make them better. That was what I was doing with your bow earlier. I never had that feeling with a person before. I do not know what to do.”

If he kept caressing my tattoos like he was, I knew one thing he could do to make me feel better. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the tingle his hands sent through my skin. I felt my cock begin to thicken against the soft fabric of the sheet that covered me.

"In my culture, that thing you're doing now is considered seduction," I mumbled.

Dolen stiffened and stopped his movement, but didn't move his hands from my shoulders. I opened my eyes to an intense gaze filled with curiosity, need, and strangest of all, hope.

"Your... Your people approve of a man lying with another man?"

"Yes," I said softly. I reached up to follow the line of his jaw with my finger. "Sex is considered to be for pleasure as well as for reproduction. There are rules about who to reproduce with. There are actually rules regulating who can reproduce. Sleeping with someone of the same gender is considered preferable to having children with the wrong person. There are people who don't, and as many who do."

"You do?" Dolen asked, breathless.

"I do. And I have no need for anything else." I barked out a laugh. "Something that's neither accepted or appreciated by my people. The Ehecati don't allow it?"

Dolen shivered when I loosened his braid and combed my hands through his long mane. It was soft as silk and shone like spun moonlight, so much in contrast to my dark, curly locks.

"We do not. It is considered a sin. Sexual intercourse only belongs in the sacred union of a man and a woman after they are bonded before the Gods."

"But you want something else?" I prodded, flexing my biceps to get his attention back to my body. It worked. His fingers resumed their tantalizing routine.

"I want a lot of things that are not proper," he said, hanging his head. I nudged his chin until he looked at me again. "I want to change things. I question things that do not make sense. They tell me I am a sinner for that. They tell me I am a sinner for asking questions about the world and the Gods and our traditions. I want to meet other tribes and learn from their habits. I want to know what it is like to walk in the sunlight. That I desire men and not women, that I was not able to keep that desire hidden, is the least proper of all."

"Oh, Dolen. No wonder they picked you for a sacrifice."

It was, of course, an acutely stupid thing to blurt out like that. I was pretty sure it was the truth, but that didn't make my comment any less hurtful. Someone more sensitive and wiser than I, someone like my sister, would have

found a way to let Dolen see the truth for himself. But since Dylwin wasn't here to save me from myself, I had made the usual mess of things.

Dolen had tensed after my words, his fingers first digging into my flesh, then releasing me like I was toxic. Without a word he stood up and fled the cabin, stumbling over a chair as he made his exit. If I hadn't been sure I was the last person he wanted to see, I would've gone after him. Instead, I stayed in my bed and thought about what he had told me.

Dolen's soft voice woke me from my sleep. I grunted and turned on my side, trying to see what was going on. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the open door that admitted the dim, predawn light. For some reason he had shed his clothes. The only sound besides Dolen's voice was the slight rumble of rain on the roof.

Dolen was speaking in a language I didn't understand. One word was repeated over and over again in his desperate plea. "Hadrà." He spoke with a cadence that made his words sound like poetry, his tone rising and falling as in song. There was power in his words. I felt it as a strange pressure on my tattoos, like they became a size too small for my skin. I felt it in the place where the Wastelands had sunk its hook, the exact place in my core where my powers came from.

My tattoos flared a warning red. Even without expanding my senses, I could feel something was present. A being so big, so magnificent, so overwhelmingly powerful, I almost felt compelled to add a prayer to Dolen's. The being reached out to me, and my tattoos flared up even brighter, instinctively bringing up a shield to guard my mind. Immediately, my impressions of the being dulled. That I could still feel it said something about its power. I felt curiosity and sorrow from it. It sent out a feeling of intense need, prodding me like a child that wanted attention. I echoed its curiosity but couldn't get my powers under control enough to release the protection from my mind.

Maybe it was for the best. I didn't want to go home and explain to my family that I had not only not managed (or even really tried) to gain control over my visions, but instead, found I could communicate with a god. And yes, dear uncle, it turns out you are not the most powerful being in the world. The Wastelands are conscious, and there are actual gods roaming about. Convincing Bane to eat bacon might be easier. At least he already liked pigs.

The god—for lack of a better word—radiated disappointment and pulled back its presence from me. My shields thinned, and I could sense the being

envelop Dolen, instead. For minutes nothing seemed to change. Then the prayer became less desperate, the pain behind his words disappeared, and he sounded happy and grateful. The next moment the being was gone. It didn't leave. It simply disappeared like it had never been.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked, a little bit too loud. Poor Dolen startled so badly he propelled himself out of the door. I leaned out of bed to see where he had gone to and saw him lying on the muddy ground in a confused huddle. "Are you all right?"

Dolen pushed himself up and glared at me. "I would appreciate it if you could announce your presence the next time." It sounded snarky, even though it was phrased so politely. I liked that.

"You knew I was here," I threw back, throwing my hands up in mock protest. "You were the one waking me by summoning those gods of yours."

"Do. Not. Make. Fun. Of. Me!" Dolen said between clenched teeth. "The Gods are undeniably real, and I will not stand for your mockery any longer. Maybe if you would welcome the Gods in your soul, you would not be so unhappy. Maybe if your people would, you would not see the need to impose your will on others with violence." Dolen had gone from cranky to pissed off, and I felt like an asshole—again. At this rate I would soon overcome my brother in this regard, and that was one competition I never wanted to win.

"I'm not mocking you, my friend. I felt the being. There was something here in answer to your prayers."

"Be silent!" Dolen had finally gotten up and was stalking back inside. He would've looked hilarious, covered by mud and dripping wet like that, if not for the look of fury on his face. Oh, and for the fact that he was very, very naked, and that my skin remembered his touch and craved more.

"You have tried to convince me you want to be my friend. Friends do not disregard each other like this. Friends respect and friends try to strengthen each other. It is one's enemies who mock and try to instill doubt." He glared at me. "I am leaving. I do not wish to ask for your help, but I will not survive without water and clothing. Are you willing to give me a waterskin and some cloth to make a garment?"

That sobered me right up. "I don't want you to leave. I am being dead serious. There was something here. Something powerful that came in answer to your calling. Something I could imagine being a god."

“Really?” Dolen asked. He tried to keep up his mask of hostility, but the hope radiating through was so intense, I swear I could feel it. “Hadrà came?”

“I don’t know what or who it was,” I answered honestly. “All I know is that it was curious, that it wanted to communicate, but my tattoos didn’t let it in, and that it did something with you that seemed to make you feel better.” I patted my bed next to me. “Come here, Dolen. I am sorry for what I said earlier about why I think you were chosen to be a sacrifice. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I tend to say things that are better left unsaid. You are not the only one who is considered wrong by his tribe.”

Dolen sat down and pinned me with a probing glance. He said nothing, and for once I tried to figure out what to say before I said it. It was useless. My mind was an unnavigable jungle. I was not used to being vulnerable, and I was not used to being honest. And mostly, I was not used to caring about what someone thought of me.

“The reason I’m here is not a ritual. I made that up. It is punishment for not obeying and for not being able to control my powers. It is punishment for not being aggressive enough, for what they see as cowering away from battle and refusing to be what I was born to be. These tattoos”—I raised my arm to show him—“are given to children with the most promise, the most power. The marks focus our powers, amplify them, protect us. My people think I have shamed that gift by not living up to my potential. They are right. Most ten-year-olds have more control and focus than I have. My uncle thinks I’m lazy and immature and only need the right incentive to finally grow up. I was sent here to gain control, and most importantly, learn how to get useful information from my visions.”

“Visions? You have visions?” Dolen interrupted me, looking at me like I was crazy, which I was, but that was beside the point.

“I have visions of the past,” I said. “Not just visions, because I can also hear and smell and feel fucking everything. Not just what happens to me but to everyone else in the visions.” I shuddered. “The visions are there all the time. They are always waiting for me to lose control when I’m tired or angry or scared. Or when I sleep. They are worse here. Maybe because I have nothing to distract me.” Or more likely, because of the strange power emanating from the Wastelands, and the extreme violence that had happened there.

“So that is what happened last night,” Dolen said. “I assume it also happened the day you found me. It is the thing that is wrong with you. I am not certain whether the fact you have the visions is the problem, or if there is

something else amiss causing them to overwhelm you.” He sounded exactly the same as my teacher did when she was trying to figure out who in class was to blame for whatever prank we had played. I did not like his tone, nor the way he was studying me. I was not an object or some sort of mystery in need of solving. “I do not understand,” Dolen continued. “Why do you fear the visions?”

“Because my uncle thinks it makes me a boundless treasure of knowledge about the ancients and all their technology and, although he has never said it aloud, their weapons. And mostly, I fear them because the past is a wretched place, and we should be glad that it’s over,” I said with emphasis.

I rubbed my face and wondered if it would be better to stand up, walk out of the hut into the Wastelands and let the ravens make a meal of me. That would eliminate all the problems my visions caused, if not for the slight complication of me having no particular desire to die. What I wanted was to get rid of those freaking visions and go on with my merry life.

I was done with this conversation, so I pushed Dolen aside to get out of bed and stalked out of the hut to check on Bane. Dolen didn’t follow me, and I didn’t know whether that annoyed me or not. I wasn’t even sure why his question had affected me this much.

The temperature had dropped when the rains started, and I was shivering in the chill early morning air. I had grabbed my leather pants and boots on the way out, but I had been too irritated to bother looking for a shirt or even my cloak. So I wrapped myself in one of the blankets that lay in Bane’s shed and sat down next to the lying horse. Bane welcomed me with a soft nicker and laid his head in my lap, prodding me with his nose until I was scratching behind his ears. I leaned back and let the solid horse take my weight. His body heat seeped through me, and it wasn’t long before I felt myself drifting off.

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Chapter 4

Sharp claws dug into my shoulder, and I swatted at my attacker without bothering to open my eyes. My assailant uttered a high-pitched cry. I felt wet fur flutter against my face, and then the beast landed on my other shoulder, chattering excitedly next to my ear.

“Lemme alone,” I mumbled, trying to dislodge the furry thing, but it escaped my grasp and wriggled until it was lodged on my head. It seemed comfortable there and stopped pinching me with its claws. So I let it be. It was only a messenger monkey, anyway. I was already dozing off when the information sunk in.

I sat up straight, startling the monkey into sinking its claws into my head for balance. The pain was immediate and intense, and I jumped up, trying to dislodge the damned beast. Of course, that only made the monkey hold on tighter until I felt the blood dripping over my forehead. I was aware that I was screaming like a girl but couldn't stop.

Dolen appeared in the shed, his wary expression immediately changing into one of amusement. He bit his lip, looking infuriatingly close to bursting into laughter.

“Get this thing off me,” I screeched. “It's not funny.”

Dolen looked like he disagreed, but he came closer anyway and reached out a tentative arm, obviously scared to get hurt himself. The monkey launched itself to safety, pushing off and thus burying its claws even deeper into my scalp, and flew towards Dolen with a single flap of its furry wings. I sighed in relief and wiped the blood from my forehead. Carefully, I examined the wounds on my head and found them not as deep or extensive as I had feared.

The monkey had crawled up around Dolen's neck, making happy humming sounds as Dolen stroked its fur. I didn't blame the beast. I highly suspected I would make noises like that if Dolen's fingers were caressing me. Dolen was still chuckling softly, the grin around his lips completely transforming the man.

As if in a dream, I stepped closer, causing Dolen to meet my eyes. The grin died on his face, the laughter in his eyes replaced by heat—heat spiced with a tinge of fear. His pupils dilated, and his lips opened in a gasp. The fear in his eyes should've been a sign to stop, but the heat took hold of me, and I moved

towards him until he was close enough to touch. For a long moment we simply stood there, looking at each other. Dolen was the first one to move, raising a hand to my bloody cheek.

"Now you look like the Nahuel we fear," he mumbled. "The tattooed monsters our parents tell us terrifying stories about. Bloody and fearless and cruel to the bone. The monsters that will come and get us when we do not obey. And still, I find that I am not scared of you."

"And why is that?" I asked, inching ever closer.

Dolen blushed, the pink rising to his cheeks an exciting contrast to his pale skin. "I think I might like danger." He trailed his fingertips from my cheek to my neck and up into my hair. I felt his fingers tighten around the curls he found there.

"Better not tell you I'm mostly harmless, then." I was now close enough to taste his breath, a hesitation away from a kiss.

"Why does this not feel wrong?" Dolen asked in a whisper, while pushing his body against mine.

"Maybe because it isn't." I didn't wait for an answer, wasn't sure if I could have if I tried.

His lips were warm and so soft, and they tasted like apple jam. He made little whimpering sounds into the kiss, and he melted against me. I wrapped my arms around him to pull him close, cursing the fact that, for once, he had decided to wear clothes. Even with considerable effort, I was unable to find a way into his robe, and I had to be satisfied with the feel of his firm body against mine. His fingers instinctively followed the pattern of the tattoos that covered my bare back. His touch sent pulses of charged electricity through my body, right to my crotch. Dolen shifted, and his hard length rubbed against mine, adding to the overwhelming urge to get us naked now. All I needed to do was find a way to manage that without ever having to stop kissing him.

"Ouch!" I shouted, jumping away from him. That nasty monkey bit my ear! It sat on Dolen's shoulder, chattering insolently. Little bugger didn't seem to like that Dolen had been giving me attention instead of him. I grumbled, wishing for a moment I was the kind of man that hit defenseless animals. "Stupid beast."

Dolen was smiling again, a sweet smile of wonder and amusement, and I decided that I wouldn't mind being assaulted by tiny animals if it kept that look

on his face. The monkey pressed against his head, rubbing its face against Dolen's hair. Its long, fluffy tail was wrapped around Dolen's neck. Only now, I saw the little message tube tied around its neck. I cursed and reached to take the tube from the monkey. It let me without protest, then continued its attempt to crawl into Dolen. I would have liked nothing more than to do the same. What I didn't want to do was read the message. I did not want my isolation to end—not now that I was sharing it with Dolen—and I was definitely not ready to go back to Masahiro to face my uncle.

I sighed, shoved the message tube into my pocket, and stepped close to Dolen again. His breath hitched when he met my eyes.

"You okay to try that again after we've given that monkey something else to chew on?" I said, brushing my thumb against the dash of my dried blood that had rubbed off on his forehead. It made me feel possessive, seeing him marked like that.

Dolen pushed his face into my touch. "Do you not need to read that message?"

"Yeah. Also need to clean my wounds. It's not what I want, though, so don't really care."

"What do you want?" Dolen asked breathlessly.

"Simple things," I answered playfully, grabbing his hand and pulling him with me. "Breakfast. Not to get bit by monkeys. To forget about the world for a day. Another kiss. You, naked. Your skin against mine. Things like that. You?"

Dolen sent me another sweet smile. "About the same. I already had breakfast while you were out playing with your horse and your monkey, so that part I can do without." I laughed at his joke, loving to see the more playful side of him appearing.

"And... will you let me ride your horse?"

I choked on a breath. "Sure, if that's what your people call it." The image his words conjured in me was enough to get me back to full hardness. "Wouldn't have taken you for the kinky sort."

He was silent for almost the entire time it took to get to the hut. "I do not understand what you mean? I meant... your horse." He pointed into the direction of Bane's shelter. "I would like to sit on him, walk around with him."

I let out a huff of disappointment. "Really? Not a clue?"

He shook his head, now so red he resembled an apple.

“Well, I might just have to demonstrate that later.” I winked at him, and that blush became even brighter. So cute. “Yeah, sure. You can ride Bane. But, man, don’t say stuff like that when you already got my mind in the gutter.”

“I am sorry,” Dolen said with an expression of misery. “This is new to me. I do not know the rules.”

“You mean—? You—? Never—? Oh man, I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Forget I said anything. You set the pace, decide what you want, if you even want—” It made sense considering how his people looked upon men having sex, but I assumed that he had some experience, thought maybe he’d been caught in the act. It never occurred to me he was that innocent.

“I desire... things,” Dolen stuttered. “I have desired a lot of things for a long time, now. But I never dared to even think them. Once, I saw two men together.” He ducked his head to hide another blush. “They didn’t know I was watching. They were doing things. I desire those things.” The last bit was spoken firmly and almost aggressively.

“Then you better put down that monkey and tell me what you saw.”

I grabbed some food for the monkey—flatbread, nuts and an apple—and put it outside the hut. The animal came immediately when I whistled for it, and the moment it was outside, I shut the door on it. I was done with being bitten—by monkeys that was. I turned my full attention back to Dolen. That earned me another blush.

“Are you ready?” I asked with a grin that never failed to have the desired effect. I beckoned him to come to me, and he came so quickly he almost stumbled over his own feet. I laughed. “I guess that answered that question.”

In the middle of the room, we stood nose to nose, not an inch of height difference between us. His eyes swept over my face, moving from my lips and up to my eyes again. He seemed almost too shy to keep eye contact, but too mesmerized to look away. I didn’t mind because when I looked into his eyes, I could see nothing else, and that was such a waste. Dolen was a beautiful man, somehow both delicate and completely masculine. He reminded me of the sculptures that the Ishiou made, a neighborly tribe that paid tribute to us. They sculpted the likeness of their god from marble and worshipped the images. My uncle had one put on the central plaza of Masahiro—not because he respected their customs, of course—but to hold their god hostage.

Dolen met my eyes again, and all thoughts of gods and my uncle were driven from my mind. I couldn't keep myself from touching him and let a finger follow the path of his eyebrows, his high cheekbones, the line of his lips. He trembled under my touch and inched forward until our lips almost met. My hand found its way to the nape of his neck, and with the slightest of pulls he came forward to put a whisper of a kiss against my lips. It was almost too light to feel, and still its touch echoed through my body. I moaned, and he smiled. With another tiny move he brought our lips together again, his bottom lip brushing my upper lip.

He kept teasing, and I kept restraining myself until every muscle in my body was quivering with unmet need. And even then, I managed to hold myself motionless until he made the mistake of lingering for the span of a second, of uttering the faintest of growls, and all my self-restraint was blasted to pieces. Crushing him against me was not a conscious decision, and neither was the way I devoured him. There was simply no other option than to take possession of him. And he gave everything, answered me as hungrily, as fiercely, and almost as aggressively. It was perfect, a moment of battling tongues, another of kisses placed everywhere, a moment of staring and waiting, then diving back into the passionate dance of tongues and lips.

Dolen clutched my shoulders, fingers digging in my flesh. Somehow his fingers had found the lines of my tattoos again, and the connection there sizzled between us. I pushed him back towards the bed, then flipped us around and let myself fall, pulling him on top of me.

"Are you sure you've never done this before?" I asked, as I placed suckling kisses on his neck.

He pulled back and frowned at me, and he looked even more like the Ishiou god. It didn't make him less gorgeous. Not that he could ever look bad, hanging over me with that amazing silky hair creating a tent and sheltering us from the world.

"Of course I have kissed before. I'm twenty-one years of age. I was bonded for three years, until they separated us when we were unable to conceive."

"You were bonded? To a woman? Like... for real?"

Dolen's face changed into an expression of complete confusion. "Of course it was real. I do not understand how this could be a strange custom for you. It appears you are even more barbaric than I thought. I can explain it to you, but I do not feel like talking at the moment. I assumed you did not either." And then

the little bastard rolled his hips to put pressure on my cock that was not as easily distracted as my brain or mouth.

“Okay,” I said with a grin. “You get your way, Nighteyes.”

“Nighteyes?” he asked in wonder, halting halfway down to a kiss. I pulled him the rest of the way down and plastered my mouth against his. I kissed him until he was almost boneless, draped on top of me, and then some more. Only when the rasp of his clothing against the naked skin of my chest started to annoy me, did I pull away.

“Yes. Nighteyes.” I traced his cheekbone with the tips of my fingers. “You have the most amazing eyes in the world. Now take off that infuriating outfit of yours. You seemed plenty comfortable without it before.”

Much to my chagrin, Dolen had to stand up to remove the sheets he had wrapped himself in. I did appreciate that unwrapping them from his body was much like seeing a present opened. And what a present he was! I had looked at him when I treated his burns, but this was so much more, and my eyes lingered. Graceful was the best way to describe him. He possessed the innocence of an antelope and had that same skittish aura, as if he would run away at any moment.

Dolen seemed unsure under my admiring look, shifting a bit from one foot to the other. I finished my inspection by finally checking out his equipment, something I had refrained from doing before. My mouth watered at the sight of his swollen cock, long and straight and the faintest of pinks. The head was several shades darker than the rest, peeking out from his foreskin. The veins showed as deep purple lines through his pale skin. I couldn't wait to trace them with my tongue.

I sat up, grabbed him by his hips, and pulled him closer so I could rub my cheek against the satin skin of his cock. He stiffened with a moan. When I looked up, there was nothing but trust and desire in his eyes. I buried my nose in the line between hip and stomach and inhaled his earthy smell. I followed with a taste, dragging my tongue down until I could nuzzle his balls. They hung low and heavy. The musky scent was the strongest here, and I drank it in, savoring it until I felt lightheaded. I lapped at his balls, moaning at the taste of him. His balls were hairless, and his pubic hair was sparse, silky, and the whitest of whites. Dolen groaned roughly when I sucked one ball into my mouth and massaged it with my tongue, his entire body quivering like the tight string of a bow. While I was giving his other ball similar attention, he clenched

his hands in my hair and angled my head so I could meet his eyes. I hadn't seen them glow before in the daylight, but now they did, a narrow ring of blue fire shone round the deep, black pools of his pupils. I abandoned his balls and kissed my way up to his hipbone.

"Anyone ever done that for you, Nighteyes?"

He opened his mouth but didn't seem to be able to form words. Instead he shook his head, fingers massaging my scalp, again instinctively finding the lines etched there. I don't know if it was intended, but there was the slightest of pushes in the direction of his cock. Well, I was not going to object to that. I nibbled on his skin, taking my time to get to my destination and, by the feel of his trembling muscles, he did not disapprove.

The sounds he made when I finally closed my lips around the head, lavishing it with quick brushes of my tongue, tasting and feeling and relishing, were so incredible I could've come from just those. The noises increased when I prodded his slit and dragged my tongue around the head. When I grabbed the base with a firm hand, angled him the way I needed him, and took him straight to my throat, his moans and whines transitioned into strangled groans. I swallowed around him, earning a half shout, then moved up again to feel his cock slide through my mouth, the weight of it on my tongue intensely arousing, his whimpers immensely gratifying. With a glance up I saw Dolen had his eyes firmly closed, his face pulled into an expression of bliss and wonder.

From his tense muscles I knew he was resisting the urge to bury himself in my mouth, and with a hand on his ass I gave him permission. His ass was something else entirely, hard muscle that was simply perfect to hold on to as he fucked my mouth. My middle finger teased his crack and that made him piston forward again. When he pulled out, the salty bitterness of his precum flooded my taste buds. I moaned around him, and the taste increased. I needed more of that, so I brought a finger to my mouth, slid it in next to Dolen's cock to coat it in saliva, and went back to fingering his ass, pushing and pulling and stroking until his movement lost all coordination. I took over then, sliding my mouth around him and sucked hard when I pulled back. One, two, three times and all the muscles in his body tensed and let go in one beautiful move. His cum rushed into my mouth. The sounds he made were all I ever needed to hear for the rest of my life.

When I was lapping him clean, his knees buckled, and he fell forward into my lap. I caught him easily and positioned him so he was lying in my lap, and I was cradling him in my arms. He had the most wonderful smile on his face,

even as his eyes fluttered shut in exhaustion. Dolen's lips opened under mine, our tongues met, and a growl resonated from him when he tasted himself on me.

Had he ever tasted himself on someone else? Had he ever licked his fingers clean after jerking off? Had he even ever beat off?

There was so much I had to discover about his culture, and their sexual habits topped that list.

"Was that what you wanted to do?" I whispered against his lips. His eyes opened widely, for a moment confused, before he smiled shyly.

"The men did not do that. I never imagined—maybe—they did that before I saw them."

"Then, what did you see?"

"They—I think it would work better if you did not wear those leg clothes," Dolen said with a slight grin. He rubbed a hand over my leather pants. "They were not naked, but our garments are much more practical for such things."

"Huh," I laughed. "And there I was thinking your people walked around naked all the time."

"We do not wear clothing for bathing. And we bare both our spirits and our bodies to talk with the Gods. But we talk to the Gods frequently, so you might say that we do not wear clothes all that often." He sent me another bright grin.

I vowed then and there to stop arguing the existence of his gods or his need to worship them, at least if he didn't mind me watching him as he prayed.

Dolen clambered off me and tried to undo the fastenings of my pants. He only succeeded in making a big knot of the woven cords that held my pants up and closed.

"See, your leg clothes are not practical at all," he said with a frown.

"Pants are plenty practical for hunting or riding horses," I threw back. "I'll dare you to ride Bane for a day without them. You'll have blisters on your ass as big as your hands. You just need to know how to work them." I tugged at the cords but failed to undo the knot.

"You see!"

"You broke them." I grinned at him, before dashing to the pantry to get a knife and cut the colored belt. On my way back to the bed, I grabbed a bottle of sunflower oil to use as a lube.

“What is that for?” he asked, studying the bottle with raised eyebrows.

“Just have a feeling it might come in handy.”

The way he gave the bottle more attention than me was a bit insulting. I dumped the oil on the floor next to the bed and found out that pulling down my pants did the trick.

Dolen took as much time checking me out as I had done with him earlier, maybe even more. Not that I even had half his patience. I lay down next to him and rolled on my side into his warm embrace. After a kiss that was nowhere near long enough, Dolen turned me onto my back and pushed himself up on an elbow to study me. As he was also dragging his long fingers over my skin, tracing the luminous patterns, I had no objection. He seemed enthralled by my tattoos, both by the thin swirling lines that covered my entire body—apart from my palms, the bottoms of my feet, and most of my face—and the way the lights pulsed as I reacted to his touches.

The contrast between our coloring was stunning. My russet skin with its luminescent lines made his seem only whiter. I had never seen anything like it, never met anyone who didn't share a tan like mine. His hands were so soothing I could've fallen asleep, if not for my cock that was getting harder and more impatient with every passing second. I put a hand on his wrist to steer his hand downwards, and he readily obliged.

Dolen didn't give me the release I craved, instead, stroked a careful finger over the fine lines etched there. I groaned at the excruciating tease. It was starting to feel like I was more a scientific discovery to him than anything else.

“Is this what you wanted to do?” I asked with an exasperated sigh.

Dolen seemed to startle out of his daze and snapped his head around to meet my eyes with so much desire, my breath caught in my throat. I pulled him towards me for a fierce kiss, moaning loudly when he wrapped a hand around me, stroking me tentatively. I arched into his touch, helpless under his hands and his kisses. There was something about Dolen that made everything more real, that ground my always chaotic mind to a halt. When he pulled back, I whined and leaned up to take another kiss. He smiled and pushed me back.

“Now, those men,” he started, seriously. “This thing they did, I am apprehensive that you might find it repulsive. I do not know your customs, and I wish you to know that I will not blame you if you do not want to do... that with me.”

I opened my mouth, but he shut me up by putting two fingers on my lips.

“Please let me finish first. I am afraid, otherwise, I will not have the courage to ask.” Poor Dolen was so red now I could’ve used his cheeks to light a candle.

“I... they...” He took a deep breath. “You know how a man lies with a woman?”

I nodded. Not that I had much—well, any—experience with that.

“Well... they did that with each other. I mean... they were standing and one of the... he put his... penis... in... you know?”

It would probably take him another twenty minutes to ask for something I had no problem giving—or receiving—so I grabbed Dolen around the waist and rolled over until I was on top of him. I straddled his thighs and wriggled until our erections aligned.

Rolling my hips to get some well-needed friction, I leaned down to hover above him. “I get it. So tell me, Nighteyes, do you want me to do you, or do you wanna be the one buried inside me?”

His mouth fell open. “You mean—?”

“Yep, not repulsed at all. The opposite, really. I want that, Nighteyes. I want that a whole lot. And if you don’t mind, I kinda want that now.”

His smile was as radiant as the glow of his eyes, and it touched me in a place deep in my stomach. “I want you... in me... if you do not mind. It is something I have dreamt about.”

I dipped down for a kiss. “Someday you’re gonna describe all those dreams for me, and we’ll make them come true.”

I got a feeling it was not just his dreams about sex I was talking about, and the widening of his eyes suggested he heard the meaning behind my words. Or it might mean the guy was looking forward to a lot of sex in his future. I was up for it either way.

I had to get off him to grab the oil and asked him to roll on his stomach. And what a sight that was. If I hadn’t been aching to be inside him, I would have spent a whole lot of time kissing and teasing that expanse of flawless skin.

Despite my impatience, I took my time to prepare him thoroughly, not wanting to hurt him, waiting to ease into him until he was begging me for it, until he was completely relaxed and opened, and everything was shiny with the

oil. My dick was leaking a steady stream of precum, adding its own slick to the mix. And still, I managed not to slam inside him. I don't think I had ever taken it this slow, and I waited until he pushed himself back onto me. His breathing consisted of gasps, sprinkled with whines of need. I held perfectly still as he shoved backward and forward on my cock, every time going a bit farther and farther until I was finally fully sheathed in him. It was not nearly enough.

"More, oh, more, please, Keric. Give me more. Oh please, Kerr..." The way my name rolled on the back of his tongue spurred my need to even greater heights. I leaned forward to press a kiss between his shoulder blades.

"Sure, Nighteyes. Everything you want. Everything for you."

I finally started moving with zeal, and once I started, I couldn't stop. I pummeled him with long, forceful strokes, designed to move as far inside him as possible, meant to possess, to lay claim, to connect. He met my every motion, rocking back and forth to increase his own pleasure. He wasn't quiet for a moment and urged me on with his moans and groans and with a shout of my name whenever I hit his sweet spot.

There came a moment I needed to see him. I needed the added link of his eyes on mine, his hands on my tattoos, and I pulled out, turned him on his back and slammed in again. I took his right hand and put it on the central point over my heart, and his left found my neck and the node there, again instinctively touching exactly the right points. I roared as I took him harder, took his leaking cock in a grip that was too frantic to be coordinated and felt his muscles clench around me, right before his slickness streamed into my hand, and my own release flooded his canal. I fucked us through our orgasms, seeing his eyes widen when the rush of colors shot over my skin, spreading from the lines atop my heart and traveling out to my limbs.

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Chapter 5

I can't remember what happened after that. I must have slept, or I might've lost consciousness. The next thing I knew was the itch of dried blood and cum, a straining bladder, my stomach roaring with hunger, and the numbness of a sleeping arm. I didn't mind the numbness much, because it was Dolen who was causing that particular problem, but the rest needed urgent attention.

A shower and a piss later, I was back inside and stuffing myself with bread and cold raven. I also got the message tube out of my discarded shirt but did not open it yet. Once I did, I would have to stop pretending I had nothing to do with that world.

The past few weeks I had been indolent and stubbornly avoided finding a solution to the predicament I was in. If I did not control my visions, if I did not show I had at least made an effort, there would be trouble. It would certainly mean the end of everything my uncle had tolerated from me until now. I'd turn twenty with the coming of the fall, so I wasn't a child in years but had been allowed to keep acting like one. It would not be accepted any longer. This forced isolation was the first sign of that.

I highly doubted uncle Deke thought me suitable for the military, political and diplomatic duties that I was expected to fulfill. I was seen as too annoying, too naive, and too soft to be taken seriously. I had no desire for any kind of official position, so this was about the only reason I did not mind making that kind of impression. My reputation as a coward might even keep me out of battle. But I certainly would be forced to procreate, if only for the slight chance that I would sire children with similar visions, children more docile and useful than I was. My uncle was a patient man, and the plans he had for mankind spanned more than just his lifetime. I would do about anything to prevent fathering children; I had no desire to ever have sex with a woman, but even more than that, the idea of being a father made me uneasy, and I did not wish my visions on anyone, least of all an innocent child.

Most important was that if uncle Deke was done being nice and patient, he would become the ruthless man so many feared. Torture wasn't beneath him. He wouldn't hurt me, not at first. But I had friends among the commons: people who, in the eyes of most Tattooed, were expendable, but who were definitely not expendable to me—something my uncle was very much aware of. And it would be useless. It wasn't only that I didn't want to give my uncle the horrible

fire sticks I had seen in my visions, but I couldn't even if I wanted to. I couldn't decide what to see, or when to see it, and once I was in a vision, I had no way out.

Before I found Dolen, I had seriously considered running away and leaving everything behind. Without him, I had no way to give my uncle what he wanted anyway. Dolen might be the key to fix that problem. He somehow helped me calm my mind. His presence shielded me from the horrors like nothing had ever done before. He might be able to help me attain the focus I needed.

For my sanity, I welcomed that, but I didn't welcome the responsibility of playing a part in spawning another Cataclysm. It would not come during my life or even that of the next few generations, and it might come even without my help, but as long as I had any say, no steps would be taken in that direction at all. I liked the world the way it was, thank you very much.

Maybe I could give my uncle some snippets, some things that were highly useful but not that dangerous. Maybe I could find medicine or new food sources or a better way to warm our houses. Maybe I could teach him to make those big glass windows the ancient ones had. Could I keep my uncle satisfied without handing him another way to bring death to our lands?

And Dolen needed a place to live. He needed safety, people around him, some way to stay useful. If I took him home, I could give him all that and more. It meant keeping him close, being with him, seeing what else could form between us. It would be difficult to persuade my uncle to allow it, to allow a stranger to spend his time in freedom, to have him house Dolen close to me instead of in the workers' camps. But uncle Deke would permit it, if Dolen was the key to my visions. He would, if he thought he could use him to breed scouts who could see in the dark or use his amazing technical ability. And even without the advantages Dolen could bring to the clan, my uncle might simply give in to me as an indulgence to his favorite sister's child, if I handed him at least part of what he wanted.

In fact, if they found out about Dolen, he wouldn't have much choice. Coming voluntarily would make things easier on him, but it wouldn't make much difference in my people's eyes. He was human, so he should make a contribution to what was best for mankind. Would Dolen want that? He was a peaceful man, and he came from a tribe where violence was only a part of his gods' repertoire. He deserved that choice, though, and I hoped being with me would be reason enough to come.

I took a deep breath and opened the message. It was time to face the real world again. As expected, it was uncle Deke's handwriting. It was short and to the point, as was everything about the man.

It is time to end this nonsense. I'm sending someone to test your progress. They will be there by the time of the new moon.
Dekarius.

The new moon was less than a week from now, an awfully short time to achieve enough for my plans to work, and I wondered why there was suddenly need to hurry. He'd been quite clear I could stay here forever as far as he was concerned. Not that he expected me to last for long. He knew as well as anyone that I hated being alone, and how easily I got bored. I half assumed he had thought I was only being stubborn and would break before I even left.

I heard the rustling of sheets and turned back to the bed, only to find Dolen was studying me with a look I could not decipher. It was far removed from the moon-eyed stare I had envisioned. Was he having regrets? He'd seemed to be into it last night, more than into it. Had it been a spur-of-the-moment thing for him, something he felt stupid about now? It wasn't that I was ready to proclaim my undying love or some nonsense like that, but I had enjoyed myself tremendously and was hoping that there was more where that came from. It was the best way to defy the boredom I could imagine. Not to mention that I needed his help.

"Dolen, I... err... About last night... Well, this morning..."

"Yes?" Dolen said, pushing himself up and thus revealing that stunning slender body of his. My mouth went dry, and I wished I'd gone through the trouble of putting on more than a loincloth. Like this, it was all too visible what effect that ridiculously beautiful man was having on me. Dolen glanced down, and I felt my cheeks grow hot. He gave no reaction to either my embarrassment or my reason for it.

"I'm... Well... How are you?" I breathed, relieved at finally being able to string a coherent sentence together. It was only three words, but still...

Dolen cocked his head. "I am fine, thank you." He moved experimentally. "A little sore maybe."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"Are you? Oh... I guess I should apologize as well. I behaved exceptionally wantonly last night. I was out of line. I hope I have not inconvenienced you by

occupying your bed.” I swore he turned red when he said that. I couldn’t be certain, not in the dim light, but he surely avoided my eyes now.

I couldn’t help it, I burst out in laughter. Dolen whipped his gaze back to mine. He growled at me, and that was the cutest sound I’d ever heard anyone make.

“I’m sorry, Nighteyes. I’m not making fun of you. It’s just... the idea of me having any objection to anything that happened between us, and that includes you hogging my bed, it’s hilarious.”

“It is?”

“Yes, it is. It was amazing. At least, it was for me...” Now I was the one avoiding his eyes. To have something to do, I studied the note I was still clutching in my hand.

“I thought it was very pleasurable as well. I am grateful I got to share that experience with you,” he said in a too-serious tone. It made me laugh again.

“Are you always this serious?” I teased him, getting a confused stare in return.

“I do not understand what you mean.” Dolen cracked a smile, so at least I was not accidentally insulting him. “Is it not proper to thank one after sharing an experience like that?”

“Hmm... maybe. But there are better ways to do that. But I warn you, they are a bit less proper.”

“What are your customs in this?” I couldn’t read his expression, had no way to know if he was teasing me or not.

“They are a bit more hands-on. A kiss would do.” A repeat of the experience would be even better.

“I am very comfortable in here,” he said slowly, beckoning me to him. “I have no objection to kissing you to show you my gratitude. But you would have to come here.”

“I think I can handle that. It’s only polite, right?”

“It is.”

I went to him, framed that gorgeous face with my hands and fit my lips to his. I wasn’t sure what to expect, and I got more from him than I could’ve hoped. He opened up to me, pulled me down on top of him, and for a while

everything else disappeared as I got distracted by naked skin and hot kisses. It took a long while before either of us was able to continue our conversation. It was Dolen who came to the matter at hand first, while I was still catching my breath in his arms.

“Now, I thought you wanted to forget about the world?” He pointed at the letter that had ended up in bed with us. “Why did you decide to open the message after all?”

“Because I realized the world is an awfully big place to ignore.” I sighed. “I can’t stay here forever, no matter what I want.”

“And what did the message say?”

I shrugged. “My uncle wants me back home, so someone will be by to test me in a week or so. I was trying to figure out a way to deal with that.” Not that I had any idea what that test would entail. I wasn’t even sure if there would be a real evaluation. More likely, my uncle expected to find me cowed into doing whatever he wanted of me.

“Who is your uncle, Keric? Why does he hold this kind of power over you?”

“He leads us,” I said simply, waiting to see his reaction. People either feared, despised, or sucked up to me because of whose blood I shared. Dolen only blinked, tilting his head in an unvoiced question.

“I see your people haven’t spent much time here, lately,” I said with a pained laugh. I needed to explain things to him, at least if I wanted him to understand what I was asking when I asked him to come home with me.

“We have not. The last time we were in these latitudes was when I was a very young child.”

“So you’ve never heard of the leader of the Tattooed, the great Dekarius?”

He shook his head. “We know of the Tattooed, know that we do not want to cross paths with them, so we keep hidden. We have not spoken to anyone living in this area since we were preparing for our... ritual.” He choked up, and I hugged him tight. I felt horrible for reminding him about his grief.

It didn’t take long before Dolen was back in control and had resumed staring at me curiously. “So you are related to the leader of the Tattooed? Does that make you important?”

I snorted. “It should. If not for the fact I have about as much control over most of my powers as a child, and they think I’m stubborn and don’t have the best for mankind in mind. I keep arguing that most of mankind would think it best if they stay in one piece and don’t have their children stolen to become Tattooed or breeding stock for new powers. My uncle usually says that I don’t see the greater picture, and I agree that we see quite a different picture—”

I realized I was going off topic and tried again. “My uncle has this master plan to breed a whole new version of humans, some kind of superhuman species that will, in the end, create peace and prosperity for all. It’s a deranged plan, but yeah, I guess he means well. The problem is the way he tries to make those dreams happen. He thinks for it to happen, the Nahuel should rule the world because we are most powerful. From every tribe he conquers, he selects the most powerful people to breed with, to make the Tattooed stronger with every child that is born. He rules by fear and has invented this principle he calls “propaganda”. Make sure enough people say something and soon everyone believes it. He mostly makes an example of only a few, so the rest will follow without bloodshed—”

Dolen was staring at me with big eyes that displayed disgust. Seeing that look in his eyes nauseated me. It was crystal clear this was not the moment to ask him to come home with me. I had not exactly argued my case very well.

“Dolen, come on. Don’t look at me like that. Don’t look at me like I’m my uncle. I’m not him. I do not agree with him, nor have I ever played a part in any of it. I have always tried everything I could to stop him. But no one listens to me. Everyone thinks I’m insane. If I can control the visions, if I can be useful and stop acting like an idiot, maybe I can change things. My little sister, she could become my uncle’s successor. I need to be there to help maintain the balance, but they need to take me seriously first. And I need you for that.” My eyes burned, and it became difficult to breathe. “I am not my uncle, Nighteyes. I am not like him. Don’t know who or what I am, I have no idea who to become, but I am not my uncle.”

“You are not,” Dolen said softly, moving back into my embrace. “You are more than the man whose blood you share, or the lines etched in your skin. You are more than just your clan. I do not know why, but you are important. The Gods wouldn’t have put us together otherwise.”

My mumbled, “Maybe your gods just wanted you to get laid,” got a disapproving look.

“What do you need me for?” Dolen asked seriously, as he traced featherlight touches over my face and neck.

“To keep doing that,” I said to another disapproving stare. He removed his hand, and I pulled it back immediately. “Okay, okay, being serious now.” Not that I wasn’t before. “I think you can help me focus the visions, make sure I don’t get lost. I need to learn how to pick the vision I’m seeking from all the chaos. You do something to calm me, Dolen. Maybe I can use that as a lifeline.”

“Tell me how,” he said, still stroking my face. “I will try to do what you need.”

I thought for a moment, then had him sit up, so I could lie in his lap—a win-win situation either way—and put his right hand over my heart and his left at the nape of my neck, not that much different from our position, earlier, during sex. “Now, look into my eyes and do that calming thing.”

For the first time, the visions didn’t flood me the moment I relaxed my wariness and turned my attention inward. Instead, I felt them as through a thick fog. It was almost like they were trying to make contact. They were ever changing, individual scenes holding for a moment in my subconscious, then popping like a bubble. There were more than I could count, more than I could ever visit even if I spent all my life in the past.

Some felt familiar. Some were so powerful they nearly broke through the shield Dolen’s mysterious powers helped me form, and some were weak, only fleetingly present. The strangest thing was that some radiated happiness. They were the ones that were the weakest, that disappeared in mere seconds. The next time a happy vision came by, I reached out—

I’m in the middle of an excited crowd. Everyone is chanting a name, screaming, whistling, clapping, dancing. There are people being carried on top of the crowd, their heavy boots and flailing arms hurting the people beneath them. I feel both the elation and the pain and irritation. I feel impatience and exhaustion and hurting feet. I feel sunburn and dehydration. I feel drunk and stoned. But most of all, I feel in awe of what is happening, and I feel expectation. Loud music hurts my ears, hard and powerful and incredibly aggressive. The crowd erupts, and so do I. The happiness and the energy send me to a high I ‘d never reached before. I sing along with words that seem

written in my heart, my voice breaks with thousands of others, I jump and jump and—

I was grinning from ear to ear, and I had no idea why Dolen looked so sour.

Where was I? What was happening? Why was I cold after being overheated a moment ago?

“What happened, Keric?”

I didn't answer. Turning my attention inward again, I tried to find the vision, but something was wrong. No friendly fog now, no protection from the onslaught of pain.

I'm hungry. My stomach is an empty pit. My legs are too weak to support my weight. My muscles burn and twitch. My mind will not focus. I look around me and see many men in the same state of starvation I am. We all wear blue and white striped uniforms with a number and a colored triangle on our chest. I look at my arm. It has the number 58964 tattooed on it. It is who I am now. A number. My arm is thin as a stick. So are my legs. I am starving. We are. Only then comes the pain. The icy cold. The fear. The choked misery. There's also hate, hot and sharp. Worse is indifference. We are cattle, less than animals, only worthy to die. Those thoughts are so potent, they burn like a whipping across my back and face. I'm so tired. I have a rock in my hands. It has to go into a pit I'd spent three days digging. I hate that pit. I hate this rock. I hate the fact that I want to die. I do not want to give them what they want. Maybe the war will end. Maybe rescue will come. Hope. It is the emotion that hurts the most. A slap falls across my cheek, soft at first, harder and harder as I cower on the floor. Somehow the slaps feel like they don't belong here; somehow they feel alien. I whimper and hide my head. A kiss follows—

I gasped as the world came in focus again. Dolen's hands and lips were lifelines, the only thing that kept me from being pulled back into the vision. The weakness, the hunger, the horrible, pointless hope in the middle of complete helplessness lingered. I reached out to his spirit, needing the reassurance of someone real and good as a balance, and found nothing, I tried again, scrambling for my powers to obey, and failed again.

I gave up and reached out with my body instead of my mind. I held him close, feeling his lips on mine, his hands stroking soothing patterns on my stomach, and the strength and heat of his body erasing the nightmares. I turned us so we were lying side by side, and pulled away to see cheeks streaked with tears.

"I could not get you back, Keric. I tried, but after you closed your eyes you disappeared. What happened?"

"Shush, Nighteyes," I whispered against his skin as I kissed the tears away. I needed to get grounded in the present before I dared to talk.

"But—"

"No words. Please Dolen? I need..."

I had no words to tell him what I needed, but Dolen seemed to understand anyway. He took the lead this time, hands becoming more sure as they whispered over my stomach and chest, lips finding sensitive spots and eliciting noises out of me that made him smile against my skin, and he did it again and again until I was a quivering mess. I pulled him back to cover me, his weight on top of me making him more real. The smooth skin of his erection slid against mine, and I pushed my hips into the sensation. Wonder shone in Dolen's eyes, and I did it again, taking his hand and guiding it down. We rubbed together, our hands joined and wrapped around both our cocks, building further and further to that high I needed so much.

Only after the force of my orgasm had swept me clean and made my previously tense limbs heavy with relaxation, did I dare to think about anything but him.

Our little experiment had failed. It had started with promise, but in the end I had been as powerless as ever.

"What happened?" Dolen asked again, his voice still rough from the left over passion.

"I screwed up," I said bitterly. "Whatever you did made me able to choose the first vision, but I lost control almost immediately."

"You closed your eyes, and your tattoos started to flash. It is fascinating. It is as if the tattoos channel your energy."

He was correct, the tattoos were intricately connected and conveyed energy from my heart and brain to my extremities and out into the space around me.

"I should speak no more on this. I am not a magic man. I know nothing."

"You have magic," I said, tracing his eye socket.

"That is not magic. That is a gift from the Gods, just like..." he slammed his mouth shut and held his lips together tightly. I studied him, curious about his secrets, but not willing to force him into sharing.

“Like that amazing white skin of yours?” I asked, once again admiring the difference between our coloring. “Or the ability to talk with gods?”

Dolen nodded slowly, eyes searching mine to see if I truly accepted his refusal to explain. “The Gods granted us the ability to walk in the endless night, to survive without sunlight. There are children born with darker skin, but they get sick. They are weak and always tired. Their bones break easily, and their muscles hurt. Those children are always sad. We have learned that they cannot thrive without the sun, so we try to leave them with tribes who live in the sunlight. But we do not have the ability to talk to the Gods. They talk to us when they please, and they taught us the words and the ceremonies needed to be open to them.”

I highly doubted that the being that had visited us yesterday needed words or ceremonies to do whatever it wanted. It seemed to be called purely by Dolen's need. It had no problem reaching out to me, even though I didn't even believe in its existence before. There were so many questions surrounding Dolen, so many mysteries, and the confusion nearly melted my brain. I never liked riddles, didn't have the brain to solve them. What I wouldn't give to have Dylwin here. Well, not here exactly, obviously. That would ruin a lot of the fun, but it would be great to have her camping outside the hut.

“What were you trying to find?” Dolen interrupted my thoughts. He rolled out of the bed and stretched. I appreciated the stretching, though not the getting away.

“What?” I was half-dazed by the spectacle he made.

He frowned disapprovingly. “Focus, Keric.”

The words, especially combined with that look, were all too familiar. I had gotten it from my mother, my sister, my uncle, every one of my teachers, and honestly anyone who spent any time in my vicinity.

“What were you trying to find in the visions? What question did you want to get answered?”

“Question?” I asked, blinking in confusion. I seemed to be missing something.

“You went into the past with a goal. What was it?” His slow, patient tone was also disturbingly familiar.

“I... I didn't have one. A question, I mean. I think my goal was to control, to see what would happen.”

Dolen sighed and rubbed his face. "I think we have been going about this the wrong way. How can you ever have any control if you have no idea what you are doing? It is like throwing someone who cannot swim into the ocean during a storm and expecting him to control the waves."

"Ocean?" The word was familiar somehow, as if from something in another life.

"You have never seen the ocean? It is the endless stretch of water that has no other side. It is the boundary of the earth on the west. Rumors are that if you travel far enough to the east, north and south you will find the endless stretch of water there as well. They say the lands float on the ocean. I do not know for sure. We have not traveled that far." He looked so wistful after those words, it made me wonder if taking him home and pinning him down in one place could make him happy.

I found so much water hard to imagine. It didn't seem healthy. "So your people swim in this ocean-thing?"

"The ocean is not a thing," Dolen said sternly. "It is like the moon and the sun and the sky. It is there for all to see, and still you can never own it. But you misunderstand me. My point is that without something to hold on to in your mind, you cannot expect to know where you are going. You will drown."

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Chapter 6

The next days were spent experimenting with Dolen's idea. It failed more times than it succeeded, for various reasons, most of which had to do with me being unable to keep an idea so strongly pinned in my mind that the emotions from the visions wouldn't wipe it away. It was Dolen who suggested trying to find things in the past I felt strongly about, creating an emotional connection, as well as an intellectual one.

The results I got were weird and unexpected and mostly useless. In my search to find what ravens were like before, I experienced a collection of short memories that lasted mere seconds, composed of playful, intelligent birds that were not even half the size of the ravens we had to deal with in this age, birds that enjoyed the interaction with humans, sometimes to pester, sometimes to be loyal companions. The ravens of the past seemed like useful pets, much like the messenger monkeys, only more intelligent and nothing like the monsters of the present.

When I was searching for a medicine that could cure the poisoning of blood, something even our most skilled healers were helpless against, I saw needles being stuck into people, pills of all shapes and sizes, and white, sterile-looking rooms filled with people wearing long white coats. Most bizarre, were the unexplained visions of moldy bread, mold in little dishes, and mold in large vats. Dolen narrowed his eyes when I relayed that and was lost in thought for a while.

At least until I distracted him with the proposal of going for a ride. He furrowed his brows until I explained that, this time, I did mean a ride on Bane. Because, well, we couldn't spend all our time being useful, after all. Although, I thought showing Dolen the activities two men could do together when they're naked and willing was pretty useful on its own, and Dolen never argued for long.

"You wanted to know what it's like to be outside during the day," I said with a nudge in his ribs. "And I promised you a ride on Bane."

His smile broadened, and he rushed to get dressed in those maddening wrap-around things he insisted were clothes. He had been making adjustments to the sheet he was wearing until it covered him from head to toe. Only his eyes were visible in a thin slit between folds of fabric. He had explained that most of

their clothes were in dark shades, and I realized running into the Ehecati at night would be the fright of a lifetime. You would only be able to see glowing eyes hovering in the sky. I chuckled, realizing the origin of a few ghost stories we told. With a little prodding, I persuaded him to borrow some pants to wear underneath his wrap to protect his pretty ass.

I took my time putting on my leather pants and shirt, and still, I was finished before he was. He had tried to show me how to wear his outfit—he called it a shiresha—but I had been more interested in getting him out of it. Yorrit was right. I was useless when it came to gathering information for the clan. Not that I cared what my arrogant twin brother thought. He was an idiot. And I did learn heaps about Dolen, only not much about the Ehecati. I was not really interested in people who thought killing someone did any good for the state of the world. And that included many of my own tribe.

“Keric!”

I looked up to see Dolen already hesitating by the door.

“You were lost in your head again. It is not healthy. You need some fresh air.”

He didn't make an attempt to step outside, or to even open the door. It was a sunny and bright day, and I didn't blame him for fearing it. On impulse, I took my dagger and sliced a strip of the old shirt I wore when the nights were cold. It was a dark woven fabric that was soft with age and so worn it was practically translucent. I bound it loosely around his eyes. He made a sound of protest, at first, but opened the door only a moment later and laughed loudly. I was immensely proud that I had been the one with a clever idea for once.

In these last few days, Dolen had improved everything he'd gotten his hands on. My bow, that he had tinkered with that first night by the fire, was more accurate and powerful than ever. He had improved my hearth, fixed the creaking door, found a better way to make my raven cloak, and probably did a whole lot of other things I hadn't even noticed. Dolen had that need to be busy constantly, and when my stamina—either for sex or for working on my visions—ran out, he found something useful to do. I liked watching him, so we both kept ourselves amused.

Right before I followed him outside, I slung on my raven feather cloak that we had finished last night. I wished I had a mirror to admire myself in. I had to suffice with marvelling at the gleaming feathers. When I pulled the hood over my head and tried to look menacing, Dolen burst out in laughter.

I pouted at him, but that only made him laugh harder, so I decided to ignore him and called to Bane, instead. I had let him out of his shed earlier in the day, and he was happily grazing under the apple tree. The messenger monkey was sitting on a low branch, plucking apples for Bane.

“Stupid horse,” I said when I reached him and saw he was eating only apples and no grass. “You’ll get a stomach ache.”

In response, Bane snorted chewed apple in my face, and the monkey threw an apple right onto my head. I thought it was an accident until I led Bane away, and another apple bounced off the back of my head. I turned around to scold the beast, and it threw another one that would have hit me right in the face if my reflexes were a bit slower. As it was, I caught the apple and grinned at the monkey before taking a bite of it. I didn’t doubt another volley would have followed if the monkey hadn’t caught sight of Dolen. It immediately launched from the tree and flew towards him, greeting him with excited chitters. Dolen patted his shoulder, and the annoying thing landed there and made itself comfortable.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked Dolen. “Do you mind going to the Wastelands? It’s only a few miles from here, and I want to see what happens to my visions there.” I also wanted to try communicating with the Wastelands again, but that sounded so crazy I didn’t mention it. I wasn’t so sure that the last time hadn’t been some kind of weird dream.

Dolen didn’t answer at first. The cloth around his face hid his expression. And with his eyes wrapped, I didn’t even have them as a guide. “I... I don’t know,” he finally said. “It is a sacred place. I have not followed the correct rituals. I have not fasted. And...” He was quiet for a long time. “I was supposed to die on the Hollow Plains. I do not wish for my life to end anymore. What if the Gods are slighted and decide to take me anyway?”

I bit back my first response. I was pretty sure that telling him not to be stupid would end up biting me in the ass. I knew Dolen well enough now to understand he was truly scared lightning would hit him if he pissed off his gods. “Your god didn’t seem to mind you being alive earlier,” I said slowly, thinking as I talked. “And I think the Wastelands, your Hollow Plains, guided me to you. I’d tried to get Bane to go in before, but he refused until you were left as a sacrifice. I know it sounds absurd, but I think the Wastelands want me there. There’s this pull...” I knocked my fist against the place, halfway between my core and my heart, where I felt the Wastelands’ hook. “Like I need to be there. It’s getting stronger every day. But I understand if you think you can’t.”

The fact that I thought his reasons were superstitious nonsense, didn't mean I didn't understand that, for him, they were real, and I wouldn't push him to ignore them. When you're raised to think a certain way, it takes more than a few days to completely throw that off.

"We can try," Dolen said softly. "If your magic tells you to be there, we should listen."

I gave him a hug that earned me a very dirty look from the monkey wrapped around Dolen's neck and quickly readied Bane. It was already past midday, and I didn't enjoy the thought of getting caught in the Wastelands at nightfall. Even if that meant a perfect moment to try out my new cape, I had no intention of finding out what kind of deadly things roamed there during the night.

It took a while to leave after all, since the monkey had no intention of being left behind, and I had no intention of taking it, and its sharp teeth, with us. Every time I had chased the beast off, it came back to Dolen, and every time I tried to catch it, it flew out of my reach. All my supposed superpowers were no help here. Eventually Dolen, who was laughing so hard he had difficulty standing, saved me from further embarrassment by simply grabbing the monkey as it landed on his shoulder for another cuddle and locking it in Bane's shed.

Finally, we were on our way. I was leading Bane, more for Dolen's peace of mind than Bane needing guidance, and Dolen was sitting on his back. He was a little stiff, almost sliding off a few times. He didn't seem to understand my instructions, and after having to catch him when he nearly fell for the fifth time in as many minutes, I jumped on behind him. Dolen made a surprised noise.

"Bane's more than strong enough," I reassured him. "Especially if we keep going slowly." Bane nickered as if to remind me he would have no problem carrying us a whole lot faster. He seemed eager to go into the Wastelands again, which was more than a little odd considering his earlier reluctance to even come close to it.

Traveling like this was very, very pleasant. Dolen's back was pressed closely against my chest, one of my arms was wrapped around his stomach, my other hand held the reins loosely. Our thighs connected, and my crotch rubbed against his ass with Bane's every step. Dolen soon felt the effect that had on me. He pushed back, and I nuzzled his neck to show my appreciation. I was very glad that we had managed to leave the monkey behind. I was sure that it would've had my nose for that.

“Did you know it is possible to have sex on a horse?” I mumbled in his ear. “Makes me wish I hadn’t talked you into wearing pants.”

Dolen turned around to send me a mocking look that was so obvious I caught it from behind the cloth around his eyes. “You make me wonder if you were dropped on your head as a child. You have the most foolish ideas.”

I grinned at him and took the opportunity to steal a kiss, something that was complicated because of that cloth wrapped around his face, and despite his ridicule, he didn’t exactly discourage me.

“I was merely sharing an interesting fact about horseback riding.”

He snorted, but it didn’t keep him from pushing his ass back against me. The pleasure built up in me, until I was ready to let us fall off Bane to have my way with him in a more conventional position.

But when we went over the next hill, the Wastelands stretched out before us. Dolen stiffened against me. The moment was gone. And not only because of Dolen’s obvious dread. The Wastelands’ pull was abruptly magnified to almost unbearable levels. Lust and banter were forgotten. I needed to be there. Without considering Dolen, I nudged Bane with my heels, and almost before he got my signal, he broke out into a canter. Dolen shouted in fright, and I pulled him closer against me, making sure his body followed my movements.

Bane kept running until we were deep in the Wastelands, and he saw one of those moving flowers he liked so much. He came to a sudden stop on top of the plant and immediately lowered his head to take a bite, nearly causing poor Dolen to fall. Only my hold on Dolen kept him on the pony. I could feel his fear in the way he tensed against me, in the trembling of his limbs.

“Are you all right?” I asked him while sliding off Bane. I grabbed Dolen around the waist and pulled him off after me.

“Yes,” he said in a tone that made it hard to believe him.

“Are you sure?” I hugged him, but his heart didn’t seem to be in it. Neither was mine. The pull was still there, trying to guide me deeper into the Wastelands. My tattoos tingled all over, and the feeling made me lightheaded. As before, visions hovered beneath my consciousness, but I pushed them away by studying my surroundings. That was one of the things we had discovered the past few days. Trying to push them away barely worked, and neither did trying not to have them. The only thing that worked was finding something physically real to concentrate on. It was hard for me. I had a lot of trouble focusing my

attention on anything and always had. It wasn't surprising I had the most success when I distracted my mind with Dolen, but he had been quite stern in telling me that I couldn't have sex every time the visions bothered me. I hated to admit he might have a point.

So I settled on paying attention to what was around me. Bane had brought us to a place I hadn't been before. It was the first time I had seen water in the Wastelands, and the little pool seemed out of place in the red and white striped rock floor. The ground was wiped smooth by the wind that ruffled the hair around my face. I walked towards it and stared, marveling, into the deep blue-green tint of the water. The surface was moving slightly, but the patterns waved out from the center and didn't seem to be caused by the stiff breeze.

"How do you think the water got here?" I asked Dolen when I felt his shoulder bump mine.

He shrugged. "Probably from beneath the rocks." He didn't elaborate and wandered away to sit on one of the rocks. He sat in the cross-legged position that he used to pray. I opened my mouth to ask why he wasn't getting naked and immediately shut it, realizing he would have no desire to end up sunburned again. Leaving Dolen to his prayers, I reached out with my consciousness, broadening my senses to everything that was alive. To my immense surprise, I could feel Dolen this time, something I hadn't managed before. His presence was warm and soothing, and it kindled as I touched it with mine. He seemed to be reaching out as well, but in a different way. His consciousness sent out tendrils of energy that appeared to be searching for something. His ability to talk to his gods seemed to be some sort of special skill after all.

I turned my attention to the water. The pond was empty of life. Last time I was in the Wastelands, reaching out, I had felt a reaction in my tattoos, and they had flared up with a blinding light. Today, nothing happened at all. I sat down, took my boots off and after a slight hesitation, stuck my feet into the water. I squealed and pulled them out as if bitten. The water was freezing cold! I tried a second time, now sending a bit of heat down my legs, just enough to heat the water around my feet to a bearable temperature. I hoped nothing would happen to set off my powers, or I might end up with my feet stuck in boiling water or trapped in ice. Putting my hands on the smooth stones, I tried to make contact once again.

And got nothing, not even a hint that this place was more than the remnants of an ancient disaster. Was the entire episode I experienced the other day just a figment of my overactive imagination?

Discouraged and more than a little disappointed, I focused my attention on Dolen. The power of his calling increased with every word of prayer he uttered. Most of the tendrils of energy fizzled out in the air, but some found a pathway into the ground, forming brooks of energy that struggled to expand. Experimentally, I added some of my energy to his. The tiny stream grew and grew until it spread everywhere around us, forming a huge network of interconnected energy lines, and with it, my awareness of the Wastelands grew. It no longer felt dead, only dormant. I called to it, tried to make the connection I had a few days ago. It ignored me.

And then some other entity—not the Wastelands, but that god?—touched Dolen's and my combined energy, pouring more into it and sending a question back. The god's attempt to communicate through the streams of energy was so powerful I almost blacked out. My tattoos tried to put up a shield, and with some difficulty, I managed to push the reflex down. Dolen's prayer changed and turned into a call. The being came, or more precisely, was. It prodded me again, and this time I had no defense. It invaded my mind, swallowing everything I was. I could no more prevent it than I could prevent a volcano from erupting with my bare hands.

My feet were freezing. My head hurt. I felt like I never had to sleep again. I knew everything that was around me. Every plant, every small beetle crawling over the rocks, every tiny bird in the sky, every beast resting through the heat of the day. I perceived the thousands of ravens nesting in the Wastelands, felt a turmoil when my mind touched theirs. The Wastelands slumbered below me and all around me. I was sure I would be able to feel the moon and the setting sun if I chose to. My consciousness stretched out for many miles, far beyond the Wastelands, far beyond what should be possible.

Through a haze of indifference, I felt my tribesmen come: Yanou, head shaved to show off his powers, menacing and grim in his usual black leather; Truben, with his greying beard and hair completely out of control; and my beautiful sister Dylwin. They were still over a day's travel away.

The reach of my consciousness continued to expand until it became almost unbearable, and I was stretched so thin I felt I might evaporate if I didn't stop. Slowly I pulled back, and I let myself shrink. There was a moment of resistance, the Wastelands beneath me stirred and went to rest again, and I was back in my own body, only sensing those things in my direct presence: the reassurance of Bane at my shoulder, and some tiny lizard that was hiding in the

grass under his feet. No Dolen, this time, even though I felt his body against mine.

I opened my eyes and gazed at Dolen, feeling confused and anxious. "Why can't I sense you? I felt everything." I motioned around me. My gestures were stiff and uncoordinated. My body felt too small for me now, so small and confining. I trembled, my emotions disordered and perturbed. "I could sense you when you were praying earlier. And now, you disappeared again. Why do you keep disappearing?"

Dolen inhaled sharply and started to say something. "We—I—" He swallowed. "It is forbidden. I cannot let anyone find out. It is..." he said in a small voice. "Forbidden."

"Tell me," I pleaded with a desperation I didn't know I possessed. "I told you everything. I trusted you with everything. Do you doubt me, Nighteyes?"

"I—It will be the death of my people if you know."

I knew without needing his explanation that by "you" he didn't mean me, but my clan.

"You can trust me," I said softly. "I thought you did."

He didn't say anything, and I felt my anger boil over. My tattoos shot lines of blood-red fire over my skin, making it look like I was bleeding all over. I jumped up and ran away before I accidentally did serious harm to Dolen. I roared my pain out to the world in a reaction so powerful it caused a temporary distortion in the energy of the Wastelands.

"Keric?" Dolen's voice sounded from right behind me. Still I couldn't feel him, and it was torture. "This is very painful for me. The secret is not only mine, and you do not understand the consequences, perhaps neither do I. But I do not wish for you to be angry with me."

"I'm not angry," I said between clenched teeth. "My emotions... I'm not all in control right now. And this... it's so confusing. It's like I'm missing one of my senses. It's like you're not even here. I thought it was me or my powers. But it's not, is it?"

I turned around to look at him. His eyes shone in the twilight. He sighed deeply. "I tell you this secret because I *do* trust you, and because I am afraid you will not rest before you figure it out. It will do more harm that way, to both of us. You have called me your friend from the start, and all you have done has shown that you are true in your intentions. You saved my life and entrusted me with your secrets. You have given me immeasurable gifts."

I bit my tongue to stop myself from interrupting him, because it was obvious he was talking himself into sharing.

“As an Ehecati, I was taught not to trust. We do not have friends amongst outsiders, and a good part of that is to protect us from spreading this knowledge. By telling you this, I place the fate of my clan in your hands. I do trust you not to share this with anyone else, not ever. Do not even mention it after today.”

His seriousness gave me pause. Did I have the backbone to keep a secret this important? I met his eyes, intensely serious and almost scared. And yes, for him I could. “No word will leave my lips, not ever.”

Dolen closed his eyes. He was trembling. “Your powers are not malfunctioning in this. Your tribe is not the only one who can sense what is beyond the physical. There are other men, and there are many predators that can. Back in the endless night, danger loomed everywhere. Food was scarce, and men even turned to hunting human flesh. In the midst of our desperation, Hadrà came to us and taught us not only how to conceal our bodies but to hide our souls.”

“Hide your souls? That’s impossible.” I reached out to him with focused attention, expecting resistance, a hole in the world, or even some sort of shield, but found nothing. Or... well... there was this barely detectable feeling of distraction, a powerful suggestion there was nothing there, combined with a growing awareness of something nearby, in this case, Bane. I huffed out a laugh. “That must be the coolest power ever! It is like you’re telling me, ‘I’m not here so you can’t eat me. Eat this horse, instead.’ Oh my, if uncle Deke ever finds out about this, he’s gonna want to breed a whole army with you.”

Dread filled me.

“Oh no... he’s gonna use you to breed soldiers. He’s going to find your tribe and assimilate them. You can’t come home with me now. I’m so sorry. You need to hide. You need to go far away and stay away. They can’t find you and figure it out. I—”

“Come home with you?”

Oh, yes, I had never worked up the courage to ask him that. I had intended to, but—

“Why do you assume that I would want to join your tribe?” His disgust was a slap in my face. “Your people... I have no wish to join a tribe that worships

violence instead of the Gods. I have no wish to be bred. By Hadrà, Kerìc, why do you want to return yourself? You seem to hate it there.” His face was etched in confusion, brows drawn.

“I—” I shut my mouth. “They—” I tried again. After several more failed attempts, I realized I had no rational answer for him. “It’s home.”

And that was the simple truth. No matter how much I complained, Masahiro was my home, and I missed it. I missed my friends, my family, and most of all, my little sister. And if I looked deep inside myself, I even missed my pain-in-the-ass twin. I missed the evenings spent roaming the city with friends, simply hanging out and being breathless with laughter about jokes that were so old they should have stopped being funny ten years ago. I missed going on communal hunts, helping out my friends’ families with whatever chores they had. I hated the politics, having to listen to my uncle’s speeches that sounded so logical until you really thought about them, detested the way so many of the Tattooed gave me the cold shoulder. But for all I didn’t like about it, it was still my home. I wasn’t ready to walk away from it, not for a man I had known for less than a week. Not even if that man was as incredible as Dolen.

“You think your uncle will use you to create terrible weapons. You will be forced to have children you do not wish your visions on and be forced to fight in wars you condemn. The other Tattooed see you as weak because of your beliefs and because of the compassionate person you are. They have convinced you that you are a lunatic and do not have a right to your own opinions. You have told me that I am slow-witted for believing exactly those same things about myself. Now I am telling you what you told me. You do not belong with those people. You...” He swallowed and looked away. “Something happened when I prayed. I felt Hadrà like I have never experienced before. Some kind of synergism happened. Your powers strengthened my prayers, or perhaps my prayers were guiding your powers. Hadrà came not only for me, but for you as well. I do not know why. I do not assume to understand the intention of the Gods. But, I feel strongly that I need to go deeper into the Hollow Plains, and Hadrà wants you to accompany me.”

What did Dolen want of me? Did he expect me to dance to the needs of yet another entity more powerful than me?

No, thank you!

“I can’t simply run away and leave everything behind. My sister is coming for me.” His blank look reminded me that I had not shared that particular bit of

information yet either. “When Hadrà visited us it helped me see far beyond my normal abilities. My sister is nearly here with two of my uncle’s men, who, I assume, are here to take me home. I need to see why Dylwin is here. She wouldn’t come if it wasn’t important. I’m surprised mother let her go at all. And I need to warn my uncle about the ravens. They could hurt so many people. He has the power to do something about them. I have responsibilities to my clan, to my family. I can’t run off with you.”

Dolen stared at me for a long moment, wringing his hands as he slowly backed away from me. There was a look in his eyes I didn’t recognize, one I didn’t like at all. His next words were like arrows into my heart. “When will your clansmen arrive?” Dolen asked with ice in his voice. “Do I have enough time to go back to the hut and to pack some supplies before I leave? Are you willing to gift them to me?”

“They will not arrive before the morning after next. And of course you can have anything you need,” I snapped, trembling with anger and hurt. “Did you think I would leave you stranded without food, clothes or water? I will not leave you to die, not like your own clan did.”

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Chapter 7

Needless to say, the ride back wasn't as cheerful as the way there had been. Dolen insisted on walking while I rode Bane. He walked faster than I thought possible, making his way through the, now, pitch-dark without a moment's hesitation. Bane followed in his footsteps and showed his displeasure about having to walk in the dark by prancing and bucking and nickering sadly. After a few attempts, I stopped trying to make conversation and suffered in silence. As if drawn by my current mood, the visions came back, and I let them take me. Because of our hard work, I now managed to remember that the visions were not real, and they didn't overwhelm me like they had before. That didn't do much to lessen the horror of seeing people turn to ashes, of seeing skin boil and blister, of feeling intense pain before the bliss of nothingness. I gagged from the smells of burnt meat and toxic gasses I had no name for. At least I didn't choke on the smoke anymore, managing to remind my lungs that I was breathing perfectly clean, cool air.

Dolen's sharp voice freed me from the misery. "Get a grip on yourself, Keric. I know you can."

When I opened my eyes, I noticed we were back at the hut. Bane was patiently waiting in front of his shed until I got off his back and let him in. Dolen had turned around the moment he saw I was back to reality and was walking towards the hut with big, angry steps.

I had done it again, ruined everything with my big, stupid mouth, and I had the feeling saying sorry wasn't gonna cut it this time. Not that I was the slightest bit inclined to be the only one to apologize. I was more than done with his tenuous faithfulness to me. The moment I refused to do whatever those gods of his wanted, he treated me like vermin, like an enemy.

The rest of the evening was spent in icy silence that was only broken by Dolen asking me for certain supplies. I gave him everything he needed, the first few times looking for an opening to close the distance between us. He never gave one, and I soon gave up. After a quick meal, I dropped down on my bed. I didn't bother to take anything but my boots off. I knew I wouldn't sleep anyway.

Only when he hoisted his backpack on his back and opened the door, did I react. "Where are you going?" I cursed the desperation in my voice.

"I am leaving," he said with a voice that was devoid of all emotion. "I do not want to inconvenience you any longer. I thank you for... everything." His voice shook a little on the last word. It wasn't much, but I pounced on it.

"Don't go. Not like this. Not while you're still angry. It's bad enough we'll probably never meet again. Please don't make this a bad memory instead of a good one."

Dolen turned around and studied me. "Why do you care, if my beliefs are so unimportant, and my people are so simpleminded? I was willing to sacrifice my life to save the world. You ridiculed those intentions. Even after the encounters with Hadrà, you still paid no heed to my belief that our meeting is not coincidence, and that we have a purpose to fulfill. You ramble on about inconsequential birds, wanting to talk to your sister, and not being able to leave a home behind that you never truly belonged in. I lost my home, my family, and everything I ever cared about! The only thing I have left is my faith in Hadrà, and that I have something important to do. Without you I will almost certainly fail, but I will die trying." By the end of this speech, he was quivering with emotion.

"So everything that happened between us was only politics and religion to you?"

"Hadrà—"

"I'm not trying to disrespect your beliefs, Dolen. I have been given free will and a mind of my own. I have spent twenty years defending that freedom from my clansmen who have tried to bend me to their will, and I will not give it up for some god when I don't even know its intentions! But this shouldn't be about any of that, Dolen..." I hid my face in my hands, trying to think about what to say, how to rescue this. I wasn't used to stopping fights, starting them was more my thing. "We come from different worlds, and we're fucking up because of it. I'm trying, but I don't understand shit about your beliefs, and I know you don't get where I'm coming from either. You can't. And I never expected you to understand in the few days we've known each other. But you seem to assume I should. You act like what happened between us was ordained by your gods, and we had no free will in this. Do you even like me, Dolen?"

He staggered back like I'd hit him. "You think I only had... intercourse with you because Hadrà intended me to?"

"You sure got cold the moment I told you I had obligations to my clan, so yeah."

“You were refusing to obey the wish of the most powerful of Gods. That shocked me. I—I have never heard of such a thing. And I had hoped... I do not wish to undertake this quest without you.”

“Because without me your god doesn’t get what it wants. I don’t care, Dolen. That god scares me. It nearly ripped my mind to shreds. Just go. Just go and leave me alone.” I wished I hadn’t even started this conversation. Before, it was only the all too familiar knowledge that I fucked up something good. But, realizing the entire time with me had meant nothing to him made me wish the being had, indeed, taken my mind. I turned onto my stomach, hid my head under the pillow, and tried to ignore the door shutting behind Dolen.

I flew up and nearly bumped my head against the top bunk when I felt Dolen’s hand on my back. My tattoos flashed blood red, a clear threat to anyone familiar with the Tattooed. I did nothing to restrain the reaction. Let Dolen see what happened when he pushed me over the edge.

“I never answered your question,” he said, sitting down on the bed, apparently too stupid to heed a warning. “I was hoping it would be easier to say good-bye with anger in my heart, holding on to the conviction that you are an ignorant idiot with no idea of how the world works.” I growled at that, ready for the attack, but Dolen held up his hand and quickly continued, “I find perhaps I am the foolish one. If I did something to make you believe there is nothing true between us, I have wronged you even more than you have me. Being with you is the only thing I have ever done that was solely for me.”

The harsh red glow of my tattoos faded with his words, and I couldn’t help reaching out to him, pulling him towards me, filling the horrible hole in my chest by holding him close. “I’m sorry for the things I said, Nighteyes. I am an idiot.”

He smiled, a trembling smile that reminded me of tears. “A thing you say far too often. Have they managed to make you believe that?”

I had no intention of answering, of explaining to him that the more popular opinion was that I used it as a convenient excuse to speak my raving mind. Leaning forward into a kiss seemed like a much better alternative. That first kiss led to another and another until I was no longer counting, but solely feeling. Frantically, we ripped at clothes, not settling down until we managed naked skin sliding over naked skin. Dolen seemed determined to show that he, indeed, desired me and lavished every inch of me with hot kisses and trembling caresses. In the few days we had spent together, he had discovered exactly what

drove me wild, so he went painfully slowly with touches which were barely there, not giving me what I craved until I begged for it. I wasn't exactly keeping time, but I swore the night was over when he finally reached my cock, licking and sucking and moaning around it like it was the best thing he ever tasted.

He looked up, eyes glowing like a solar eclipse. I took his face in my hands, drinking in this moment and forcing it into my memory. Smooth skin against my hands, satin hair brushing my thighs, hot, slick, perfection around my cock. He went so slowly I could've lasted for hours, and I sincerely hoped he'd keep it up. I felt like I was on fire, and the yellow and orange flashing and fluttering over my skin made me look the part, too. I nearly screamed when he pulled away and let the cold air of the hut tease my aching dick.

"There is something I want," Dolen said shyly. "But I am not sure if it is proper."

"I don't give a damn about proper. You should know that by now." I smirked at him, but he didn't seem to buy it.

"I am serious."

"And so am I," I said, sitting up so I could kiss that annoying hesitation out of him. "You can do anything you want with me. At least, as long as you do it soon. Otherwise I'll be forced to throw you on your back and drive into you until you can't remember your own name."

His mouth formed a perfect "o", and it was simply adorable. Another kiss followed, and he needed no more incentive to make up his mind. He slithered down again, pausing only for a teasing bite of my nipple. I whimpered and tried to keep him there, but he evaded me and went further down. He took another break to nibble on the head of my dick and continued his journey down until he was kneeling between my legs and lavishing my balls with attention. I grabbed my ankles and folded myself in half, starting to see, and like, where this was going. Down he went, tongue tickling that space behind my balls. When he arrived at his destination, he hesitated for the slightest of seconds before dragging his tongue around my hole. Stars flashed before my eyes, and the sound I made was unrecognizable.

"Is this acceptable?" he asked, committing the horrifying crime of pulling back.

"Y- Yes," I stuttered. I couldn't believe it took me four tries to get that one tiny word out. "Pl- Please."

His little smirk was priceless. He pushed my cheeks apart and went for another taste. He didn't pull back this time and laid soft kisses on my opening, pressed his tongue against it and massaged it, licked and pushed his tongue in until I couldn't help pushing my ass into his face. From the sounds he made, he didn't mind, and even if he did, I couldn't stop my movements, just like I couldn't stop the frenzied sounds I was making. The pleasure built up in me until his tongue was not enough anymore.

"Want you, Nighteyes. Need you in me." At least that is what I tried to say. Between the moans and groans, the words might have been unintelligible. I grabbed for the bottle of oil that had taken up permanent residence near my pillow and dropped it next to his head. Luckily, Dolen took that hint, hands trembling when he looked up to me and dripped the slick liquid on his fingers, just like I had done so many times this last week. We hadn't yet ventured on to Dolen fucking me, not because I wasn't willing or hadn't suggested it, but because he had been so eager to have me in him over and over again.

I was almost desperate enough to beg him to forgo prepping, but I had no intention of explaining to my clansmen why I wasn't able to sit on a horse. And Dolen's exploring fingers felt amazing, slick and careful and wonderful. He stretched me like I had him, turning all my tricks back on me and inventing some of his own. He did something with his thumb that—oh, wow.

When he finally pushed into me, I had never been more ready, so relaxed and needy, the sting of the intrusion immediately turned into pleasure singing through me. Dolen looked frozen in wonder once he had pushed in completely.

"So tight," he said, struggling with his voice. "It feels nothing like being with a woman."

"So I've been told. But Dolen"—I groaned when a slight move he made echoed through my entire body—"can we leave the scientific discoveries for another time?"

Dolen cocked his head and never even moved. "I still think it is strange—"

"Dolen, fucking move!" I growled in a way that would have been menacing if I hadn't been gasping and writhing on his cock.

There was that little smirk again. The asshole was teasing me. I would not give in to him.

"Please?" I whimpered a few endless moments later. That smirk blew up to a full-scale grin, before he pulled out so slowly it was torture.

It didn't take long for either of us. Very soon, Dolen lost his composure and his rhythm, but as far gone as I was, it didn't matter. I grabbed his hand and clumsily put it on my heart to connect our energies, the rush of release in my veins echoed by the rush of colors running over my skin, and with one last hit to my sweet spot, I shattered into a million pieces.

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Chapter 8

We left the bed as little as possible that night or the following morning. I was trying to forget that Dolen would get up at any moment and walk out of my life. By mid-afternoon, he was getting restless. It was a highly inconvenient time for him to get edgy, since he was midway through giving me the best massage I had ever had. I was half asleep on my stomach, savoring his weight on my buttocks. His hands worked on muscles I was pretty sure had always been tense.

"I have to go soon," Dolen said. He leaned down to press a kiss on the nape of my neck.

"The sun won't set for hours," I complained and wriggled to get his attention back to my shoulder blades. He obeyed, and I moaned. "Yeah there. A bit up, another bit."

"Are you sure your clansman won't arrive today?"

It was only the fifth time he had asked today and like all those times before, I obediently stretched my senses to their full capacity, which wasn't nearly as far as I had managed in connection with either Hadrà or the Wastelands. It was far enough to know that nobody would reach us today.

"Yeah, I'm su—"

"Wait," Dolen interrupted me. He pushed my hair back from my neck. "Use your magic again."

"It's not—"

"Do it!" He sounded so panicked that I did as he asked and reached out a searching question to Bane to see if he was still happy.

"It is wrong, all wrong," Dolen babbled as he slid his fingers over my skin. "Your tattoos here, there is something grievously faulty. The upper part of the node is broken and asymmetric. Some lines are missing and others situated askew. It seems like the energy can't flow where it needs to go. It reminds me of a creek with a dam in it, where the water is trying to get to where it wants to be, but is only uselessly splashing up against the barriers."

He took a deep breath. "I think... it could be the key to.... your visions overwhelming you."

“What?” I exclaimed, turning my head in an attempt to see what he meant, to point out that he was mistaken, but of course it was impossible to see the back of my own neck. I nearly threw Dolen off me and went in search of a mirror. There was one, a little one I used for shaving, but of course that was of little help. I ripped the hut apart in a frenzied attempt to find something else to use as a mirror, but nothing worked. I couldn’t see it.

“This can’t be true,” I mumbled, by now sitting at the table with my head in my hands. “You’re probably mistaken, right?”

Dolen shrugged. “I do not know anything about tattoos. I know about mechanical things. You explained your tattoos are meant to focus the energy streaming through your body. These seem to be malfunctioning. Your physical powers are working normally, are they not? It is when you need to use your mind that things go awry. Are these not the tattoos linked to the powers of the mind?”

I really didn’t want to answer that. “I need to see them. I know how they are supposed to look.”

I leaned my head on the table and tried to stay positive. Dolen had to be wrong. But what if he wasn’t? How did I get faulty tattoos? Did they have anything to do with my out-of-control powers? Why had no one told me? And who—

“Do you have paper and charcoal?” Dolen interrupted my thoughts. “I can draw it for you. I am not a good—”

I jumped up and hugged him so hard he let out a surprised gasp. “You brilliant man!” I dove into the chest where I kept my personal belongings and handed him a sheet of paper and a charcoal stick. “I also have ink if you prefer that?”

“I have never worked with ink. Only the priests have permission to use it to write down the wishes of the Gods. Charcoal will do perfectly.”

I was trying to sit still while Dolen copied my tattoos onto the piece of paper. It was useless. I fidgeted nervously, multiple times almost standing up before I realized that I needed to stay seated. What should I do if Dolen was right? Go back and confront my mother and my uncle? They must have known. Did my brother know? My sister? My friends? Everyone? Should I run away with Dolen after all? But then I’d never get answers, then it could never be fixed. Was it even possible to alter the tattoos? They couldn’t be erased, not as

far as I knew. But really, what did I know? I had never heard of anyone with broken tattoos before. Was I the only one?

“Argg!” I screamed my frustration out. “Are you done yet?” I demanded impatiently.

“Nearly. Now sit still and keep holding your hair off of your neck. I am not an artist, and I want to get this right. I do not wish to scare you even more.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered obediently and did as he asked.

“Are there tattoos under your hair?” Dolen asked. “I wonder if the oddities continue there.”

There were, most of this node was actually above the hairline. “I’m not shaving my head,” I mumbled. “I’ll look ridiculous.”

“And looking handsome is what is most important now,” Dolen threw back sarcastically. “Although, I am sure you will be very pretty with a bald head. Very mysterious.”

“I am not pretty.”

“I disagree,” Dolen said with a chuckle.

I appreciated his attempt to take my mind off my anxiety, but it wasn’t working. I suffered in silence until he was finally done. He laid the picture before me on the table and sat down next to me.

My tattoos reacted even before the message arrived in my conscious brain. Rage and fear raced over my skin and through my veins like a forest fire. The reaction was so strong it looked like I had burst into flames. The drawing must be incorrect. It just had to be.

Most of the drawing looked perfectly in order. It had connections to all the right places and was perfectly symmetrical. Those were the tattoos that were visible to all. A small part of Dolen’s drawing, though—the part illustrating the designs hidden on the back of my neck, always covered by my thick curls—was distorted and incomplete. No way this could have been an accident—not if it was this clear, with only a small part of the node visible. Even if the lines that were in the wrong places were unintentional, they should’ve added the ones that were missing. Especially once they realized my powers didn’t work like they should. What really frightened me were the runes I didn’t recognize and could not guess the meaning of. Our tattoos consisted solely of lines, and I had never heard of the use of runes in the designs.

“Are you sure this is how they look?” My voice was so calm it scared me.

Dolen took a stuttering breath at my question. “I am not a good illustrator. This is the best I can do.”

I wasn't aware of the power of my glare until Dolen flinched away from me, holding up his hands to ward me off. “I understand that. What. I. Am. Asking. Is. If. My. Tattoos. Really. Look. Like. That?” With every word, I stabbed my finger forcefully on the upper part of the drawing.

Dolen nodded, slightly backing up. I didn't blame him. Screaming out my frustration to the world, I slammed my fist against the table, again and again, while violent visions played behind my eyes. Normally, I was helpless in my visions. Normally, all I did was watch and die. But now, I was the one with the firestick in my hand. I was the one that threw exploding apples into a trench where people were hiding. I rained down fire from a huge flying bird, and I released toxic gasses while hiding behind a mask myself. I felt their suffering as always, but this time, I reveled in their deaths, and their pain equalled victory. I became the creature my uncle wanted me to be. Ruthless and invincible. I had turned into my worst nightmare.

This is not right! This is not me! I would never allow that!

I snapped out of it, stepping out of my visions like I had always aspired to do. Was that the key? Was I locked in my visions because I identified with the suffering, with being powerless, with being a victim? Did I really believe myself so weak? Had they convinced me of that, like they had convinced me I was crazy for the things I believed? I did not have time to think about it, so it was yet another freaking mystery added to the pile. I needed to figure out the reason behind the disconnection in my tattoos. I couldn't do that on my own. And in this, Dolen would not have any answers for me. The key lay with the Tattooed.

Looking up, I searched for Dolen. He was standing next to me, even whiter than usual. His lips were trembling, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“It's okay,” I said, close to tears myself. I reached out to grab his hand. “I'm back again.”

“I am so sorry, Keric. So incredibly sorry.”

“For what? I should be apologizing for scaring you.” Holding his hand wasn't enough. I pulled him closer, wrapped my arms around his waist and hid my face against his belly. Dolen stroked my hair and shoulders.

"I am sorry that they did this to you. You do not deserve to be suffering like this. And I apologize for having to leave. You should not go through this alone." He nudged my cheek until I looked up at him. "Please rethink your decision and come with me."

"You think this has been done on purpose," I stated carefully, not giving away my own conclusions.

Dolen nodded. "It is too precise to simply be a mistake. There are no attempts to correct the malformations. And I think you would have been informed if it was not intentional. They have let you suffer without offering help or even honesty. People must have noticed."

A memory slammed into focus. When I got the cranial tattoos—right after my twelfth birthday—I had been excited to show them off to my friends and everyone else in the clan. It was sign of maturity, of belonging, to get those final tattoos. But due to a bad infection, my head had been wrapped in bandages until my hair had started to grow back, and even after that, my mom and the tattooist had urged me to keep them covered and protected from the sun until my thick hair hid them completely.

I took a deep shuddering breath.

"Come with me," repeated Dolen. "We will look for answers together. Maybe Hadrà can help you."

Seek help from a god. Dolen was naive, too naive for someone otherwise so smart and practical. From what little contact I had with the being, it was too alien to understand petty human concerns like wanting to keep control of your own mind. It wanted something. That much I agreed with Dolen, and for some absurd reason it thought it needed me to get it. But where Dolen thought that an exchange would be favorable for both parties, I had no such illusions. The being would get what it wanted as soon as it figured out how, and then I would be abandoned: dead, alive or something in between.

And yet, running away was so tempting. I didn't like the idea of Dolen striking out alone, especially if he decided to go into the Wastelands. I doubted his ability to defend himself against—well, anything. More importantly, I hated the idea of never getting to see him again. And Dolen was right. The home I had longed for had become a trap. The only obstacle stopping me was Dylwin coming: she was the only one I trusted, who listened to me, and who got me. She needed to know about my sabotaged tattoos. Dylwin was smarter than I was, knew and understood more, and maybe she had the answers I yearned for.

"If you are scared they will try to track us, we can fake your death," Dolen said softly.

"Fuck, no! I'm not letting my sister think I'm dead!" I snapped. "I need to know why she's here. I will not leave without talking to her. And the only answers about my tattoos are found back home." Even saying the word "home" made my insides clench so much it hurt. "I have to go back."

"I need to go now, Keric. I am so sorry, but I need to go. It is getting dark, and I want to be far away before your clansmen arrive. I wish you would come. I wish there was a way not to say good-bye." He pulled me up and kissed me hard.

"Bye, Nighteyes," I whispered against his lips. "Promise me you'll remember more about me than the idiot I am. Don't forget the good things that happened, and please, please, don't die. Leave me that slim chance to find you later and make up for not coming with you. I'm terrified I'm gonna regret that choice."

"Then do not make it," he whispered back between desperate kisses. "We will figure it out. We will find a way to contact your sister later."

It was tempting, so tempting. But I knew that there might not be a later. That we would disappear into the Wastelands and likely never come out. I couldn't die. Not without answers. Not without saying good-bye to Dylwyn. There might be death, or worse, waiting for me at home as well. But what if there was an easy explanation? What if my tattoos were simply different because my powers worked differently? What if...?

One final kiss, one final embrace, one final round of him begging me to change my mind, and he was picking up his stuff, opening the door, walking through the doorway, walking and walking and walking until he was no longer visible.

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Chapter 9

The brush against my mind that was my sister greeting me felt like a caress. I reached back to the familiar comfort before I realized that Dylwin would be able to sense my mood perfectly. I tried thinking happy thoughts but gave up immediately. I was too angry and too hurt. And I would not be able to hide those feelings, anyway, once I looked her in her eyes. Dylwin's mind was in a turmoil similar to mine, her fear and iron desperation like pinpricks against my mind. I had been right. Dylwin had come for a reason. It was the first—and most likely the last—sign that I had made the right decision in choosing to stay to meet with her.

Two other minds touched me in greeting: the ice cold Yanou and the slightly friendlier Truben. I thanked Dolen's gods that it takes familiarity to be able to read more than just superficial emotions. They would be able to sense that I wasn't happy, but since the whole intention of my seclusion was to punish me and whip me into obedience...

I made no attempt to hurry or to even pretend I was hurrying, and let Bane find his way back to the hut at his own pace.

After Dolen had left, I spent the night staring at the ceiling—with a pillow that smelled like him pressed to my chest—wondering if it was really possible to fall in love so quickly and completely. Considering the hole his absence left behind, it seemed it was. Screw me for only realizing it now that I had lost him forever.

By the time the sun was up, I realized pining wouldn't help me one way or the other. So I cleaned the hut of all traces of Dolen—even washed the pillow no matter how much I didn't want to—and took Bane out to go hunting.

I struck out in a different direction than Dolen had taken, scared that if I found his tracks I would follow. Not that it was likely he had left traces of his presence behind. His people wouldn't be able to walk these lands unbeknownst to all, if they were careless enough to leave behind signs of their passing. A single Ehecati would remain unnoticed unless he wished it to be otherwise.

The hunt had gone as expected. I was too distracted and didn't really give a damn what I caught, so all I'd gotten was a brightly colored porcupine and some eggs I'd robbed from a distracted pair of giant chameleons. I had thought about taking one of the lizards with me as well but didn't want to kill one and

not the other. It would be a waste, considering these beasts mated for life. On second thought, I put back four of the nearly ten eggs I had taken. I cursed myself for being sentimental enough to forgo an excellent dinner. It was a good thing these huge, highly toxic lizards were so slow and inattentive. Otherwise, I would've ended up chameleon food for sure, seeing how I hesitated near the nest for long minutes.

"I bet you don't feel sorry for the plants you eat," I said to Bane, scratching his neck. "Not even the ones that don't appreciate being eaten."

Bane ignored me and reached to grab a low stem between his teeth. It wouldn't budge, so he pulled harder, dragging most of the plant behind him.

"You could just stop, you know. I don't mind."

Bane whinnied and dropped the plant. Had it bitten him? He whinnied again, this time louder, and sped up to a canter. If I'd allowed him, he'd have broken out into a full gallop, but I didn't want to meet my clansmen looking like an idiot who couldn't control his horse. My horsemanship was one of the only things I was proud of.

When I arrived, it was as I expected. My visitors had already reached the hut, and Dylwin, Yanou and Truben were unsaddling their ponies. Surprisingly enough, my little sis was no longer riding a pony. She had one of the sleek new breeds that looked like it would break in half under my weight. Bane neighed, and the three other horses responded with ears pricked forward and tails swishing. I jumped off my pony before he was even standing still and left him to greet his friends. I ran to my sister, hugging her tightly. I could feel Yanou and Truben staring holes into my head, but they could wait as far as I was concerned.

"You're okay?" Dylwin said in a tone which turned her words into a question.

"Sure I am, Winny," I reassured. "I can take care of myself for a few weeks."

She studied me, and her eyes told me she didn't believe a word of it. "And you are not surprised I am here?"

I shrugged. "Let's just say this place has some interesting quirks. I sensed you days ago."

"How?" Yanou asked immediately, pushing between me and my sister. "What quirks?"

"I'll tell you later. Let me take care of Bane first."

"I can't believe you follow that ridiculous notion of naming mindless animals."

I ignored him and didn't hide my grin when Bane stepped on his toes—twice—and then pushed him to the ground.

"I'm so sorry. He can't help it. He's just a mindless animal," I sneered and whistled for Bane to follow me. With a swish of his tail—that hit Yanou right in the face—he came and let me clear his tack away without even moving a muscle, as if he was showing off to Yanou how well-behaved he was. I filled the manger with food for him and the three other horses and left the shelter open so they were free to wander in and out as they wished. I only locked him in at night to protect him from predators and trusted him not to run away during the day.

Only then, did I turn to greet the third member of the party.

"Truben," I said with a respectful nod. I held out my hand, and he shook it firmly. I liked Truben. He was one of the more sensible people that were close to my uncle. For a Tattooed he was unusually friendly, always allowing the little children to sit on his lap and pull on his beard.

"Good to see you in one piece, kid," Truben said with his trademark grin. "The popular opinion was you'd have truly gone mad by now. I never understood Deke's reasons for sending you here on your own."

"I do," Dylwin said. "He hoped it would make Keric a bit less annoying." I laughed with her, never minding my sister's friendly mocking. If it'd been Yorrit, he'd have eaten my fist for the same remark.

"I hope it worked," said Yanou coldly. "We have some more kids like him that need to learn some manners."

"Not a chance," I said brightly, draping my raven cloak over one shoulder. "Anyone hungry?"

"Nice cloak," Dylwin said, stroking the soft feathers. "Who did you steal that from?"

"Made it myself," I answered with a shrug. I threw my arm around Dylwin's shoulder and guided her with me. "Killed a bunch of ravens for it." The last bit was aimed at Yanou, who looked at us sourly. I didn't know what it was about that man, but I never liked him, not even when I was a little kid. He

was a cruel and cold man, who saw compassion as a weakness. And it was a different kind of cruelty than my uncle possessed. My uncle had a goal, a vision for the future, and he felt like he had the right to hurt people to achieve his vision. He honestly believed he was doing what was best, and it was something I could admire about him. I just didn't agree with his plans for the future of the world, or that his goals excused the violence he used to reach them. In Yanou, I sensed a simple lust for power, and worse, a complete lack of empathy, something we Nahuel aren't known for anyway.

The moment we were settled inside, and the porcupine stew was brewing, Yanou went straight to the business at hand. "Have you come to your senses?"

I had just taken a bite of a delicious nut cake Dylwin had brought along with her, and I took my time to finish my mouthful. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"Have you finally decided to share what you see in those visions of yours?" Yanou grunted back. "Are you finally ready to end this nonsense and grow up? Are you done with being a child and ready to do what's right for your clan?"

"That's a lot of questions," I bit back with all the contempt I could muster. "I have always been honest about what I see in my visions. The problem is that you and uncle Deke, and anyone else for that matter, do not believe me. You think because I do not tell you what you wish to hear, that I must be nuts. But if you spent five minutes experiencing what happens in my head, you'd go crazy yourself." Not true, I realized. Someone like Yanou would be the aggressor, never the victim, and he wouldn't feel guilty about it for a second. "But to answer your first question. No, I cannot fully control my visions. They still overwhelm me, and I have difficulty choosing what I want to see. And this is not nonsense to me, it never was. So I guess I can't grow up if it means leaving everything I believe in behind. And to the last question: yes, I've been ready to do what is best for my clan and for all mankind since I was a child. But I will never share your opinion on what's best."

Yanou glared at me, mouth half open as if he was struggling to reply.

Take that, asshole. I have not grown mellow or compliant with a few weeks of isolation.

"What's the hurry anyway?" I asked, directing my question to Truben who was rubbing his face in a way that made clear he was already regretting his decision to come along on this expedition. "Uncle Deke seemed quite happy to leave me here until I rotted. I'd have thought I'd spend at least another month

or two, here, on my own.” And wouldn’t that have been fun? Two months to spend with Dolen, exploring the Wastelands, having the time to learn to understand my powers. I sighed.

They didn’t answer, and I had no intention of breaking the silence, so I grabbed another nut cake and nibbled on it. I threw a glance at Dylwin who was sitting on my bed, studying the raven cloak. She was beautiful, my sister. Already tall for her young age, slender and strong like a willow. Her dark hair lacked the curls I had inherited from our mother, and it was as long as Dolen’s and as black as a raven’s feathers. She would look even more magnificent in a raven cloak than I did, and I would make her one as soon as I got the chance.

Dylwin looked up and met my searching look. She quietly shook her head, telling me with a little hand gesture to tone it down. How often had I seen her make that sign? I grinned at her, and she smiled back wryly. Something was bothering her, and I hated that I had to deal with Yanou before I could be there for my sister.

It was Truben who spoke next. “Wait kid, did you say you can’t fully control the visions? Meaning that you gained some mastery of that power?”

Damn, me and my stupid mouth. I should have come up with a game plan. I certainly shouldn’t have spent the entire past night and day moping over Dolen. I sighed and nodded. “Some,” I said truthfully. “But I don’t know how much good it will do me. This place, it has something to do with it. The most success I have had was in the Wastelands.” A lie. I planted it in memory. I had the feeling I had to keep track of the story I spun this time.

“What?” Dylwin exclaimed, much out of character. My sister is not the impulsive type. “You’ve been in the Wastelands?”

I nodded. “I got bored. And I was in the mood for roast raven. So when I spotted a few, I went to get them. It felt interesting there, so I experimented some. Did you know there’s a giant flock of ravens forming somewhere in the Wastelands? I’m talking thousands. I think uncle should do something about that.”

Truben cursed. “Thousands of ravens? And you saw that?”

“Sensed it.” I shrugged. “I guess the Wastelands augment my powers. I also met a god.”

Yanou glared at me some more, Dylwin frowned in that way she did when she was thinking hard, and Truben broke into chuckles.

"You're sure you're not losing your mind after all, son?" he asked when he got his breath back.

"I don't have another word for a consciousness that big and powerful."

"Did it mean harm?" Truben asked.

"I am still in complete control of my sanity, so I guess not," I said cheerfully.

"The vote's still out on that one," Yanou mumbled.

I huffed at him. "It could've ripped my mind apart, and I could have done nothing to prevent it. It didn't. I don't know what it is or what it wants. I wasn't exactly in the position to offer it tea."

Yanou was the first to break the long silence that followed that comment. He spoke to Truben. "Do you see what I mean now? The boy is useless. If we leave him here for another month he'll probably think he's a horse. It's time to stop being soft on him."

I grew cold, and my tattoos started that blood-red glow again. I took a deep breath and tried to stay calm—something that grew increasingly harder when I saw Yanou's menacing smile. "Why would I tell you I met something resembling a god if I didn't?"

"So everyone thinks you're the poor little mental kid that we should treat nicely."

"Everyone thinks I'm crazy anyway," I bit back. "Contrary to popular opinion, it's not an impression I enjoy making. I told you because it might be important to uncle Deke." Well, honestly, I had no idea why I shared that particular piece of information. The ravens, yes. I desperately wanted my uncle to handle that problem. And even that felt like a betrayal to the Wastelands. But telling them of Hadrà or whatever it was? It was yet another example of not knowing when to shut up. I sighed and dragged my hands through my hair. "Believe me or not. It's probably not important anyway. As long as someone goes to kill those ravens."

Yanou scowled at me. "Dekarius has more important things on his mind than killing some birds simply because you are easily spooked."

I only managed not to explode because I was looking at Dylwin. That warning look in her eyes was as obvious as any sign she could give. I shut out the rest of the conversation. They must've asked me questions, and I might've

replied, but I made our voices unimportant background noise to the visions playing in my mind.

Relegated to the floor by Truben and Yanou taking the two available beds, I couldn't get comfortable, or relaxed enough to get even close to sleep. I stared up at the ceiling and tried to figure out what would happen to me. From what I overheard Yanou and Truben discussing, now they thought I was sleeping, my uncle needed me for something he thought was important. Yanou and Truben disagreed on what needed to be done before I was ready for that. Truben was in favor of taking a detour into the Wastelands to see what effect it had on my powers, and if it affected theirs as well. He also wanted more information about the ravens. Yanou thought I was only spouting nonsense and wanted to "teach me to obey" on the way back home. I had no difficulty imagining how that would work out. Neither of them said anything about the reason Dylwin had come. I highly doubted she had come to see her brother get tortured. Maybe my uncle wanted her to have a lesson in leadership? More likely, it was to test her. Was she distraught because she knew what was planned to make me submit to my uncle's will once and for all?

Argh! All these questions and no answers. I got up and went to the shed. Being with horses calmed me, and even that annoying messenger monkey was better company than Yanou's snoring.

It didn't surprise me when Dylwin followed me there not much later. "I knew you'd sneak out."

"You know me. More mindless animal than proper Nahuel." It didn't come out quite as lightly as I had planned.

"What happened to you?" Dylwin asked, sitting down next to me, against Bane's side.

I shrugged. "Not much. Been bored mostly. Killed some ravens. Met a god. Rode around on Bane." Fell in love. The most important thing of all, and I had no idea how to tell her.

"You really think there are gods?"

"There's one at least. Maybe the Wastelands is one, too. Or that god is the Wastelands. This place is too bizarre to be true."

"You make no sense."

"Nothing makes sense. Least of all, why you are here. You know that Yanou's gonna hurt me bad, right?"

“And you’re gonna let him?”

“Not much I can do about it.”

“You could run away.” Dylwin’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “That’s why I came. I need you to leave.”

“What?” I nearly shouted, but managed to keep my voice quiet at the last possible moment. “You want me to... go? Why?”

“Uncle found something in an old book. I’m not sure exactly what, but it is a terrible weapon that is supposed to be easy to make with ingredients which should be readily available in nature. He’s been very excited since it was brought to his attention, not long after you were dropped here. Uncle’s been trying to find the recipe, but when he didn’t soon enough—”

“He remembered his crazy nephew with a door into the past. What kind of weapon is it?”

“Something that reminded me of a story you told me a long time ago. A weapon used to blow holes into rocks or buildings or sling heavy iron balls at people with unbelievable speed.”

I didn’t even have to close my eyes to remember what a weapon like that could do against people who couldn’t see it coming. It was something I had lived through countless times.

“And there’s more. The Ishiou are revolting. They have a new leader who has rallied the population, and they have even recruited some other tribes to help them fight us. Uncle expected to quell their resistance in a week or so, but it’s not going well. Yorrit...” Dylwin’s voice broke.

“He’s dead?” My voice shook. Strange, I often thought I didn’t care about my twin at all.

“No. Not as far as I know. But he’s being sent there. Or I think he asked to be allowed to go. You know him. It’s hard to get a straight answer from him. But he is going, and he will be taking dreadful risks to prove himself.”

I gulped. Both of us knew he was desperate to show everyone how different he was from me.

“I can’t save Yorrit from his stupidity. But I can save you. If you go back, you will be forced to discover how to make that weapon. If you won’t or can’t, you’ll be sent into battle. Uncle is done being lenient with you.”

I didn't know what to say. In the end, I said nothing. I turned the back of my head towards her and lifted my hair. I expanded my mind until I could not only hear Dylwin sob but feel it in my bones. The pale light of my tattoos lit up the room. Her reaction chilled me. It gave me the confirmation that something was wrong. Our minds connected, and our fear, anger and confusion mingled into one giant tangle of hopelessness. She traced the lines, followed the missing connections, touched the runes. Every touch felt like a million pinpricks.

"You didn't know?" I asked hoarsely.

"I don't understand how this has been kept hidden. How did you find out?"

A flash of heat ran through me. I hadn't wanted to betray Dolen's existence. "I don't want to lie to you," I finally said. "And I can't tell you."

Dylwin turned my face back to her and looked into my eyes. "It's not important," she said softly. "You have to leave."

"But if I don't go back, I'll never find out why this was done to me. I'll never find a way to fix it."

"This was done to hurt you, Keric. How and why, I can't comprehend right now. I'll try to find out as much as I can for you. Maybe I'll find a way to get that information to you. Maybe I'll find a way to follow you later."

"Come with me now. Please?"

"I can't. Not now. Uncle will definitely come after us if we both go. But if it's just you, he might not do anything. He's busy. He's got a war to fight. He's not that sure you'll be useful anyway. I'll give Truben and Yanou the impression you ran away to avoid torture. I love you so much, big brother, and I'm as sick of the violence as you are. But I have to fight it from the inside."

"I won't let you do that alone," I said fiercely.

"You won't be any use to me when they break you, and break you they will. Break you or kill you. You're not subtle enough, Ker. That's always been your weak point. You're so passionate, but not much of a strategic thinker. And you're too impatient. Let me handle what happens. And find somewhere to be happy. Try the Quidan. They're less than a week away if you strike through the Wastelands. I wish you hadn't told Yanou and Truben the place is safe to go into."

"With any luck, their horses will refuse to go in anyway. Bane didn't want to at first. Now, he loves it."

“Well, that might buy you time. You need to leave now, Keric. You need to be far gone before they wake up.”

I swallowed. All the reasons not to leave with Dolen had been eliminated in a ten-minute talk with my sister, a talk that had brought me nothing but more questions and more misery. And now, I might never find him again. He might already be dead.

“I need to get some supplies from the hut,” I said, pushing back the tears I had no time for now.

“Already took care of that,” said Dylwin. “I packed supplies for you back home. I had to suffer through Yanou nagging about spoiled little girls who didn’t know how to travel light. Not that he noticed I’ve been wearing the same outfit since we left.”

She stood up, walked to the back of the stable, and pulled out a backpack that could also be tied on the back of a horse and two filled waterskins. I came to my feet as well, nudging Bane to wake from his slumber and to stand up. I fed him some oats so he wouldn’t hate me for waking him up and forcing him to go outside in the dark, and quickly saddled him with riding blanket and halter. I tied my supplies behind the riding blanket, and after a moment’s thought I took the bridles of the other horses and bound them to Bane’s surcingle. “I don’t think Yanou can control his horse without a bit. You can though, right?” I refused to endanger my sis, no matter what.

She scowled at me. “I ride as well as you do, and you know it.”

“On a real horse, yes. I don’t trust that showy thing.”

“Sapphire behaves better than that clumsy beast of yours.” She was caressing Bane’s ears while she said it, so we both forgave her. “Go now, big brother.”

“I’ll miss you,” I said, pulling her into a tight hug. “I wouldn’t know what to do without you being all smart and wise.”

“It’ll be boring without you,” Dylwin sniffed. “That’s for sure. But we’ll find each other, I’m certain about that. Be safe, find answers, and please... never, ever change who you are.”

Two days before, I had ridden this way immersed in visions, and I’d been terrified of those, not of the real danger all around me. Tonight, I was acutely

aware of my surroundings, and fear crawled in my stomach. The night was never quiet in these lands, and sounds of predators and their prey fighting for the right to live surrounded me. Bane was tense beneath me, obviously on the verge of breaking into a frightened run.

If I hadn't been even more terrified of discovery, I would've opened my senses to the pitch-black night, and let my tattoos flare with that blood-red light—a warning that any smart beast would heed. Now, I felt blind and defenseless in this dark, moonless night. I held my bow on my knees, an arrow within reach, a knife in my belt close enough to grab on a moment's notice. I wished I had thought about taking a small axe but didn't dare to stop and check the bag Dylwin had packed. The raven-feather cloak was wrapped tightly around me, the hood pulled up to hide as much of me from sight as possible. It might've been smarter to take Dylwin's black horse, as Bane's golden brown coat and his blond mane could very well be the thing that led to my capture. But leaving him behind would have shattered my heart in even smaller pieces.

After a mile or so—and after crossing a hill that would, hopefully, keep us from being heard and spotted—I expanded my mind, and I felt for danger around me. The abundance of life I felt astonished me. It appeared most animals had adjusted to the night. The world felt alive and vigilant, and many a creature panicked when my mind found it. A pack of wolves howled when they felt my energy. I sent them the smell of dead wolf and pain, and the next time I heard them they sounded further away. I pulled my awareness back to my immediate surroundings, enough to be wary and defend myself but not enough to let the predators know I was here, alone and vulnerable. Too many animals had developed senses beyond the ordinary.

Long before the sun came up, we crossed into the Wastelands. I felt the change in energy, welcoming, beckoning, guiding me deeper and deeper.

The screech of some unknown raptor rang out in the night, reminding me there was a difference between being welcome and being safe. The call came again, closer this time, and the warning I sent out touched a mind that had no way to feel it. A third screech, and the bird's speed increased as it fell out of the sky for the kill. Bane bolted before I could give him the signal, and that was a lucky thing. I didn't want to engage a bird of prey big enough to think I was supper. The bird adjusted, and it kept coming closer despite Bane's speed.

Think, Keric, think.

I nocked an arrow, desperate enough to try to shoot a moving object I couldn't even see while sitting on a panicked horse. I let the arrow fly, trying to

steer it in the direction I felt the bird. Miss. I tried again and missed again. I threw my entire mind against the bird, trying to push it off its course. It ignored me completely. I whipped my bow around, forcing heat through the bow, trying to shoot lightning from it, a feat I had never managed before—and didn't manage now. The bow, itself, would've burned the bird if it had been close enough. In the bow's glow I saw its ominous shape, a few feet behind and above. It swerved to keep away from the bow but didn't give up the chase. I screamed at it, and it screeched a challenge back. A few lazy flaps of its powerful wings was all it took to keep it hovering above my swiftly running horse.

I was ready to jump off and risk a broken leg, or worse, when Bane came to an abrupt halt. The bird overflowed us and hit the ground with a loud thud. Pushing back from Bane's neck, where I had slid in the sudden stop, I sent just enough energy into my tattoos to light my surroundings. I could now see the giant eagle, leathery wings spread in defiance, looking more than a bit confused. Bane was slowly backing up when I took an arrow and shot it through a wing. I had aimed for the chest but was shaking so hard I missed. Not even the improvements Dolen had made to my bow could help with that. The bird uttered a sharp cry of agony, flapped his wings in an attempt to fly away, managed to lift a few inches off the sand, then fell down again. I grabbed another arrow to finish the poor beast, wondering if the eagle would make a decent meal, but before I could release it, the ground started moving all around the eagle.

Immediately, Bane stopped moving, standing as still as possible. I made more light and had to resist a scream. I had to resist very, very hard. The floor around the bird was crawling with insects, red ants the size of my thumb. The otherworldly clicking of their jaws echoed through the night. Within seconds, the red horde had engulfed the eagle. It uttered a scream that betrayed a terrible agony and went quiet. The bird was shrinking before my eyes, getting smaller and smaller as the ants devoured it. I tried to get Bane to move, but he refused, ears flat against his head, trembling all over and never taking his eyes off the ants.

When the eagle had been devoured completely, I hoped against reason that the ants would disappear with it. For a moment it seemed as if that would happen. The crawling mass stopped, going completely motionless for one, two, three seconds. I blinked, and the next moment, they were moving as one single being, a carpet covering the sandy ground, coming towards me and Bane.

Again, I tried to get Bane to run, slammed my heels into his sides as hard as I could and cried a loud “hiyah!” But the terrified pony didn’t move a muscle. Before I could get off Bane and make a run for it, the insects had surrounded us, a glinting, heaving mass of gruesome death. Being tortured by Yanou suddenly seemed like a very pleasant thing. I braced myself, ready to throw myself off Bane the moment the insects attacked him. Useless probably, but I was not going to sit quietly as these mutant ants devoured us.

The attack never came. The loathsome insects streamed around us, not even a foot of distance between Bane’s hooves and the edge of the swarm. It was like they were waiting for a signal, for a sign to attack. What would chase things like this away? Fire, maybe, but I had none. A rain storm, but again, not something that I could call up. Heat might work, but I needed a connection to the sand to make it burn, and I didn’t dare get closer to the ants. Heating the air enough to kill would only harm Bane, instead. Cold wouldn’t work for the same reason.

I was going to die. I could hear nothing but my heartbeat rushing in my ears, my chest tightened so much it hurt, every breath I took was a struggle. If I was lucky, I would drop dead before the ants even attacked, and Bane would escape while they ate me.

The red glow of fear from my tattoos mingled with the red of fear behind my eyes. Every instinct told me to run, to fight, to pull my mind close around the core of my being and protect myself. I fought that instinct and fought the flashes of visions that transported me to other places during the worst possible moment. Without Dolen’s coaching, I couldn’t have brought my focus back to the here and now that was worse than anything I had ever seen in my visions.

I sent out a searching mind to the ants and met, not a crawling mass of individuals, but a single entity that extended deep into the ground. I reached out for contact, and felt the mass shiver as much as I saw it. There was a consciousness there, stranger than anything I’d ever felt before. It only held one emotion that was familiar to me. Hunger. An overwhelming, all encompassing need for food. It was so strong it echoed in my stomach, feeling empty and bleak and insatiable. Hunger. No explanation why it didn’t attack. No explanation of what would stop it. Nothing *could* stop it. Even if I killed a million, there would be countless millions more.

I gave up. I’m not a fighter, not a thinker, never a hero. I’m just a guy who can see the worst of history. I opened myself to my visions, preferring the

horrors of the past to the horrors of reality. Maybe I wouldn't even feel death when it came to me.

It is so dark I can't see anything. All around me are people. We are crammed into a place that is too small to fit so many. It stinks of unwashed bodies, sweat and perfume. It stinks of fear. The panic is so thick it smothers me, smothers everyone in the room. The only other emotion I feel is grief. Grief and terror. That's all that is left of humanity.

In here, are only small sounds. The sound of crying, of quick, fearful breaths, of pounding hearts. The whisper of a mother trying to comfort a child. The sound of praying to a god that has proven it doesn't care. Outside, are bigger sounds. The screech of an alarm, high pitched and ringing. The rumbling sounds of faraway explosions.

The next explosion sends a convulsion through the ground I sit on, the wall I lean against. The sound is so loud I feel it more than I hear it, pain ripping through my head, rattling my teeth and every bone in my body. The panic around me rises to such intensity, I can't take it anymore. I scream so hard my throat burns and my voice breaks. The second explosion is even worse, even louder, even more terrifying and causes the room to start shaking. This time it doesn't stop. Earth rains down on me. I roll up in a ball, protecting my head against the falling debris, trying to do the same against the screams and the mindless fear all around me.

Someone opens the doors which are meant to stay locked. We are supposed to be protected here, safe from the destruction going on above ground. Another explosion, and the concrete I sit on starts to crumble beneath me. I fight my way through the people, caught in the urge to flee that now possesses everyone inside.

The door is now open, throwing a strange, flickering light into the room. Fire. The smoke billows in with it, making it even more difficult to breath. I don't care. I would rather choke than get burned alive. A flash so bright it burns my eyes out is followed by the loudest explosion of them all. I can't see the fire racing through the hallway, but I can feel its heat before we are engulfed by it.

I snapped out of the vision, warned by Bane's snort of distress. I was close to falling off his back, into the mass of ants. They still hadn't come closer. There was light now in the east, the land still dark, but the sky coloring red with a sliver of bright yellow. The waiting felt endless as the sun painstakingly

creeped its way above the horizon. The line of light moved closer and closer until it finally touched the ground before me. The ants disappeared into the sand as one, and the Wastelands seemed peaceful once again

Only then, did I notice what had saved us: Bane was standing in the middle of a perfect circle of smooth stone. We were completely surrounded by a broad expanse of the red sand that was so commonplace here. The spot where the eagle had crashed was sand as well. Could it be the ants could only travel on and through sand? If so, Bane had saved my life.

I leaned forward to hug Bane closely. “Thank you! You clever, clever beast.” Bane whinnied and—without any more hesitation—started walking further into the Wastelands, precisely in the direction I still felt compelled towards.

I halted Bane and slid off to lead him, giving him a well-deserved rest. I didn’t dare let him walk free as I usually did, so I turned the reins into a long leash. Clearly, Bane was my best instrument for survival here.

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Chapter 10

By midmorning, the haze of fear had finally cleared from my head, but by now, exhaustion was catching up with me, making everything feel distant and fuzzy. Hidden in the shade of one of the massive rock formations, I found a place to rest. I felt safe enough to let Bane walk free again, allowing him to feed and rest and roll in the fine sand to clean his coat of sweat and insects. I was acutely aware I needed sleep soon, but every time I closed my eyes, I either felt an itch somewhere and woke up half-panicked with the image of my body crawling with ants, or I sank back into visions of explosions and fire and light too bright to survive seeing, of people and animals changed beyond recognition. I saw women dying as they gave birth to children with two heads, men covered with sores the size of my hands, bizarrely deformed and mangled animals, and countless other abominations. I had seen visions like these before, I had even witnessed scenes like this in real life, but never as potent, never as many together, and I wondered if it was the Wastelands recounting its history.

I finally gave up on sleep and focused on the problems at hand. It was not reassuring that the visions almost felt less disturbing than my current reality. During the day, the Wastelands felt empty and safe. As long as it was light, the biggest danger I had come across was the ravens; and even they felt less threatening in comparison to the eagle, the ants, and whatever else there was out here at night.

And still, not ending up as something's dinner was the smallest of my problems. I had no idea where to go. East was the direction the Wastelands were pulling me, and east was the shortest way to the Quidan. But not knowing what was between here and there was not a good feeling. And then, there was the not at all insignificant fact that I had no idea whether I was being tracked. And maybe the worst one—having no way to locate Dolen. I couldn't sense him. I wouldn't be able to track him, even if he had left tracks, because I had no idea where, or even if, he had entered the Wastelands. If he was even still alive.

"How did I end up in this mess?" I complained to Bane, who was grazing close by. He snorted and extended his neck to sniff a cactus with deadly looking thorns. "Leave that thing," I told him. "You don't want to hurt your nose." Bane bucked and went back to eating the orange grass he seemed to like.

Okay, back to the problem at hand. I needed to be able to see more than I did now. With my usual methods, I couldn't locate Dolen, and I'd risk Yanou

and Truben sensing me. When Hadrà had possessed me, and I sensed their presence, they hadn't been aware of me. I had no intention of connecting to the being ever again, however, wary that it would damage me irreversibly or find some way to control me. I reached out to the Wastelands, instead, but was too tired to focus and got lost in horrifying images again.

When I finally escaped those, I stood up and studied my surroundings. Bane was now chewing on some plant that was so juicy the liquid dripped from his mouth. I hoped that meant he wouldn't need water soon, because the absence of that was another huge problem. I was surrounded by open land for miles, although far away—both south and north—I saw a misty wall that might mean cliffs, mountains, or clouds. The direction I was pulled in was mostly open as well, land that was flat and almost featureless. Here and there were huge rocks, pillars like the one I was standing under right now, offering shelter and protection from being spotted. I had practically unobstructed vision for miles, and if I was being tracked, it wouldn't take much to find me. Traveling under cover of darkness made the most sense, if it wasn't such a likely way to die.

If my clansmen weren't tracking me, I could simply focus on finding Dolen and getting through the Wastelands alive. I would find some safe rocky place to sleep, build a huge fire—that maybe Dolen would see and come towards—and I'd travel in the daylight. For a moment, I allowed myself to feel the bitter loneliness of his absence. I had been so stupid. I could've been somewhere cozy with him, instead of in this wretched place composed of nightmares. I could've benefited from his wisdom, his knowledge of living off the lands and, most importantly, I would have been soothed by the simple pleasure of his company. He had wormed his way further into my heart than I could ever have thought possible in the few days we had spent together, and it was my own fucking fault that we were both alone and miserable.

I used the day to cover as much distance as I could without completely exhausting Bane. I tried to lead him over as much rocky ground as possible to leave no tracks, but we had to cross a few large stretches of sand to avoid having to backtrack for miles. On the first stretch, I managed to influence the sand with haphazard nudges of my mind, to create random patterns that didn't look like a horse's footsteps, but the second and third expanse of fine sand completely resisted my attempts to alter them. Since I was half-asleep by then, I didn't bother finding another way to erase our tracks, hoping the winds or the Wastelands would do it for me.

By the time the sun was setting, I had just arrived at another rock formation, and for once, luck was with me. I found a narrow cave that was just big enough

to hold me and Bane. The floor was made of smooth stone and would hopefully grant me safety from the ants. I prodded it with my mind and found it empty of anything big, aggressive, or hungry. Very carefully, I wedged myself in, tattoos glowing and knife out. The walls of the cave were as smooth as the floor, almost soft to the touch. They reflected the light from my tattoos, making it seem secluded and safe. A draft meant it would even be possible to light a fire without suffocating in the smoke. When Bane didn't hesitate to follow me in, I felt reassured enough to sleep there.

Sometime during the night my dreams changed from fitful and scary to a stillness and calm that was alien to me. I was drifting in space, the only sound a slow, rhythmic, all-encompassing rumble. Everything around me was a beautiful, bright blue. I felt shielded and welcomed and wouldn't have minded spending forever in this peace.

Life pulsed through my veins. Not just my own, but everything that was connected to these lands. I opened my awareness and let everything in, feeling as much a part of the Wastelands as the ravens were, as were the ants, the giant eagles, the plants, the birds and all those animals I hadn't encountered yet. This place was teeming with life, creatures deadly and creatures innocent, crucial to it all.

My scope expanded, and I saw the land stretched out below me as if I were a bird flying in the night's sky. Underneath me, I saw Dolen sitting cross-legged on a patch of sand, lines of energy radiating from him. As I watched him, the streams of energy suddenly branched out over the lands, finding the link he needed, happiness radiating from him. I tried to make a connection to him, to tell him I was alive and looking for him, but I was prevented. We might both belong here, but we had different paths to take right now.

I blinked, and another image bloomed before my eyes: a man, armed to the teeth, riding a horse that only kept running on because of the spurs driven into its bloody flanks. They had no place here, and only the pony was smart enough to realize it. The man's tattoos glowed a dirty, bloody red, showing off his rage for all to see. He was riding hard through the night, and his anger was horrible enough to chase predators away. Behind him, I saw the evidence of one who had not been chased away. Some sort of catlike beast was dying of a cracked skull. It wouldn't die of its injuries. The ants were already coming.

I struggled against the consciousness of the Wastelands, trying to force it to send the ants after Yanou, but again that was forbidden. Yanou's presence,

here, was my challenge, my fault, my problem to solve. My life meant nothing to the infinite patience of the Wastelands. It would find another, if I didn't accomplish whatever it wanted from me. The knowledge of my purpose floated outside my reach, as did the way to safety and Dolen's location. The only thing I knew was that Yanou was coming fast, and I shouldn't count on the Wastelands to dispose of him for me.

I woke with a racing heart and an impending sense of danger. At first, I thought it was the memory of my dreams, then I felt a heavy pressure moving on my chest. I opened my eyes and felt myself immediately getting dreamy again. The large eyes I looked into soon encompassed my entire world. They were so pretty—yellow, with horizontal pupils of the purest black. They swayed back and forth, taking my world along with them. I would go to sleep now, a nice deep sleep and wake happier for it. Yeah, I would just close my eyes. I did.

I wondered why. I wondered what that weight was on my chest, what that hissing sound was, why I was trying to fall asleep when a—a giant snake was trying to eat me! I reacted instinctively, tattoos lighting up to resist the hypnosis, mind forming a blade against the snake's consciousness, driving inside it, making it screech in agony until the coiled muscle on top of me relaxed. I jumped up, pushed the heavy snake off me, grabbed the hand axe—that Dylwin had indeed packed for me—and hacked its head off. At least I tried. The snake was so big it took me two tries before I was certain it was dead. Its blood gushed out of the gaping wound, filling the cave with an acrid odor. I haphazardly gathered my belongings and fled the cave, pulling my terrified horse after me.

The remainder of that day was blissfully uneventful. The moment the sun was fully up, all became quiet and still, only plants and very small animals moving in the daylight. I noticed the lizards and mice, the tiny, fuzzy, flightless birds that looked cute until you saw their razor sharp teeth, and all the other tiny inhabitants of the Wastelands become more common the farther I traveled. They also grew wackier. Mice with two tails, lizards with several heads, birds with scales or plates and plants that moved of their own volition became commonplace.

They paid no attention to me and Bane, and Bane didn't mind most of them, but we steered away from a large group of bright blue and green scorpions, and the big flesh-eating plants that stood in little clusters. I was mesmerized as I watched one move a beautiful-looking flower to hover above an unexpected

lizard, then grab it from the ground with movement so quick I could barely believe what I was seeing.

I assumed the rest harmless enough. I studied them, linking them to the visions I had lately. Animals that had changed, but not the pitiful, starving beasts from the Wastelands' past. These had perfectly adapted. I spent some time looking at a lizard with three heads. One of the heads was looking around, scanning its surroundings, while the other two devoured a nest of what looked like bird eggs. When a large dragonfly buzzed past it the third head snatched it out of the air.

What would happen if I spent too much time here? Would I change into something unable to live, or would I become stronger, healthier, better adapted to a place so dangerous and strange? Were the Wastelands consciously trying to turn these creatures into something better—not unlike what my uncle was trying to do with humans—or was it pure coincidence, the simple result of natural selection? These were questions I might never find the answers to, questions that felt important for some reason and helped me keep my mind off the desperation of my situation. I didn't succeed nearly often enough in hiding my tracks, was quickly running through my water supply, and had no idea how to survive the next night. No amount of thinking would give me the answer to those worries. So yeah, studying a group of brightly colored birds that hunted tiny scorpions was the better option.

I also lost myself in memories of Dolen, trying to relive every moment we had spent together. I cringed when I remembered my insensitivities and all those stupid things I had done. I didn't skip over them, though, or push them away and try to forget the bad things. No, I needed to imprint everything in my memory before it was lost. And I had to remember, had to make sure never to make mistakes like those again, needed to find ways to make it up to him when I found him. I tried to stay positive that we would meet again, the brief glimpse of him in my dreams enough to keep me hopeful. It was the only thing that dulled the pain of missing him, the only thing that distracted me from the anger and grief I felt over the betrayal by my own people. It was a pain I locked away for later, if there would be a later. Escaping and finding Dolen were the only two things I needed to focus on.

I was going almost directly east, the direction I was still pulled towards. Curiously enough, I never had to point Bane in the right direction, and I wondered if he felt the same pull I did. We only took detours when the terrain was impassable and went as rapidly as possible, alternating between a fast trot

and a walk when Bane needed rest. I hunted a little, kept my eyes open for any signs of water, and noticed how the walls of the mountains on both sides crept closer.

The third night I spent in the Wastelands, I didn't sleep. I found another cave, made another fire, and forced myself to stay awake in any way I thought possible. The next night, I fell asleep even after dragging a knife over my skin in order to keep my eyes open. I was immediately, almost impatiently, drawn into the Wastelands' vision that showed me Yanou still forcing his exhausted horse forward, leaving destruction and death in his wake. His horse wouldn't last long like this, and I grieved for her. She deserved better, but Yanou's cruelty served a purpose: he was gaining on me. He was not stopping for the night, and he was still filled with a murderous rage. It was starting to look hopeless. Yanou was an experienced ranger with complete control over his powers and highly proficient with weapons as well. I had counted on the Wastelands to keep him out or at least hinder him, but it had turned out Yanou was a much better match for this wretched place than I was.

The Wastelands showed me my location and the place it needed me to be. A perfectly round crater of magnificently gleaming rock of all colors. All around it I could feel the presence of ravens, nesting on the cliffs and rocks nearby. I soared higher, looked farther, saw the tiny village that was my destination not far beyond its borders. The Wastelands centered my perspective on the crater again, a feeling of purpose echoing through my mind. It was the clearest attempt from the Wastelands to communicate with me.

"Dolen," I sent back. "Dolen, first."

A feeling of bewilderment surged through me, and I sent it an impression of the man I missed so much. I brought up my longing, the way I felt when he first smiled at me, first kissed me. I sent it the sound of his voice, the smell of his skin, the taste of his kisses. I sent his flawless looks, his razor-sharp intelligence. I sent it the shape of his consciousness, however limited my familiarity with it was.

A moment later I saw him, this time so close I could've touched him if I had been there in the flesh. He looked older than when he left me only a few days earlier, and I growled when I noticed he was limping badly, obviously hurt. Cliffs towered over him, but otherwise I couldn't get a sense of his location, only felt that he felt trapped and scared and lost.

Helped by my desperation, and using the energy of the Wastelands, I forced my mind away from its grip and touched Dolen. He stopped in his tracks and

looked around as if he heard something. "I'm here, Nighteyes. I'm coming for you." I tried to send to him. Before I could see if he got my message, I was yanked back to my body.

I risked riding through the next night, letting Bane lead the way, hoping he would keep me from the most looming danger. I expanded my senses as far as I dared, trying not to sense in the direction Yanou followed, but that would be an impossible feat. My senses went everywhere or nowhere. The visions were almost constant now, the Wastelands showing me the history of the ground I was walking on. I had no idea why it was important, didn't understand half of what I saw, but since I had no way of doing anything about it, I stopped wasting effort by trying to push them away. As long as the visions didn't overwhelm me, and I could keep somewhat focused on my surroundings, I didn't care. It beat being frightened by the sounds of predators all around.

The night went on too peacefully, and I started dozing off. Bane whinnied in distress, the sound loud and ringing though the empty lands. I screamed when I saw the huge, red, glowing eyes of a crouching mountain lion ready for the jump. Reflexively, I flashed bright white light back at it. *Predator*, I screamed at its mind, *I'll kill you before you kill me*.

I regretted doing it immediately, realizing that I had just showed Yanou precisely where I was. Okay, the lion thought better of eating me, but I could've fought the beast off quietly. I had my bow in my stupid hands, after all, ready for exactly this sort of situation.

Not much later, I felt the consequence of my careless action. A cold presence touched my mind, and I was too late to throw my shields up. Stupid again, deciding that knowing what was around me was more important than protecting myself from the animal that chased me. Yanou's rage strangled me, and for a moment I was unable to move. The tattoos, the wrong ones on the back of my neck and skull, flashed with blinding pain.

How was that possible? It was impossible to hurt someone from a distance. It should be impossible, anyway. So why was it happening? Were the designs meant to inflict pain and suffering? Why? Who would etch such evil on a child's skin?

I nearly fell off Bane, tumbled forward and grabbed him around his neck, wrapping the reins tightly around my wrists, whispering for him to run. And run he did, strengthened by my fear and despair. It took too long for Bane to outrun the reach Yanou had on my mind, whispering all the things he was going to do to me once he captured me, hurting me already through my tattoos.

Once I got out of Yanou's grip, I fainted, only my bound wrists keeping me on my horse.

The next thing I was aware of was hitting the ground with a loud and painful thud. Bane snorted at me and shook his head, reaching for one of the plants we both got our moisture from. I was lying next to his head, so I must've fallen off. The sting on my wrist alerted me that Bane's reins were still wrapped around my arms. My wrists were bruised, and my hands were stiff and swollen and hurt terribly. The tattoos on the back of my neck stung like a bad burn.

Slowly, what had happened came back to me. And as soon as I remembered, my blood went cold with dread. I was in more danger than I had ever expected. Yanou knew how to use my tattoos to hurt me. He was in on plans I could not guess the scope of, plans that somehow involved a need to control me.

Why me? No time to think about it now.

Now, I needed to find a place to hide from Yanou. Or I needed to sneak up on him and kill him.

No! I wouldn't kill another human.

My uncle's complete disregard for the value of human life was exactly what had sickened me the most about his philosophies. My convictions shouldn't change simply because someone set out to hurt me. Not if there still was another way. Not if I could escape.

Looking around me, I realized why Bane had stopped. Over the past days the cliffs had come even closer together, and tonight I had reached the point where they nearly touched. There was a narrow canyon leading between them, but not one Bane could navigate. It was littered with rocks, large and small, and overgrown with vines the likes of which I had never seen—thick, dark green branches with speckled red leaves. The pull was still here, getting stronger and stronger as I hesitated. Urgency ripped through me—not mine, the Wastelands'—and a vision of Yanou running flashed before my eyes.

The cliffs were towering over me, and I couldn't even see the top. I could either go on without Bane or go back and fall into Yanou's clutches. It wasn't a real choice.

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Chapter 11

I hugged Bane's neck, swearing I would make them pay: Yanou, my uncle, and everyone else who was responsible for getting me in a situation where I had to leave my last friend behind. I didn't know how. I didn't know when. But I would, and it would not be pretty. Bane nickered, pushing his head in my hands so I could scratch him behind his ears.

"I'm so sorry, Bane. I wish there was another way. Don't get eaten, you hear me! Maybe there are other horses around. Or, run home. You know the way home, right?" I embraced him even tighter, and the horse leaned against me, showing a confidence in my strength that I didn't deserve.

I sorted my possessions, taking only what I desperately needed and could easily carry, hid the rest, and set Bane free. I hugged the confused horse once more, trying to push him away at the same time. Having Yanou follow Bane's prints was the only way I had to distract him, to win some time to flee. I could only pray that Yanou wouldn't capture him and use him to catch up to me. Bane would be smarter than that, though. He knew not to trust my clansman.

Giving Bane a last stroke over his soft nose and receiving a last nuzzle in return, I braced myself and stepped away from him.

I clambered over the first rock into the canyon and begged Bane to flee, to run along the cavern's edge until he found freedom. His desperate neigh slashed through me and echoed from the cliffs. A last soft nicker and he started running as if possessed.

"Good-bye, my friend," I whispered, not bothering to wipe away the tears that streamed over my face.

Navigating the canyon was every bit as difficult as it had looked. It involved climbing over and under huge boulders. I had to hack through vines the size of my upper arm, stumble through knee-deep, loose sand that luckily held no ants, or at least none that tried to devour me. I felt only plant life and tiny pinpricks of consciousness that betrayed the presence of countless insects beyond me. I didn't dare feel too far but didn't dare to keep my mind shielded either. There was no telling what would come out of this overgrown tunnel. Soon my awareness paid off, as I sensed the giant snake right before I grabbed its body to pull myself up to climb over a rock. I yanked back my hand as if bitten and shielded my mind before looking at it. It was the same kind that had attacked

me days ago, but even bigger. It was at least fifteen feet long, and thicker than my thigh, a beautiful, bright purple with hypnotizing golden eyes. It looked at me for a few moments, hissed in frustration when it had no effect on me, poison dripping from its long teeth, and lay down its giant head to rest. I went around it and only noticed when I stood next to it that its body was swollen to monstrous proportions. It had just eaten and would be no threat as long as I let it be.

The canyon grew darker and darker, and when I looked to see where the sun had gone, I saw the cliffs had truly met and formed a tunnel. The loss of light was inconvenient, and the idea of being underground was oppressive. Too many of my latest visions had been of underground rooms caving in. At least I found water for the first time in days. At first it was only dripping from the walls and in occasional shallow puddles on the ground, but after a while, a stream ran along one side of the walls. I took the opportunity to drink my fill and wash my face and hands in the blissfully cold water.

I set out again, navigating the now slippery rocks, only going on because of my insane belief that the Wastelands' pull would somehow lead me to Dolen. The darkness was almost complete, now, but for the luminescent fungus clinging to the walls and the slight shine from my tattoos. I lost my footing and went down hard, a shocking pain tearing through my knee. I lay there for a moment, close to giving up. My pants were darkening with blood already. There was no saying what creatures the smell would attract. Even that wasn't enough to make me go on. I was just going to lie here and close my eyes. I was done caring.

An incredible sense of need that wasn't mine possessed me, urging me to go on. I wasn't strong enough to resist the pull, and I stood up. At least I tried. The moment I put weight on my knee, it buckled beneath me, and I had to stifle a cry of agony. I tried again, and this time it held, and I staggered on, limping and trying to keep as much weight as possible off that knee by grabbing onto the wall on my left side. I didn't know what the fungus would do to my skin, and I couldn't care.

I walked for hours through the near dark, the clicking of insects, the squeaks and squeals of tiny life forms all around me. I sat down on a rock when I couldn't go any farther, pulling my raven cloak around me and watched myself disappear in the darkness. It was a good feeling, that feeling like I was gone. If it would only hide my mind as well.

Far behind me, I heard a thud, followed by the rattle of stones falling and then faint footsteps. More footsteps followed, now fast and secure. For a second

I thought it was Dolen, then I cursed myself for being foolish enough to hope. My mind now closed, I tried to imagine it being a globe of the hardest glass.

There's nothing here. There's nothing here. There's nothing here. It became the mantra I repeated as I stood and walked on as quietly as possible, still grabbing the wall for support.

The wall unexpectedly ended, and I tumbled into a narrow tunnel leading away from the main one. The thud of my fall resonated through the passages and in the silence that followed, Yanou's footsteps quickened. Ignoring the pain throbbing through my knee from the fall, I crawled deeper into the small tunnel. It twisted and turned, until it narrowed so much I was scared I wouldn't be able to get out if I took another step. I pressed as far into the crevice as I dared, wedging in sideways, hiding myself with my cloak and begging that he wouldn't be able to feel me.

Yanou's heavy footsteps came closer and closer until the sound of it was all around me. My heart beat in the same rhythm as the steps, terror once again choking me.

Nothing here, I sent out, even though I knew he should be able to feel my panic. The footsteps passed my narrow canyon and went on. *Not here!* I tried when his mind brushed mine. I braced for the assault, but it didn't come. Amazed that the ploy worked, I continued my desperate plea that I wasn't there and pushed deeper into the crack. All my attention was focused on keeping Yanou's mind out, so I didn't feel the tickle of little, hairy legs on my hand at first. When I felt it, I couldn't entirely restrain my scream and made a sound that wasn't completely human. My tattoos blazed red, something that Yanou wouldn't miss, but when I stared at the giant spider crawling onto my arm, I didn't care. It was a smooth black, with iridescent purple legs, and close to the size of my hand. It had countless eyes that seemed to watch me. I shook it off violently, and it crashed with a sickening splat against the walls of the cavern. I couldn't stay here, unmoving. Not anymore. Yanou would come soon. And there was never merely one spider. Never.

I tried to crawl further into the crevice, praying that I would fit through it, that I wouldn't get stuck and be at the mercy of both Yanou and an army of poisonous spiders. Behind me I heard Yanou coming closer, his mind now finding mine and beginning a battering assault. I kept pushing, making myself as thin as possible. I breathed out and had no room to breathe in again. My shirt tore and then my skin, hot pain streaming over my chest. Yanou kept up his attack on my mind, and as he came closer, I felt my defenses failing. With a

mighty effort, I mustered all the strength I had left and shoved as hard as I could, fighting to get to the other side of the crack. Red dots danced before my eyes, the lack of oxygen making me dizzy. I pushed hard again, and I fell into another tunnel on the other side of the crevice. Taking deep, painful breaths, I realized a moment too late my mind wasn't shielded anymore.

It was taken in an iron fist and squeezed tightly. I screamed and clawed at consciousness. The pain Yanou had inflicted before was nothing to what he did to me then by crushing and twisting my mind. I could only see red and, for a moment, I thought there was blood dripping from my eyes. I curled into a tight ball and hid my head in my arms.

"Stupid, stupid boy," Yanou shouted from the other side of the crevice. "You're gonna pay for making me chase you through this demented place. I'm going to retrain you like the dog you are. Now. COME HERE!"

He stopped the torture and took over control of my body, something that should've been as impossible as the agony he was giving me. All of this should be impossible. My arms moved without my volition, pushing my body up. I fought it and stopped my movement, managed to crawl back a bit, bumping into a wall. Yanou doubled his effort, and I kept fighting him. I wasn't able to do more than resist my limbs moving where Yanou wanted them. The agony in my head, the feeling that it was getting smaller and smaller and smaller until it would disappear into nothing, made resistance seem futile. Close to giving up, I kept moving along the wall, until, suddenly, I was tumbling through thin air, sliding down faster and faster. Yanou's roars of fury accompanied my descent.

Ache. A terrible, dull ache in all my limbs and agony in my head. Everything was too bright. I shifted in an attempt to find a more comfortable position. The floor beneath me was hard as a rock, with numerous small sharp objects digging into my skin. I opened my eyes and was immediately blinded by the sun. I shut them and waited until the spots dissolved. With my arm covering my face, I tried again, opening my eyes to slits, this time careful not to look directly up.

Wow! The ground was almost as bright as the sky—a gleaming black with countless gemstones embedded in the smooth rock, resembling an enormous jewel. Blinking a few times and slowly sitting up, I looked around me. I was in the middle of some sort of bowl, at least a mile across and perfectly round. It was deep, at least a hundred feet, probably more. It was familiar somehow, and

powerful in a way I had never felt before. The power drummed, strummed through me, feeding me. I tried to connect to it and felt my aches subside. My tattoos lit up and became blinding like the sun. With my energy, my memories returned, and I slammed my shields up, expecting Yanou's assault. I looked around me but saw no trace of him. Great! I might be able to outrun him after all. Or maybe he had gotten stuck in the narrow crevice that only just allowed me to get through.

I stood up and studied the bowl, looking for a way out. There was no obvious escape route. I kept the sun at my back and walked to the place where the bowl started to arch up. Every step was agony. It felt like I was walking through quicksand. The Wastelands was pulling me back to the center of the bowl, and I realized that there was no longer a pull to the East. I had arrived at my destination, at least as far as the Wastelands was concerned. I took another step—the first step up the steep slope. The next step proved impossible, though, as my foot moved but my body didn't. It was like someone was dragging me back by a rope bound around my spine. The moment I pulled too hard, a nauseating pain shot through my body, and it felt like if I pulled even harder, my spine would be ripped from my body. I tried another spot, a little bit to my left, with the same result. And another spot, until I was panting in exhaustion. This wasn't working. I needed to find out what the Wastelands wanted from me, or I would die before I'd get out of here.

I turned around and walked back to the center of the bowl, this time pulled forward so harshly I had to jog to keep from tumbling over. I sat down in the middle of the basin, pulled my boots off, placed my bare feet and hands onto the ground and tried to make a link to the Wastelands. There was an instant connection, the power drumming in my veins. I went deeper, farther, spreading my mind. I felt the icy touch of Yanou's rage as he ran through endless tunnels. I braced myself for an assault, but it never came. He couldn't feel me, connected to the Wastelands like this.

A little farther, and I found ravens, thousands of them, minds pushing back at my intrusion on their space. And then... There. There, something familiar. Trickle of energy being fed into the earth, into the sky, searching, always searching. A prayer. Dolen! I connected to that flux, adding my augmented power to his, creating a raging torrent of energy that flushed the lands. A moment of quivering anticipation and hopefulness. Then the god answered our call, slammed into me and pushed me wide open. It released a wordless cry of power into the world to which the ravens reacted, the cacophony of their croaks so loud it echoed through the bowl.

They were coming!

The god searched my mind, looking through visions and memories, searched my world. I was floating, exalted in this nexus of power, happy to be nothing.

Abruptly, agonizing pain slammed me back to the earth—pain, both in my mind and in my leg. I looked down and didn't understand why an arrow was sticking out from my leg. The next moment, Yanou was on me, pummeling me with both fists and mind, trying to grab me in an iron hold.

I pushed, or the god pushed, or we both pushed. Yanou flew off me, landed with a thud, screaming in frustration. Almost instantly he was on his feet again and launched towards me, diving with outstretched hands towards my throat. I rolled away, and searched desperately for a weapon. I grabbed at the knife that was bound to my thigh but found I couldn't move my hand. Horrible, unbearable pain flashed from the runes on my neck and all over my skin, as if I was burning alive, when Yanou resumed the attack with his mind. His weight fell on me again, one hand pinning me to the ground by my throat, one fist raised for a punch. It hit me, and for a second the world disappeared. When I came to, everything around me was spinning. My consciousness was lost in the midst of Hadrà and Yanou fighting for control of my body and mind. I, or the god—I couldn't see the difference anymore—freed a hand and clawed at Yanou's face, the fingers pulsing with heat that caused Yanou to shriek in agony. For just a moment, his grasp on my throat loosened, long enough for me to draw one shuddering breath, and then the pressure was back. His fist went up for another blow, and I closed my eyes and waited for it to come.

Before it could connect, a cacophony of noises exploded through the gemstone bowl. Hoofs hitting against hard stone made a sound like thunder. An enraged man cried out his frustration, and thousands of ravens called out as one. In a split second, I got a glimpse of Dolen roaring out a battle cry while desperately trying to stay on Bane's back. The sky was blackened by the ravens, their presence threatening, their intentions unclear.

Yanou made the mistake of taking his eyes off me, of allowing me another lung full of oxygen. I shouted out, slamming my mind into his with all the power I had, through the connection he had formed himself. Hadrà came with me, adding incredible power to mine. Yanou screamed without sound, went completely still, and crumbled on top of me.

I pushed at him, fighting to get him off me. Drained as I was, I didn't manage until Dolen was there to assist me.

"You are alive," he said, kneeling down next to me.

"Barely," I croaked between coughs. "And only thanks to you. Is *he* dead?"

Dolen leaned over Yanou to check. "He is still breathing. Very shallowly." He looked at me with a stoic expression. "What do you think we should do with him?"

"I don't know," I said, shaking with pain that was invading me now the adrenaline was wearing off. "I guess... we should kill him."

"Murder an unconscious man?" Dolen said, with scarcely hidden disgust in his voice.

"It's not that I want to. I just... I don't see another way. He'll keep following me until he captures me."

"We can restrain him and deliver him to justice."

"What justice? Whose? Who will dare to deny a Nahuel the right to do whatever he pleases?" I sighed and closed my eyes. Reassuring blackness was hovering near the edges of my vision, and I wanted to let it take me. It would be better than the pain. It was also better than experiencing what the being was still doing in my head. It was anchoring itself into my mind, sending in tiny barbed tentacles of energy. I tried to struggle against it, and a soothing feeling smothered me. I was too tired and in too much pain to deal with all of this.

"Please stay awake, Keric." Dolen was next to me again, pulling my head into his lap. "What should I do? I do not think I can kill someone, and I agree we cannot take him with us."

"I don't know. I can't deal with this right now," I said, pushing myself up and looked at the arrow piercing my thigh. "That thing needs to get out."

Dolen swallowed and repositioned himself to check the arrow wound. He was cutting my pants to see the amount of the damage, when Bane's terrified neigh broke through our little bubble. We looked up and saw the sky darken as an immense flock of ravens flew over, and a horrendous sound assaulted us.

"We need to go," I said with a groan, trying to push myself up. I wasn't sure if Dolen could hear me over the noise, but I think he understood my intentions. I whistled for Bane, and he came running.

"You cannot ride a horse now," Dolen complained loudly.

"It doesn't look like I have much of a choice."

Dolen swallowed and stood to help me get on the horse. I screamed in agony, seeing red and black flashes as my stomach emptied itself. The moment Dolen mounted behind me, Bane started running. Not much later, the world went blissfully dark.

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Chapter 12

The next thing I felt was the agony of the arrow being pulled out. Before losing consciousness again, I registered that I was lying on a stone floor, Bane's distraught nickers echoing around me.

I woke up to the disturbing feeling of my tattoos crawling on my skin. The only normalcy was the creamy white hand clutched around my dark hand with the shifting black lines. I didn't think much of it, because the entire cave-like room was distorting oddly.

"I want to go home," I mumbled, through lips that felt like sandpaper.

"I am not sure if that is a viable option," Dolen said. "How are you feeling?"

I felt my face and found it swollen and tender to the touch. I carefully examined my nose. Not broken. My eye sockets, painful but hopefully not shattered.

"Sore," I tried. "Thirsty."

I felt a waterskin pressed against my lips. "Drink, my love."

I did, soaking my lips and tongue until they felt somewhat close to normal. I closed my eyes, ready to fall back into a slumber when I felt something strange in the back of my mind. I prodded it, and it prodded back, unfolding and filling my mind with power and a consciousness that was most certainly not mine. I opened my eyes and sat up so abruptly everything spun violently.

"I have something in my head!" The being in my head radiated contentment and went back to whatever it was doing. I tried to figure out what and felt tiny tendrils connecting to all parts of my body. "What is it doing? Get it out!" I clawed at my head, only to have Dolen pry my hands away. I was so weak I couldn't even fight him.

"Clawing your eyes out will not help you. What do you mean you have something in your head?"

"I mean that god of yours has found a way to invade my mind. Tell it to get out! Now!"

The look in Dolen's eyes changed from puzzlement to devotion. I wouldn't have minded so much if the look were meant for me and not for the monster hijacking my brain. "Don't look at me like that. Get it out!"

“Hadrà has made you his vessel?”

“I don’t care what you call it. Tell it to get out!”

“Your tattoos are transforming,” Dolen said slowly, pointing to the shifting lines on my hands and arms. “Maybe the change will be positive? Hadrà does no harm.”

“How can something making my head its home be a good thing? Would you like being invaded like this?”

Dolen shrugged. “Of course.”

I sighed. “Well, at least I don’t have to be scared of you leaving me again anytime soon.”

“I would not anyway,” Dolen said softly, tears choking him. “I have never felt more alone than when I thought you were dead.”

“Dead? I tried to send you signs. Didn’t you get those?”

“I thought I was dreaming that!” Dolen exclaimed, too loudly. It felt like a kick to my head, and I covered my ears. Dolen looked mortified and hushed his voice as he continued, “I assumed I was having hallucinations caused by a fever. As far as I knew, you were on your way home, back to your people. And then, I found your horse and knew for certain you had perished. I could not think of any other reason you would leave Bane. I was praying for your soul when Hadrà called me to your aid. Do you remember what happened?”

I thought hard and found only flashes. “Not much. Tunnels. A lot of pain. Some weird crater with gemstones. Yanou trying to kill me. You coming to my rescue on Bane. Ravens. Wait! Where are we?”

“In one of the tunnels near the crater. I did not dare to move you any further because of your injuries. You have been unconscious for most of the day. I was afraid you would not wake up again.”

“When can we leave? I don’t like being underground.”

“Not yet. You are unable to travel. Tomorrow, hopefully.”

“Can we go during the day, please? I’m sick of everything trying to kill me at night.”

Dolen nodded, and I closed my eyes again, exhausted by our short conversation.

“Come here?” I asked Dolen. “Come lie with me?” I moved to make a place for him on my bedroll, and he hesitantly came, careful not to touch me. Had he changed his mind about us, now he knew I held his god in my mind?

I turned to him, seeing only those mesmerizing, hypnotic eyes looking scared and hesitant. “Hold me, please?” I begged, deciding my dignity was nonexistent by now, anyway.

“I do not want to hurt you.”

“You can’t make it worse, only better. I promise.” I tried a smile and got one back. Better yet, I got him pressed against my side, arm slung over my chest. And yes, it hurt, but it was worth it. With some difficulty, I cradled the back of his head with my hand and pulled him close enough for a kiss. I didn’t dare to risk it, scared of rejection, and halted before our lips would touch. He closed the distance between us, lips soft and warm and oh-so tender on mine. He pulled back with a jolt, looking baffled.

“What’s wrong?”

Dolen shook his head and kissed me again, this time lingering, tasting, exploring. After he pulled back, he rested his forehead on mine. “All my life,” he said softly, “I was told that the Gods would not allow me to be who I was and desire who I did. Now, I see that so much of what the priests said were lies.”

I had no answer for him. The god was, indeed, not even paying attention, but telling him that seemed rude for such a momentous discovery. I was very glad of it, though. Having a god in my head was bad enough, I wasn’t sure what I would’ve done if Dolen’s superstitions had been correct, and Hadrà had been homophobic.

I closed my eyes and pulled him as close as possible. This was a great moment for a nap. As soon as I started to relax, the images of what had happened started rushing back. “Wait. What happened to Yanou?” I asked, trying to force protection around my mind.

“I do not know. We had to flee the ravens. They probably killed him after we entered the tunnels.”

Where had the ravens come from? Why had they come? Had Hadrà called them to our aid?

I sincerely hoped it wasn’t the latter. I doubted I’d be able to handle having to deal with ravens on a regular basis.

“Good,” I said with a sigh. “How’s Bane?”

“He is right outside eating dangerous looking plants.”

“And what happened to you? Are you okay? In one of my visions I saw you were limping.”

“Talking can wait, my love. We will have time for that later. You need to sleep and heal so we can leave this place.”

“My love?” I asked with a smile.

“You heard me.”

“Love you, too,” I mumbled, before finally falling asleep.

The next day, I refused to rest any longer and insisted on leaving as soon as I awoke and noticed the sun shining into the tunnel in which Dolen had hidden us. Dolen had to help me get on Bane, and I saw in his frown that he was about to tell me we needed to wait another day. So I urged Bane to a walk and didn’t look back at Dolen until he had caught up to us. He walked next to me, hand on my thigh. As long as Bane went slowly, most of the pain was—for now—manageable, and I preferred that to the prickling fear I got while staying below the earth.

“Tell me what happened,” I asked, hoping it would get my attention away from what was happening with my tattoos. A disturbing substance was oozing from the back of my head, and that could not be good. My other tattoos had at least stopped moving and didn’t look too different. By now, I took things like that as good news. Also, the pull the Wastelands had on me had disappeared. The bad news was: the absence of the pull might mean the Wastelands intended for me to turn into Hadrà’s new home. I had been right not to trust its intentions. It would not do me much good to have a god in my head, I was sure of that. I had no idea what purpose it had for me, and I had no interest in playing that game. I simply wanted it out, no matter how delighted Dolen was with me being a vessel for his beloved god.

“Surprisingly little befell me,” Dolen started. “After I left you, I went straight into the Hollow Plains, back to that pond where we were earlier. I prayed there, trying to discover what Hadrà desired of me, but did not find any answer—only a feeling I needed to go on. So, I did. I walked all night and as long during the day as I could manage and prayed every time I felt safe enough to stop and expose my soul.”

“How did you get safely through the night? I nearly got eaten like... well, way too often,” I interrupted.

“A lot of predators are confused when they can see something but can't feel it. I did not get through unharmed, however. I got attacked multiple times and was lucky to escape with only a wound on my leg. I do not wish to linger on my terror, now. It feels unimportant, now I have you back.” He threw me a smile that made me even woozier than I already was. “Several times as I was praying, I thought I felt your presence. One time, I even saw you standing in front of me. I had a fever and was not praying, so I thought I was hallucinating. But then I found your horse, or better said, your horse found me while I was sleeping. That was when I thought you were dead. I was not certain I would be able to go on anymore. It was only because Bane would not leave me in peace that I resumed my travels. I didn't bother concealing my soul anymore and kept praying for Hadrà to keep your soul safe. Hadrà gave me you, instead.” Another gut-wrenching smile followed, and he held his face against my thigh for a moment. “Tell about your adventures, now.”

“I don't like adventures,” I complained. “I want to find a nice and comfortable town to settle in and never spend a night outside again. I want a shower, or even better, a hot bath. I want a soft, warm bed with you in it. I want things to stop trying to eat me. I hate heights and tunnels and snakes and ants and spiders and sand and three-headed lizards and gods and landscapes trying to get me to do something. And I hate hating everything.”

Dolen chuckled. I grumbled at him and swatted playfully at his head. He caught my hand to push a kiss on the palm. “Tell me, my love, it will make you feel better.”

So I did, leaving nothing out, but maybe exaggerating certain things a bit, maybe making a few situations a bit more dangerous and interesting, maybe adding a head, or two, to a certain snake...

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Chapter 13

It took another three days to finally get out of the Wastelands. We went slowly, me riding Bane, and Dolen walking next to us. We rested more than we walked, and even then, I was almost delirious with exhaustion, and well, maybe a fever that I tried to hide from Dolen at all costs. I wanted out of here. I wanted back to civilization, and I wanted that horrible god out of my mind.

The unwelcome occupation of my mind was what was making me sick, I was sure of it. The arrow wound still hurt, but it was healing well, no swelling, no heat, no sign of infection. There were no other wounds that could be infected, no wounds but the oozing tattoos on the back of my skull. Dolen cleaned the bandage every night, but he said nothing about how bad it was. He didn't have to. My powers were gone. I couldn't even extend my senses. The visions had also stopped, something I had wished for all my life, and I had expected to be worth any price. Maybe it would turn out to be worth it, if I at least found my physical strength again, and I stopped being helpless and invalid and useless.

When we finally reached the end of the Wastelands late on the third day, I felt the change in my bones, the shuddering of the god through my being. It was scared. Somehow it was linked to the Wastelands, and it was afraid what would happen if we went too far. I hoped it would decide to leave me and go back home.

Hadrà wasn't the only one hesitant to leave. Bane also halted, looking back and neighing loudly.

"He really liked it there," Dolen said, putting a hand on Bane's neck.

"He belongs there. Too bad there are no other horses. I might leave him otherwise."

Bane snorted and started walking again without encouragement.

"Or not. Your choice, silly beast. Maybe I'll find you a nice mare and leave the two of you to make super-ponies."

Dolen started a reply and halted, taking a step closer to me, pressing against my thigh. He pointed, and I tried to see what he was looking at.

"A village," he stammered. "There is a village over there."

“Well, let’s go. I hope they have a hot bath ready. I’ll settle for a hot shower, though.” I’d probably have to settle for a cold one, with my powers still nonexistent.

“What if... what if they do not approve of us being together?”

“Then we’ll move on. You can show me that ocean of yours. Somewhere between here and there, someone will accept us.”

Dolen didn’t react.

“Hey,” I said, again to deaf ears. With some difficulty, I slid off Bane so I could look Dolen in the eyes. I had to lean against Bane to keep from falling. Sometime during the day the last of my strength had seeped away.

“Listen to me, Nighteyes. I have not gone through everything only to have someone else tell me what to do, and neither have you. We need help. I need rest—”

“You need healing.” Dolen frowned.

Okay, maybe I hadn’t really managed to hide how sick I was. “Yeah, that too. But those things are temporary. I will not hide who I am or who I love. I couldn’t if I tried. I’m a terrible liar. They will accept us, or they won’t. But we need to try, Dolen. I can’t go on much longer.”

Dolen nodded and kissed my cheek. He helped me back on Bane, and I slumped forward, happy to be able to sit. He started walking, and Bane followed him eagerly, ears pricked forward.

We were met before a closed gate by three men holding axes and a woman with a big curved dagger. Two other men held bows aimed on us from a platform next to the gate. The village wasn’t big, but it was surrounded by a palisade made of pointed sticks and a moat filled with brambles with impressive prickles. Smart people. I already liked it here.

“You came from the Wasted Lands. It’s impossible to have the sun set on you in there and live to tell about it,” a big man with a bushy beard exclaimed.

I tried a smile. “Not impossible, but pretty hard. Not going to try that again, that’s for sure. Never been this scared, or this sick.” *Can’t believe I ended up with a god in my head.* What would happen if I said this out loud? Would they kill me, lock me up with the crazy people, or gaze at me in devotion like Dolen did when he thought I didn’t notice?

"We are looking for a place to rest," Dolen said. He was shaking with exhaustion, so pale he looked pretty much dead. "My friend is injured and sick. Our horse requires food and shelter."

"It is not often you see a Nahuel traveling with one of the Ehecati," the woman said carefully, still not lowering her knife.

"You know my people?" Dolen asked, perplexed. "How?"

"They passed through here not so long ago. We traded with them. We have done so in the past. But it has been years. You are welcome here. But he is a different story."

"I mean no harm," I said. "I left the Nahuel behind."

"Why?" This time the eldest man spoke, pushing forward to study me. "He is ill. Close to death, if I'm right. Let him in."

"Not before he answers your question," the bearded man grumbled.

"Because I didn't agree with their... well... everything. I'm sick of violence and people dying for no good reason." The world spun again, and I vomited what little food I'd eaten today. I leaned over and noticed, too late, that I was falling. The ground came closer and closer until warm arms wrapped around me and softly put me down. "I don't feel good," I told the spinning blue eyes that hovered over me.

"Help him!" the spinning blue-eyed man shouted. I wondered what he was talking about.

"How do you feel?" Dolen asked. He looked crumpled and tired, the bags under his eyes standing out like bruises. He sat next to my bed on a wooden chair that seemed terribly uncomfortable. The room, itself, was nothing special. Stone walls, stone slab floor with a sheepskin for comfort, a small window with the shutters closed, and in the middle of the room, a table with three chairs, like the one Dolen was sitting on. Several cabinets and a wooden chest stood against the walls.

I thought about Dolen's question. "I'm not sure. Better?" I reached up to check the back of my neck and felt the bandage had been removed. The skin was tender, but no longer sore. I moved my hand up and felt a smooth skull. "You let them shave my head!"

Dolen laughed softly. "It was necessary to treat your illness. We could not see the full scope of the problem with your hair covering most of the infection.

But I was right. You look very striking like this.” He stroked a hand over my head, and I shivered under his tender touch.

“My... my tattoos there? How do they look?”

Dolen hesitated. “Different. The runes are gone, the shape is symmetric now, and the connections make more sense now. But—” He halted, and looked away.

I went cold with dread. “But what?”

“They look very different from the other designs, and I cannot guess the meaning. Your tattoos are luminescent again, so I think that is a good sign.”

Without reacting to him, I turned my attention inward and felt like screaming when I felt the lingering presence of Hadrà. The entity was hidden away deeply in the caverns of my mind, with little tendrils spreading out everywhere. For now it was dormant, only radiating a deep satisfaction as I poked it. It seemed to have no intention of leaving me anytime soon. It showed no sign of its purpose, didn't even show it had a purpose. But I knew that couldn't be true, knew it had to want something. I prodded it again, harder this time, turning my consciousness into a pointed stick. Hadrà reacted, filling my mind with images.

I was in the middle of a vast crowd, color all around me. I glanced down and saw that I too was decked out in bright reds, blues and yellows. We were dancing to the uplifting sound of flutes and drums. It was hypnotizing, purposeful, joyful. There was this all-compassing need to please. Please what? I wondered. The answer came when the presence of Hadrà swelled in my mind.

I stepped out of the vision. *So you want to be worshipped again?* I asked the god silently.

It sent me no words in return, only a need so great it nearly flattened me.

Selfish, I thought at it.

More images filled my head. Images of bloodshed, of sickness, of mass murder. This time the desperation I felt didn't belong to the people I saw, but to Hadrà. It experienced unbelievable pain over being unable to save its people. I saw flashes of the Cataclysm, of a string of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes ripping the earth apart, leading to sickness and wars more horrible than any the world had ever witnessed before. Mushroom-shaped clouds popped up everywhere, and diseases were spread on purpose as the endless winter continued. I witnessed Hadrà reach out countless times to the remaining

humans wandering the scorched earth. It got no response until it came across a sad bunch of dying people trying to cross an area that looked a lot like the Wastelands. These images were familiar. The Wastelands had shown me these malformed humans before. This time, Hadrà managed to make contact, and the reverence the people showed the god strengthened it as well. It connected to the Wastelands, and together they shaped the humans so they were fit to survive. They gave them white skin and glowing eyes, and they gave them the ability to converse with the gods. They also gave them a mission, a mission that they had failed to fulfill.

"It would be easier if you told me what that mission was, you know," I mumbled out loud. "And what you think I should do about it."

"What did you say?" Dolen asked, startled. "I thought you had fallen asleep again."

I shrugged. "I was talking to that annoying god of yours. Apparently there was something it wanted your people to do that you failed to do. Not that it told me anything useful, like what it wants, why it wants it, and what I have to do with any of it."

"Hadrà is still with you?"

"Yeah, and don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're star-struck. I like that doe-eyed look, but not when it's directed to that unwanted passenger of mine."

"We have to figure out what Hadrà wants."

"Not now."

I ignored his protests and went back to exploring what had happened to my powers. I extended my mind and felt reassured by the quick response. Even better was the fact that I wasn't flooded with visions immediately. They were still there, and I would experiment with them later. I searched for Bane and found him happy and content in the company of a few other horses. Around me, I felt the presence of the inhabitants of the village. I didn't try to see if I could contact them, afraid to scare or anger them.

Pulling back my mind, I let the energy flow through my body, discovering a rightness to it all. I grabbed a cup of water that stood next to my bed and heated it gradually. The control I had was amazing. Maybe that god wasn't all bad after all.

My stomach rumbled, and I was glad to feel something that was normal. "I'm hungry," I complained.

"I'm happy to hear that," said a woman with black hair, as she entered the chamber. Miraculously, she came bringing food, a delicious-smelling soup. "You need to eat too, Dolen, and a nap would suit you well when you're done." She put a pan of soup on the table in the middle of the room. "Do you think you're fit enough to get out of bed to eat? I'm getting a bit sick of having to feed you."

"You've been feeding me?" I tried sitting up and found the world behaved. It stayed perfectly still, just like it was supposed to.

"Yep, you've been in and out of consciousness for almost a week. This is the first time you're not blabbering something about gods and ants and ravens. Sometime yesterday, those tattoos on your head stopped oozing foulness, and this night they started glowing. It seemed like a good sign, and I guess it was. You're up and awake now."

I blinked at her.

"Yeah, she talks a lot. She reminds me of someone else I know." Dolen smiled and helped me stand up. I felt stronger than I was supposed to and wondered if I had Hadrà to thank for that, or if these villagers had healing powers. My leg felt great, almost like there was no wound at all. I leaned against Dolen even if I didn't need the support, loving the opportunity to be so close to him again.

"You have a great friend in that one," the woman remarked, ladling soup into two bowls. "He hasn't left your side the whole time."

"He's more than just a friend," I said, leaning closer to press a kiss to his cheek. He stiffened. *Oh. He had been hiding. Out of fear? Or necessity?* I glanced at the woman who looked at us with big eyes. She didn't look horrified, only surprised. And maybe, just a little bit disappointed.

She sagged a bit, glancing at Dolen—yes, she was disappointed for sure—and smiled at us. "Well, I guess love conquers all differences. You sure make a striking couple."

"Your people don't mind?" I asked for Dolen, who seemed speechless.

She shrugged. "We don't object to much, here. As long as you don't hurt anyone, we pretty much mind our own business."

“So how did you two cross paths?” The woman sat down with us and looked at us curiously. “I’m Ashia, by the way.”

“Keric,” I mumbled through a mouthful of soup. It was excellent.

“So tell me... It’s bound to be an interesting story.”

“And it’s one the entire village should hear,” an elder man said as he walked in. “Most doubt the wisdom of giving a Nahuel healing. Some say we should’ve let you die. There are even a few who think we should reverse that decision and kill you after all—”

The anxiety boiled up in me, and with it came the familiar red glow in my tattoos. The man took a frightened step back. I took that as a clear sign to try and push down my instinctive response to danger. It took so little effort, it astonished me. No overwhelming visions, either.

I took a deep breath, but before I said anything, Dolen spoke with a firm voice. “Everyone has been very friendly to me. I have been invited to stay for as long as I wish. Now you tell me that you wish to kill my friend? I do not know what to make of such a peculiar show of hospitality.”

“People are scared, Dolen. I get it.” And to think we had been afraid it would be our love that would get us shunned. “Will we be allowed to leave safely?”

“You are right, Nahuel. People are scared.”

“I have a name,” I snapped at him. “It’s Keric. I am more than the clan I left behind.”

“Indeed you are, Keric. I am Palak. I am one of the people saying we should not decide who or what you are before you have a chance to tell us your story. I came here to tell you it is decided to let you plead your case.”

Again, before I could respond, Dolen did, “Plead his case? You are treating him as if he is on trial! Keric is not a criminal, nor a murderer. He is a good man, with more compassion than any other man or woman I have ever met. I will not allow him to be harmed because you don’t like the people he was born to!” What exactly Dolen thought he was going to do about it was unclear, but his defense warmed me.

Palak held up both hands. “I should’ve formulated that differently. I meant that he—both of you—should tell your story so we can decide if we will extend our hospitality to Keric as well. The decision not to kill him has already been made.”

I wondered if that decision could be altered the moment they didn't like what I had to say. "Who makes all these decisions?" I asked, instead.

"Everyone," Ashia interjected cheerfully. "We vote." I looked at Dolen who seemed as confused as I felt. It sounded like a very chaotic way to rule a place. I liked it!

So the next evening, the entire village was gathered on the central plaza. There were only eighty people or so, but it was eighty people who would decide my fate, some of whom wished me dead. Dolen was right beside me, paler than ever. He was shaking so hard, I swore I heard his teeth clattering.

I grabbed his hand firmly in mine and whispered, "Everything will be fine, Nighteyes." I took a deep breath and began, "It all started out with me being bored and lonely. And although I was getting mightily sick of the way my life had turned into a pit of emptiness with nothing to entertain me..."

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Epilogue

“Well,” Dolen said, hugging me close in the privacy of the bathhouse. “That turned out surprisingly well.”

I grinned at him. “Told you I’m awesome.”

“For a moment, I was certain they were going to lynch us. You could have broken the subject of who your uncle is more subtly.”

“Nah. Subtle isn’t my style. I’ve got you for that. But I think they’ve taken me in only because they want to use Bane for breeding. Half the people arguing in my favor mentioned him as my biggest asset. Can’t blame them for that. He’s pretty great.” I pecked Dolen’s lips and looked around me. “It’s not bad here. Of course, back home...” I swallowed. Mentioning home still hurt. “In Masahiro, the bathhouses are much more luxurious.”

Dolen gave the room a quick glance, before turning back to me. “I see what you mean. There is much malfunctioning here. Give me a month, and I will make this bathhouse better than the ones you are used to.”

“What? How did you see that so quickly?”

“I am simply that exceptional.” Dolen threw me a teasing smirk.

“Really?”

He laughed. “No. All I spotted was some leakage. But if you tell me it can be better, I will make it so. After all, we have been told to make ourselves useful if we want to stay.”

“Do you?” I pulled him into an embrace, my fingers busying themselves with removing his garment.

“What?” he asked, eyes already darkening in lust. He moved forward to steal a kiss.

“Do you want to stay?”

He shrugged. “I have never spent an extended time in one place. I would like to see what it is like. But I do not mind traveling on if that is what you prefer. We should also take your uncle into account. Do you think he will follow you?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. He might send someone after me. But if Dylwin is right, he’s busy fighting a war. He might not care, or he might assume I’m

dead. Dylwin suggested I come here, and she said something about trying to follow me. I would like to wait and see if she does. So, we could stay for a while until we have a reason to go. One day, I'd like to see that ocean of yours." I finally managed to undo his clothing and pushed it down until it pooled around his feet.

Dolen groaned when I stroked the long lines of his back down to his ass, jerking his hips when I cupped it. "The ocean will not go anywhere. It can wait until we feel like traveling. Hadrà will show us our path." He kissed me, tongue asking for entrance, and that eliminated my desire to tell him I had no intention of letting the god decide my fate. I stroked his tongue with mine, sucking it into my mouth while my hands kept exploring. I still didn't really believe we were both alive and mostly in one piece.

"Bathing would be easier if you would remove your clothes as well," Dolen complained, tugging on my shirt.

"Yeah? Are you saying you want me naked?"

There was that delightful smirk again. "I am merely explaining the principle of bathing to you. You seem confused." He stepped back from me, took his loincloth off and stepped into the nearest bath. "See. You get naked and then get into the water."

"You don't say," I said, laughing, and made quick work of my own clothing. I followed him in and gave a shout at the unexpected cold. "This water is freezing," I whined.

"I told you there is much to improve here. I will find a way to heat the water before our next bath. Now be useful, for once, and use your magic before I freeze."

I couldn't resist sticking out my tongue even as I complied. Soon, the water was a comfortable warmth, and steam filled the room. "Here you go, Nighteyes. Hot water as requested. Now resume your explanation of baths. I've often heard of a thing called washing. Maybe you can show me what that means." I pulled Dolen forward until he knelt in my lap, facing me.

"I am afraid that requires a hands-on demonstration. I do not know if that is acceptable to you?" He traced the tattoos on my scalp that were normally covered by hair, causing spurts of delight through my body. The reaction was so powerful, colors shot over my skin.

I moaned. "I think I can suffer through your demonstration. I feel a bit dirty."

"Hygiene is a very important thing. Luckily for you, it is not that difficult," Dolen explained with a laugh. He reached to the bowl of foam that stood next to the bath. "You take a bit of this substance, soap. You spread it all over your body, then rinse it off." He rubbed the soap on my chest and back, and I gasped as his tender hands slid over my skin.

"Hmm. I don't know if I completely understand. Can you do that again?" I chuckled.

"Certainly. I see that you are a slow learner. I will be thorough."

"Oh, yeah, do that." I let my head fall back as he took more foam and meticulously rubbed it over the part of my body that was above water.

Soon, I joined in the fun and started washing him as well. All that time, we stared into each other's eyes, first breathless with laughter and later breathless with desire, as hands dipped beneath the surface, stroking stomachs and thighs and asses. I cried out when he sunk down on me, his hot channel clenching around my swollen cock. The connection between us was almost perfect. Almost.

"Please, Dolen. Can you expose your soul? Let me feel you?"

Dolen went still for a moment, hesitation clouding his eyes. The seconds that passed until he nodded felt endless. I expanded my senses to him and gasped as I connected to him as never before. He was so warm, felt so wonderful. Our souls blossomed when they touched—and impossibly—mingled. I pulled him against me, pushed in as deep as I could, needing the physical connection as much as the mental one. In this span of time, we were truly and utterly one.

We started moving again at the same time, only breaking eye contact to allow for drawn-out kisses. When I came, it was glorious, pleasure rushing through my body, colors shooting over my skin. Dolen's eyes fell shut as he shook through his orgasm. He was so unbelievably beautiful.

So much had happened in little more than a moon's time. I had lost so much: my home, my family, and even the place in my mind that the god now occupied. And still, it felt like a fair price to pay for being with Dolen.

I blinked against the tears that threatened to overwhelm me. "I'm never letting you walk away from me again. I hope you don't mind."

Dolen's smile was broad and a bit shaky. He tried a few replies, then cupped my face with both of his hands, and fitted our lips together for a kiss that was sweet and tasted like forever.

The End

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Author Bio

Gwynn Marssen was born and bred in the Netherlands, where talking about the weather is the national sport (although we pretend it's soccer) and a favorite saying is: "To act normal is crazy enough." She likes talking about the weather but is not a big fan of normality. Despite that, she leads a mostly quiet and disturbingly ordinary life and keeps the craziness contained in her head.

As a child she read too much, finding the world of fiction far more interesting than everyday life, and even now, she tries to spend as much time as possible in other people's heads, through books and writing, and through her alter ego as a psychologist. On any given day, you can find her curled up on her couch—on those few occasions the weather permits it—in her hammock with a spicy book, one or both of her two cats, some tea, and ample amounts of Dutch chocolate.

She's been writing for about five years, after she started watching professional wrestling. Those hot and practically naked men invaded her head, became her muses and forced her to start writing. And by forced, she means forced. They woke her up, filled her mind with images she couldn't resist, and, on more than a few occasions, drove her out of bed at five a.m. to write their steamy stories. Eventually, she managed to house-train them, and thus, highly increased the time she could spend procrastinating (which in her opinion is an art in itself). In the little time left over, she writes stories about men living and loving with all her heart.

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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

MEASURING THE REIN

Jae Moran

MEASURING THE REIN

By Jae Moran

Photo Description

Black and white photo of a muscular cowboy standing in a field, holding his saddle in one hand. He is shirtless and wearing jeans. His head is dropped to his chest and his face is obscured by his hat.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I thought that I could hide who I really am from everyone. My family and friends don't know my secret, I'm gay. More specifically I'm a gay cowboy, I've been riding the rodeo circuit for several years now. What's worse is my best friend, the person I've shared everything with since we were in grade school, doesn't know the 'real' me. So here I stand, saddle in hand, trying to muster up the courage to come clean with him. He's over in the arena getting ready to ride one of the most dangerous bulls in the circuit, he's probably looking for me right now for support. We've been there for each other through all the injuries and self-doubts, been supportive for each other when our families have thought we were crazy for leading a rodeo life.

I take a deep breath and go watch my friend, the one I'm about to lose when I tell him I'm gay, I wonder what he'll think when I tell him I'm in love with him too?

Sincerely,

Lily

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, rodeo, first time, coming out, friends to lovers

Word Count: 56,109

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MEASURING THE REIN

By Jae Moran

Chapter 1

The most difficult questions in life are not the ones without answers. They're the ones with plenty of possible solutions and you can't live with any of them. Gavin Hayes has been wrestling with one of these dilemmas for the last thirteen years. He was gay, and no matter how hard he hoped and prayed, that was never going to change. Every time he thought about coming out, all he could see were the enormous risks and no potential rewards save one... his personal integrity. Lying to his family and friends weighed on him, but was he willing to sacrifice his whole life in order to come out? After all this time, he finally thought the answer was yes.

Gavin was a professional saddle bronc rider on a national rodeo tour, and he thought he knew something about being fearless, but he was terrified. It wasn't so much he thought his parents would throw him out or anything dramatic. Gavin just didn't want to disappoint them. His dad would be crushed to know his family line would end with Gavin. His sister, Piper, would eventually give them grandchildren, but there would never be a fifth generation of Hayes progeny to grow up at Hazy Hill Farm. Those were things he thought he could overcome, but rodeo and Toby were entirely different.

Being out as a nationally ranked rodeo cowboy was an absolute impossibility. If his secret was ever discovered, he would lose his sponsors and be shunned, or worse, by the people he considered his friends and colleagues on the circuit. When he was in college, one of the ropers got caught kissing a guy behind the stock barn. The kid tried to tough it out, but he was beaten and bullied over and over until he quit rodeo entirely. Gay rodeo was out there, but you couldn't make a living at it. Gavin had finished in the top twenty saddle bronc riders since his first year as a professional. He placed twelfth last year and was sixth in the money so far this year. Gay rodeo would be a huge step back for him. He knew there had to be other guys on the tour who were gay, there were always rumors, but he stayed as far away from them as humanly possible.

And then there was Toby. Gavin sat at the picnic table behind the RV lot outside the arena making a small repair to his saddle. He couldn't stop the sigh that bubbled up in his chest. Toby Prescott had been his best friend since they were twelve. They'd helped each other through everything that happened in their lives so far, from Toby's dad's death when they were fifteen, to

convincing their parents to let them seriously pursue rodeo during their freshman year of college and all the milestones in between.

Gavin watched the activity moving in and out of the rodeo arena, trying to imagine what he could say to ensure he wouldn't lose his best friend. After a few moments, he could imagine Toby sitting in the dinette of the RV they shared with a beer in front of him. His sandy brown hair, in the same short ivy-league haircut he'd kept since he bought his first cowboy hat, was a little squashed from the day and his pine green eyes curious and concerned about whatever Gavin needed to say. The next image he conjured was of Toby scowling angrily with his jaw clenched right before he started yelling, calling Gavin a faggot and a liar, followed by Toby storming out and never speaking to Gavin again. He knew that was unlikely, especially if he left his revelation at his being gay, but Gavin wasn't sure he could reveal the first part without the second. Gavin was not only gay, but also stupidly and irrevocably in love with his best friend.

"This is fucking insane. I can't do this," Gavin muttered to no one. He couldn't risk blowing up his whole life only to lose the one person he couldn't live without. When he fell in love with Toby was a mystery, sometimes it felt like he was born loving his best friend. Checking his phone for the time, he knew he had to get back to the arena. Toby was probably already looking for Gavin. Bull riders, like saddle bronc riders, were nothing if not slaves to their routine.

He stretched his arms into the air, feeling the sun on his shoulders and chest. He'd taken his shirt off after his ride earlier to absorb a little vitamin D on the hot August afternoon while he did his repairs. Picking up the saddle, Gavin walked across the field towards the trailer. About halfway across, he stopped when the ache in his heart overwhelmed him. Since the start of the rodeo season, his loneliness and the weight of his secret had begun to manifest themselves as physical pain on top of the bruises and injuries which were constants in the life of a saddle bronc rider. He dropped his chin to his chest and took a few breaths as he stood there holding his saddle in one hand. All he wanted was to live an honest and open life with Toby by his side. Why was that too much to ask?

He didn't even know if Toby could reciprocate his feelings. Gavin thought he'd seen Toby check out some of the guys on the circuit in addition to the multitude of women following him around. Rodeo was certainly full of eye candy of both genders. And then every once in a while, Toby would look at him

and smile in a way that was more intimate and loving than is usually shared between friends. Gavin knew Toby had slept his way through his share of girls, but that had tapered off to almost nothing since last season. It was wishful thinking, but Gavin thought Toby might be at least hetero-flexible, probably a one, maybe a two, on the Kinsey scale. Even more than the sex, Gavin wanted Toby to love him back someday. In any case, it all gave him too much hope to ever move on with his life.

“Dammit. I don’t have time for this.” Gavin trotted to the RV and took a navy shower before rushing over to the arena. He hoped Toby did well today. His friend hadn’t had the best week and finished out of the money so far. Odds were in Toby’s favor today though. He’d drawn the money bull of the day. Pomodoro was a dangerous asshole of a bull, but if you were one of the rare few who managed to stick, the scores had been awfully good.

When Gavin rounded the corner into the contestants’ area, Toby was sitting alone on a bench doing his visualization exercises before he looked up and smiled with the crooked grin Gavin knew belonged only to him. Returning the smile, Gavin’s heart clenched with a familiar ache. “Hey dude. You ready?”

“I am now. Where the hell have you been?”

“Fixing my saddle. I noticed a worn billet after my ride and thought I had time to fix it before you needed me.”

“I always need you, Gav.” There was that look again. Gavin couldn’t figure it out. “You’re my best friend.”

“I know... Tell me about Pomodoro’s last few rides.” It was Gavin’s way of getting Toby focused for his ride. They chatted about the bull’s recent history as Toby went through his stretching and warm-up routine. Toby was a sports science major in college and had developed a pretty intense training and warm-up program tailored to their needs. To be honest, Gavin knew Toby’s nutrition and training plans were responsible for a lot of their success.

Toby sat on the ground with his legs spread nearly into a split while he stretched his hips and thighs. “Gav, you going out tonight? The guys said something about going to Miss Kitty’s Place.” Miss Kitty’s Place was the local roadhouse that catered to rodeo cowboys looking for a party. It was the best spot in Coeur d’Alene to hook-up with a buckle bunny for the night.

“Naw. We’re done early today. I’m gonna make some real food, play some Xbox and go to bed. I’m not up to their brand of debauchery tonight.”

"I hear you. I wasn't feeling it either."

"We should start talking about next year over dinner." Gavin made a snap decision that would change everything. "I got some other stuff I need to talk to you about anyway."

"Anything wrong?" Toby looked worried.

"Not really. I got some stuff on my mind and Dad's been squawking about wanting me on the farm more. We'll talk later. You need to focus on warming up."

Valentín Figueroa, a roper from Brazil and one of their closest friends on the circuit, laughed as he walked up to Gavin and grinned mockingly at Toby. "Go on, yoga boy. Show us your moves."

"Fuck off, Val. You only dream of being able to do this." Toby smiled wickedly as he bent forward and lifted his leg into a standing split with little effort. Gavin almost let out a groan as Toby's package was perfectly on display in his Wranglers. For someone only five foot nine and about a hundred and sixty pounds, Toby's well-muscled body made him appear larger and more imposing than he actually was. Gavin had to look away as Toby repeated the stretch with the other leg.

"Hey, Val. Nice ride today." Gavin liked Valentín. He was one of the people who stayed with Toby at the hospital after Gavin wrecked last year.

"Thanks, you too. String Theory didn't give you much to work with, but at least you finished in the money. You guys going to Miss Kitty's tonight?"

"No. We're headed home early tomorrow and it's a long drive hungover. Where you heading?"

"Sacramento overnight then straight to Ellensburg. I have a meet and greet with a potential new sponsor. My agent thinks it's a good opportunity. We'll see." At their level, chasing sponsors was a necessary evil. Gavin was always amazed at how much time he spent wooing corporate sponsorship.

"Good luck. I just signed with Rimrock Denim. My mom says a huge box of clothes turned up at the house the other day. I'm gonna miss my Wranglers but a national sponsor is a national sponsor."

"You know it, man."

Gavin noticed Toby had stopped stretching and was glowering for all he was worth. Rolling his eyes, Gavin chuckled to himself. "Come on, Tobes,

focus. Calves and ankles. Let's go." If it were anyone else, he'd think Toby was jealous, but Gavin knew he just didn't like his routine interrupted.

Val looked to Toby. "I wanted to ask yoga boy about this damn nagging groin pull. The doc and physical therapist keep saying it takes time, but no matter how I stretch or what I do it doesn't get better. You helped Matty so much with his ab strain, I thought you might have an idea."

"I bet it's your psoas, not your groin. The pain is deeper than the groin pulls you've had before, yeah?"

"Exactly. I didn't know how to describe it, but that's it." The amazed look all the cowboys got when they realized Toby could help them passed over Val's handsome Brazilian face.

"I'm not a doc or a PT, so I can only give you my inexpert opinion. If it doesn't work, don't get pissed at me. Gav, I need to keep going. Show him the psoas stretch." Gavin rolled his eyes and knelt on the dirt, moved his left leg so his foot was on the ground and his leg formed a ninety degree angle at the knee. Toby continued. "From there, tighten your abs like you're gonna take a punch, tuck your ass tight, hands on your hips. Keep your back and pelvis as straight as you can. Lean forward until you feel the stretch, hold for twenty seconds and repeat three times. Switch to the other side, rinse and repeat. You have to be gentle with it until the muscle is stretched out and happy again. Once you can do that with your hands over your head and pain free, come back and I'll show you some exercises to strengthen the muscle. You'll be blown away by how much less lower back pain you'll have after you ride and I bet you'll see an increase in your average score within a couple months. If you run into trouble, ask me or Gav to demonstrate again."

"I can do that. Thanks, Toby. I know I give you shit for being yoga boy, but I've seen you help most of our friends get better at what we do and heal faster than we would otherwise. You're a good guy to have as a friend."

"No big. I like using the stuff I've learned, especially when it can help. Just so you know, I watched you ride in Casper, you could use some core work too and not the kind that makes the six-pack abs everyone seems to be chasing. Come see me when the pain's gone and I'll show you that too."

Gavin checked the time. "Come on, Tobe, you gotta finish stretching and get to your warm up."

"Yes, mother." Toby snarked at him.

Turning back to Val, Gavin knew he needed to focus as much as Toby did. His best friend was a bit off kilter from his uncharacteristically mediocre rides that weekend. "If we don't see you later, we'll definitely see you at Ellensburg. I gotta focus on the princess. He needs a good ride."

"Thanks again, Toby. I'll let you get back to your routine. Good luck."

"You're up, Prescott," the chute boss hollered.

Toby climbed up to sit on the rail, stepping firmly on the back of the bull as he moved to straddle the chute. Pomodoro threw his head around in protest, banging his horns on the chute, but settled pretty quickly. Gavin stood at Toby's shoulder waiting for him to hand off the bull rope. They'd done this so many times it was fluid and well-choreographed. It didn't take long for Toby to get set. The last thing Gavin did was to lean in to the side of Toby's helmet and say the same thing he'd said for almost every one of Toby's rides. "Time to dance with the devil. Good luck, cowboy." It was a little silly and pretentious, but somehow it became a tradition back when they were both seventeen and new to the sport. Gavin banged on Toby's helmet as he stood up straight. Toby did his cross-checks one more time before he nodded his head to signal the gate keeper.

The first two seconds were always the worst for Gavin. Once he could get distracted by analyzing Toby's ride, it was easier. Most people would expect Gavin to be afraid of Toby getting hurt, but that wasn't it. At. All. He stressed over two things. One, the bull wouldn't give Toby enough fight for a high score and two, Toby would get bucked off before his eight seconds were up.

Gavin had been doing this long enough to understand Toby was going to get hurt, it was just a question of when and how bad. Injuries happened. Toby made a promise to his Grandma Betty when she gifted him the money to attend their first rodeo camp the summer after they graduated high school. She managed to extract a commitment from him to wear a helmet for every ride as long as he competed to protect his handsome face. Grandma Betty would call tonight after watching the television broadcast of the rodeo and without a doubt she would mention the helmet.

Out of the chute, Pomodoro exploded into a huge leap, kicking and rolling his shoulders hard to the left. Gavin held his breath as Toby countered the move without losing his seat. Sometimes, when Gavin could pull his attention back far enough from studying the details of the ride, Toby's athleticism and grace

stole his breath. On the next buck, the big, red bull started spinning into Toby's hand while still in the air. Toby got shifted out of position a little, but he pulled up on his bull rope and got himself back into his set position on the next jump, which was good because the damn bull started spinning in the opposite direction again while he was still in the air. All Gavin could think was *come on, come on come on, come on...* and he only took a full breath again when he heard the buzzer sound. The bull was a little wily, and Toby was forced to dismount away from his hand before he could scramble to the fence.

Gavin cheered and pumped his fist in the air. It was by far the best bull ride of the entire event. He couldn't help but watch Toby across the arena while they waited for the score to be announced. After a few seconds, Toby pulled off his helmet and looked back to Gavin. His smile was as broad and open as it had ever been. Gavin's heart swelled in his chest, full of love for this man. The announcer reported a score of eight-seven. Toby leapt to the top of the fence and raised his hands in triumph. The crowd was still going nuts, and Gavin was right there with them. As Toby walked out of the arena, Gavin jumped off his perch on the bucking chute and hugged him as tight as he could. There were a couple riders left, but Gavin knew it was enough for Toby to win the day.

They talked about the ride all the way back to the contestants' area. Friends and fans stopped to congratulate him along the way. Toby was always willing to stop and thank the fans for their support. Those diehard fans were the ones who kept him in sponsorship money and they deserved his gratitude. In the locker room, Toby hugged Gavin and put a hand on the back of his neck. Something weird crossed Toby's face and Gavin was once again confused because on any gay man that look would precede a kiss. Toby shuttered his eyes and pulled away before Gavin could wrap his brain around what was happening. Damn. The conversation later was going to be interesting. The butterflies in Gavin's belly morphed into California condors which left him more than a little nauseated.

"Dammit, Gav, put the dishes in the sink. I'll help you do them later. Tell me what's going on." Toby sprawled on the sofa in the RV with a beer in his hand. Gavin stood leaning on the kitchen counter. He could tell Toby was anxious by the tiniest twitch in his left eye.

"I talked to my folks on Wednesday. Mom had spent the night in the hospital after having some minor chest pain. Dad forced her to go to the ER to get it checked out."

“Fuck. Was it a heart attack?”

“No, thank God, but she was diagnosed with the early stages of coronary artery disease. They caught it while she’s still healthy, but she has to take some new meds and make some lifestyle changes.”

“Let me guess... she needs to improve her diet and reduce stress. I can’t imagine they think she needs more exercise. She already works harder than most of the ranchers we know. She runs your folks livestock operation practically by herself.”

“Yeah. That’s the problem. Dad called me back after Mom went to bed and told me, the doctor was clear. We need to find a way to reduce Mom’s workload and make her relax more. His solution is for me to spend more time at home working the farm and taking over the responsibility for the cattle and helping with the orchards, which would leave Mom with managing the sheep and the farm store.”

“What about Luis or Brendan? I thought they were being given more responsibility.”

“Luis is the assistant orchard manager under my dad and Brendan is the farm foreman. They know fruit trees and managing picking crews, not livestock. Dad’s going to hire some help to get them through the end of the year, but he’s hoping I’ll be willing to cut my rodeo time next year.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know yet. I told him I had to talk to you first.”

“Why?”

“We’ve needed to talk about next year for a while now, but you’re not going to like what I have to say.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s time for you to move to the PBR. No one understands why you haven’t already made the jump. People ask me all the time and I just shrug, but we both know you’ve held yourself back to stay with me. You’re my best friend and I love you for it, but it’s time for me to let you go. I’m only holding you back. If I were sure I’d be on the circuit full time next year, I might have waited another year, but shit Toby, I’ve never been as talented as you are. I can be happy as the Columbia River saddle bronc champion from now ’til my body gives out. You won’t be satisfied until you win the PBR world championship. We’ve always

known that.” Gavin tried hard to hide the pain he felt at acknowledging the truth of what he said. It was time to let Toby go.

“Maybe, but you don’t make my decisions for me, Gav. I haven’t moved up because I don’t want to make the switch until I am ready to storm the Built Ford Tough Series. The Touring series isn’t much different than what I’m doing now except there’s more money to win. I decided that doing this with you was worth giving up the extra income and I don’t regret it. We’re both gonna go into the National Championships in the top ten this year and we get to do it together. If we stick this out another year, we’ll both be serious contenders to win it all. Why wouldn’t I want to be able to do that together? We’ve come this far.”

“You don’t have to give up PRCA completely, ya know. Lots of guys do both, even at the BFTS level. They aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“So you’re really gonna do this?”

“It’s not what I want, but what choice do I have? I’m not willing to put my mom’s health at risk so I can chase some rodeo glory. While we’re home this week, I’m going to sit down with them and figure out how it will all work. Mom wants us at dinner tomorrow and I’d like you to be there. My dad is worried you’ll be upset. I don’t care if you are, for an hour you can pretend not to be and that it all works out great since you planned to move to the PBR anyway.”

“The only thing I’m upset about is Angie’s heart. Jesus. You think I’d care about anything else? Shit. She’s been more of a mom to me than my own since my dad’s heart attack. I’d give up bull riding right now if it would keep her healthy.”

“I know. I do. But Dad doesn’t want this to get in the way of you living your dream. Everyone knows my future is on Hazy Hill. I was never going to have a twenty-year pro rodeo career. Riding saddle broncs will always be part of my life, but it isn’t meant to be my whole life. You were born to be a professional bull rider, that’s who you are.”

“But it’s not all I am, Gav. I’m a man with a heart and soul who feels like he’s losing his best friend. I love our life. I love traveling with you, training with you, and doing this together. I don’t want it to end. I don’t know if I can do this without you.”

“Well, it’s time for you to find out, Tobes. Nothing is ending, it’s just changing. I’m still your best friend. You will always have a home at the farm. I

promise. Anyway, I'll still be on the circuit a lot, just not full-time. We'll make it work. I wasn't exactly ready to give all this up either, ya know."

"Nothing changes until after the end of the season, right?" Toby's words sounded so bittersweet in Gavin's ears he almost couldn't listen anymore. "We'll finish this together in Las Vegas, same as when we were seventeen at that tiny rodeo in Upton."

"Yup. Mom, Dad, Piper and Chad are all coming to Vegas for the finals again. They've booked flights and rooms already." His parents came to a few rodeos close to home each season, but Gavin's sister Piper and her husband Chad used seeing him ride as an excuse for a weekend getaway. They usually turned up at four or five rodeos a year all over the country.

"Angie told me when we were home last month. She stopped by the high school to give Mom the VIP tickets and hotel information for Ellensburg. My mom wouldn't commit to going to Vegas at all, never mind if she and Oscar wanted to travel with your family. You know, I've told my mom a dozen times I wanted her to be there to see me ride in the finals. I even said I'd pay for the trip. I know money is an issue for them, but she still wouldn't agree. I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"You're not doing anything wrong. Your mom doesn't make it easy. She never has, even before your dad died. All you can do is keep trying."

"I guess. Sometimes I think I keep you around just for your family."

"They're your family too. You think my mom would call us 'her boys' if you weren't?"

"True enough. Why didn't you tell me about Angie when it happened? We could have gone home for a couple days, even if it meant we'd have to fly instead of taking the truck."

"Mom forbade it. She didn't want us to rush home like she was on her deathbed or something. And I didn't say anything because after I talked with Dad, I needed some time to think some things through."

"What's to think about? Your mom's sick. Your family needs you. You go home."

"It's not that easy. I needed to decide if I was ready to give up saddle bronc altogether or if I could stay on the pro tour at least part time. If it would still be worth it, when I wasn't going to qualify for the championship... I also have some personal stuff I need to work through, if I'm going to be home more."

“What personal stuff? I’m with you almost twenty-four seven... What else are you hiding from me?” Toby couldn’t hide the twitch in his thigh as he stopped himself from bouncing his leg.

This was the moment. Gavin could either come clean about being gay, or stay in the closet for the foreseeable future, if not forever. He didn’t want to be alone anymore. Even if he couldn’t be with Toby, Gavin wanted to find a love like his parents had. Ending all of the pain and shame he’d fought with for so long, was the only way forward. If it meant he lost Toby, his home and his family, Gavin could still make a life as a saddle bronc rider until he could afford to buy his own ranch somewhere. The irony of hearing Toby in his head telling him to “cowboy up, asshole” wasn’t lost on him.

Gavin dropped his head to his chest and took a few deep breaths as he tried to stop his hands from shaking. After a long silent pause, he raised his head and looked Toby square in the eyes. “I’m gay, Toby.”

As much as he’d wrestled with how this conversation would go, there was one response Gavin hadn’t considered. Toby closed his eyes and sighed, “I know.”

“You know. How long have you known?” Gavin was genuinely perplexed.

“About a year and a half.”

“How?”

“You told me.”

“I did not.”

“You did, but you were pretty high on pain meds at the time.”

“My wreck in Austin...” At Rodeo Austin last year, Major Tom threw him into a fence before kicking him as he ran off. His injuries included a severe concussion, a few broken ribs and a lacerated liver. After surgery and a few days in the hospital, Gavin returned to the circuit ten weeks later. “I don’t remember much from the ICU. What did I say?”

“It was maybe five in the morning. I’d been sitting with you all night. Your folks weren’t flying in ’til later in the day. Val, Matt, and Pietro were around but they’d wandered off for some food. You almost died, Gavin. You woke up, saw me sitting by your bed and holding your hand. I saw you close your eyes and thought you’d drifted off again, but you started mumbling that I wouldn’t even be there if I knew you were gay. I was stunned. I mean I’d wondered a few times, but...”

Okay. Gavin could cope with this. "You wondered?" Okay, that qualifies as a complete sentence, right?

"Well, yeah. I haven't seen you date anyone since college and you don't seem interested in most of the women who are always sniffing around, so I wondered... Wait. Do you have a secret boyfriend? Is that why you're telling me now?"

"No, no boyfriend since college. I'm just sick of being lonely and dishonest."

"At school? Really? We shared a room for four years. How did I not know?"

"I was careful and you weren't looking. Remember Wes Lunsford... We dated for almost half of sophomore year."

"Wes hated me."

"That's part of why we broke up. Do you hate me?" Gavin recoiled at sounding like an insecure little boy.

"No, Gav, no... I could never hate you. How long have you been worried about that?"

"Since I figured out I was gay, September twenty-sixth, two thousand and two in the boys' locker room at the high school after soccer practice. One of the guys walked out of the shower room naked with a towel around his waist... a single glance and any doubt I had about being gay disappeared." Gavin didn't mention the guy was Toby.

"Wait... Two thousand two... We were fourteen. What about Jenna?"

Gavin figured Toby would get around to asking about Jenna. "High school was hard for me. I desperately wanted to be normal. Junior year I decided I would force myself straight. Jenna was a good Christian girl and took her abstinence pledge seriously. We didn't have sex until we were freshmen at Wazzu. It was the beginning of the end for us. She started talking about getting married and having kids like it was a foregone conclusion. I couldn't lead her on anymore. She deserved better than a husband who fantasized about Chris Hemsworth to get it up."

Toby finished his beer and stood up to grab another out of the fridge. When he turned around, he raised his left eyebrow. "Chris Hemsworth? Awright." Toby chuckled wickedly as he settled back on the sofa and some of the tension

evaporated from between them. "It doesn't matter to me that you're gay, Gav. But I am kinda pissed you didn't tell me. After Austin, I could see the barely hidden pain on your face every time you left a party to go home alone. You should have told me. I would never out you. Did you think I would?"

"I couldn't be sure how you'd react, Toby. I couldn't bear losing my best friend. Remember what happened to Josh Kitchens? He's the guy who got caught kissing one of the male concession workers behind the stock barn at Vernon Creek. People we know bullied him and beat him over and over until he dropped out of rodeo. He was nineteen. I heard from Brady Benning that when his parents found out, they kicked him out of the house and Josh committed suicide a few months later. I promised myself I was never going to be that guy."

"You didn't have to carry this alone."

Gavin whispered, "I couldn't risk losing you. I couldn't do it."

Toby burst off the sofa and moved into Gavin's space. "You'll never lose me. Friends to the end. Isn't that what we promised each other in middle school?" He reached out and hugged Gavin tightly. "It's okay, dude. It's gonna be okay."

It only took a few seconds for Gavin to relax into the hug. His love for Toby filled him as he accepted the comforting gesture. In a moment of terror, Gavin stepped back, putting a couple inches of distance between them. "What else did I say that night in the hospital?" Gavin sensed more than felt Toby's entire body freeze in response to his question. "I know there's more."

Toby stepped back further and froze. "Don't make me say it. Gav. I've told you enough."

"Finish it." Gavin's glare was angry enough to take the fight out of Toby.

"Please, Gav... Let it go. You were out of your mind." Toby crossed his arms, standing less than an arm's length from Gavin. Something must have shifted in Toby's head because he seemed to deflate as his breath left him. "Fine. You told me none of it mattered anyway because you would always love me, even if I could never love you back."

"Shit, shit, shit..." Gavin stammered. He felt like he was suspended in that moment of free fall between being thrown by a bronc and his body slamming into some immovable object, usually the arena floor.

"Did you mean it? Do you love me?" Toby's expression was completely unreadable.

In a breathy, barely audible voice, Gavin whispered, "Yes." It was only then that he felt a tear slip down his cheek. Gavin didn't dare look at Toby again. He was too afraid of what he might see. The next thing Gavin knew Toby held his face gently in his hands, brushing the tear away with his thumb. Startled into paralysis, Gavin felt Toby guide his face closer and brush his lips with a tentative kiss. Toby pulled back a fraction of an inch before kissing Gavin again. When he pulled back again, Toby looked deeply into Gavin's eyes before unmooring himself and launching into a full-scale assault of a kiss.

As the kiss deepened, hope filled Gavin while he prayed the kiss was more than just an experiment. It took him a nanosecond to return the kiss with an equal amount of passion, broadcasting his love for Toby in each movement. Gavin knew this might be his only opportunity to show Toby how he felt. Words couldn't fully express the depth and breadth of his feelings and all he had was this one kiss.

Eventually, reality began to intrude once again, and Gavin pulled back from the kiss. He rested his forehead on Toby's while they each caught their breath. Gavin separated them so he could see Toby's eyes. He searched Toby's handsome face looking for some handhold to grasp what the kiss meant. Was it pity? Was it goodbye? Was it an experiment? Was it real? Toby's expression again gave nothing away. Gavin didn't know where the boldness came from, but he needed to know what the hell was going on. "Tell me. Was I wrong? Could you someday love me back?"

"I don't know." It was Toby's turn to whisper.

"That's not a no. Do you want to find out?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? You son of a bitch! You've had a year and a half to answer the question and you have nothing to give me. Shit, Toby. Man up and tell me what you want. I've spent years shredding my own heart in love with someone I thought would never want me back. Now you kiss me and you don't know what it means. Jesus. Fuck, Toby. Can't you see how cruel that is? Ya know what... Don't answer. I can't have this conversation right now. I'm going out and you need to pull your head out of your ass. I need some space. Please, don't follow me."

"Gav... let me explain..." Toby's anguish was finally plain, but right then Gavin couldn't care.

“Not now. Don’t wait up.” Gavin grabbed his keys and his hat as he walked out of the RV into the over-warm dusk.

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Chapter 2

The sound of the screen door slapping shut was followed closely by the rumble of the truck driving off towards town. Toby was still standing in the middle of the RV with kiss-swollen lips and a hard dick. Not only had Gavin left without letting him explain, he'd taken Toby's truck leaving him stranded at the arena. It would be easier to deal with all this if he were angry with Gavin, but he wasn't. He was just confused.

Toby understood he was to some degree bisexual, but he'd never had any inclination to act on it. Until today. While he'd known since puberty that he was somehow different from his friends, it wasn't until after high school that he realized what he felt was attraction to some of the other boys as well as the girls. Even so, he certainly didn't think about Gavin that way, not then.

Truly accepting that he was sometimes attracted to men didn't happen until the end of their first year on the rodeo circuit. It had taken a long time to earn some respect on the tour. Eventually, the other cowboys realized that they were both talented and tough enough to survive in their brutal sport. As a gesture of friendship, Gavin and Toby were invited to have a few beers with some of the competitors, most of whom were in the top twenty of whatever discipline they competed in. At the bar, Toby saw Dean Barlow, one of his rodeo idols, dancing with one of the many buckle bunnies wearing more cleavage than shirt, but she wasn't what Toby noticed. He was absolutely mesmerized by the muscles in Dean's back highlighted by his tight T-shirt, and the more Dean danced, the more Toby was spellbound by Dean's tight little cowboy butt moving with the music. That had never happened before. Toby could admit he'd noticed a couple of the men on the circuit were hotter than the others, but he'd never found himself hard and wanting by the sight of another man. Gavin broke the spell by suggesting Toby ask the girl to dance, if he was so taken with her. Toby thanked a god he wasn't sure he believed in that no one noticed who had actually caused his hard-on. In an act of pure rebellion, Toby did ask the girl to dance and proceeded to spend the rest of a sweaty night in her hotel room.

It took him a long time to get over his crush on Dean, but once he did, he discovered Dean wasn't the only guy who could tickle Toby's pickle. Not that it mattered much, Toby wasn't faking his attraction to the girls he hooked up

with and not once did he have any inclination to act on his occasional attraction to a guy. That was a complication he didn't need.

Last March, everything changed. Gavin had been on a killer run of high scores all week in Austin. He had placed well in the money every single day. Going into the short-go, Gavin was in the lead and if he stuck his horse, he'd win the event. He'd drawn Major Tom, a big paint with a habit of throwing riders straight over his head, but Gavin rode him for a good score the year before so Toby wasn't worried. Six seconds into a highlight reel of a ride, the bronc threw Gavin head first into the fence before running over him as he ran out of the arena. Toby leaped over the fence and sprinted toward Gavin's unconscious body with the sports medicine team. Gavin remained unconscious for a couple minutes while he was being strapped to the backboard. Once they took him into the medical room, Toby was forced to wait in the hallway until they had assessed his injuries. Doc Weiland came into the hallway looking grave. A year and a half later and Toby could still hear Doc's voice telling him it was bad, really bad. Severe concussion, possible internal bleeding and multiple rib fractures, but, mercifully, there didn't appear to be any paralysis or head trauma. Val, who had apparently followed them to the med room, kept a grounding hand on Toby's back as the doctor spoke to him. Pietro and Matt showed up a few minutes later with a plan. Their friends quickly took charge, knowing Toby wasn't in any mind to deal with the details. Pietro went to collect their gear and notify the chute boss Toby wouldn't be riding. Matt ran to get his truck and Val stuck to Toby like they were glued together.

As they were unloading the ambulance at the emergency room, Gavin started coughing up blood and even Toby knew that was a bad sign. The trauma team at University Medical Center sped Gavin off for an abdominal ultrasound on arrival at the hospital, and Gavin was in emergency surgery shortly thereafter. Once he went into surgery, the wait became a nightmare. After competition ended, Doc Weiland came with a copy of Gavin's records including his living will and medical power of attorney which ensured Toby could make decisions regarding Gavin's care if he was unable to do so for himself. Because their families rarely traveled with them, Toby and Gavin had chosen to give each other those responsibilities instead of leaving it to their parents. Never did Toby believe he would ever have to use them, until that horrible night. Seeing those documents was what finally broke Toby. The realization he could lose his best friend was overwhelming. But his friends

were amazing. They anticipated every need and organized themselves so Toby was never alone while they waited. Together they decided not to call Gav's parents until he was out of surgery. It was already late and they didn't have much to report yet.

A few hours later, the surgeon came out looking for Gavin's family. "Your friend is one lucky SOB. The concussion is relatively severe, but without a skull fracture, it should eventually repair itself. Same with the fractures to his ribs. That's all good news, but he's not out of the woods. He lacerated his liver and has lost a lot of blood. We've already given him six units with more on the way. Keep in mind, the human body only has about ten units of blood total. The repair to the liver went well and we stopped most of the bleeding. Now he just needs to heal. Gavin's young and in phenomenal physical shape which is in his favor, but even so, he still has a significant risk of complications. He's going to be in recovery for a few more hours and then in the ICU for a few days to keep a close watch on him. If all goes well, and I have no reason to believe it won't, he should be able to go home in about a week. You can see him once he makes it over to the ICU in a couple hours."

Toby thanked the surgeon for his hard work and steeled himself to make the most difficult call he would ever make in his life. He had to wake up Keith and Angie, Gavin's parents, at nearly three in the morning to tell them their son was hurt badly enough they needed to fly to Austin as soon as possible. The call went as expected and by the time they hung up, Angie was on her laptop booking flights. Toby looked forward to Keith and Angie's arrival. They were always a calming presence for Toby, besides it was hard to stay upset for long with earth mother Angie around.

Both he and Gavin had spent a night or two in a hospital bed here and there... Toby's shoulder, Gav's knee, a couple concussions and more, but this was the first time an injury had proven to be life threatening. All this time, Toby had assumed it would be him with the serious injury. In theory, riding bulls and riding saddle broncs should be pretty comparable in terms of the injury rates, but that didn't account for the nature of the beasts they rode. Broncs just want you off their back, literally and figuratively. They throw you and run. Bulls want the rider off too, but more than that, they want the rider dead so he won't come back and bother them ever again. Even as a kid, Toby was glad Gavin had settled in as a saddle bronc rider because while it was technically the most difficult of the three roughstock events, it was also marginally the safest. And while Toby rarely thought about his own safety, he

did worry about Gavin's. After that night, Toby couldn't watch Gavin ride without getting a little sick to his stomach.

Because Toby had Gavin's medical power of attorney, he was allowed to stay with Gavin the whole time he was in ICU. Val, Pietro, and Matt cycled through one at a time keeping Toby company as the nurses would allow, but that left Toby alone with Gavin a lot in the hours which followed. Toby pulled the guest chair up as close as he could to the side of the bed, so he could hold Gavin's hand and rest his head on the side rail of the hospital bed. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, Gavin struggled to open his eyes and look around the room as best he could. He looked right at Toby before grimacing and closing his eyes. Toby was about to hit the button on Gavin's morphine pump when Gavin started muttering.

"Can't be real..."

"Gav, what can't be real?"

"You. You're not real. Just a dream. Toby would never cry over me..."

"It's okay, Gav. It's Toby. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Wouldn't be here if you knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I'm gay."

The mumbled statement was enough to send Toby spinning into what had to be the Twilight Zone. There was no way Gavin was gay. He would have known or seen something, but all he'd ever had were a few random thoughts over the last few years, but not enough for him to believe it was true.

"You're my best friend, Gav and that won't change no matter who you want in your bed."

Gavin tried to shift a little in the bed and grimaced again and Toby hit the button to give Gavin more pain killer. Gavin slurred now. "Doesn't matter anyway. I'll always love you, Toby, even if you can't love me back." With that, Gavin was gone again for a few hours.

By the time Gavin's parents arrived, he was a lot more coherent and didn't seem to remember the conversation or his revelations. Toby kept quiet, wanting time to think about what Gavin had said and at some point he started pretending he didn't remember the conversation either. Gavin would come out when he

was ready. Toby didn't want to make waves before then no matter how hurt he was that Gavin would keep such a huge secret from him.

Toby scrubbed his face with his big bear paws trying to free himself from the memory and make sense of what had just happened between them. He kissed a man. He kissed Gavin and it was amazing. If there were any lingering doubts about Toby's bisexuality, they were expunged when his skin caught fire and his dick turned to steel in response to the kiss. But could he give Gavin the love he wanted and frankly deserved? Toby couldn't say. This was so new, so overwhelming. Sex would be easy, but Gavin couldn't be a fuck buddy or a trick. With Gavin, it had to be all or nothing. He needed to talk to someone about all this. Normally, he talked to Gavin about everything, well everything except his sexuality. The walls of the RV were starting to close in on him, he needed to get out of there for a while. Sitting around waiting for Gavin to come home was not going to be productive. Toby grabbed his hat and ambled over to the stock barns.

Communing with the animals always seemed to settle him down. The saddle broncs were a favorite, especially the big draft crosses. They might be crazy psychopaths when you strapped a saddle to their back, but a lot of them were sweet and affectionate the rest of the time. Toby took some time to chat with the stock contractors and their assistants while he got to visit with the horses. After a while, the staff in the barn just let him be, they'd all seen him there before and understood his affection for the animals.

"Hey, yoga boy!" Val called from the end of the row with a laugh.

Toby couldn't help but smile. Val was a good friend, who'd had his back on the darkest night of his life. "Hi, Val. How's it hangin'?"

"Limp and to the left. You?" Val's wicked smile lit his face.

"Same. Speaking of which, how's the groin pull?"

"Better. I did the psoas stretch twice already and it seems to be helping. It certainly did more than anything the sports medicine people showed me. I was gonna check my horses and then go have a beer at the rig. Wanna join me?"

"Sure. I could use the company."

"Yeah. I saw Gavin tear out of here a little bit ago. Lovers' quarrel?"

Blanching at the implication, Toby rolled his eyes. Val couldn't possibly know what happened. "Something like that."

"You can talk to me, ya know. I'd never say anything, not even to Gavin."

"I know. I think I'm still too confused to talk about it yet."

"Whatever. Come on. I don't think you've met my new horse yet. Dizzy's along for the ride this time, getting used to the traveling. I'm hoping to start him in competition next season." Val started walking towards the area where his horses were stabled.

"How's he coping with the chaos?" Toby followed Val down the aisle.

"Okay, for the most part. He's getting used to all the loading and unloading, but he can be a bit of an ass when he gets tired of it. He's a goof, but he's probably the best roping prospect I've had in a while." Val couldn't help but smile as the big dun gelding nuzzled Toby's neck looking for pets. "And he's a cuddler."

Toby laughed as he gave Dizzy the attention he wanted. "Matt and Pietro are driving the horses to Ellensburg, while you're in Sacramento?"

"Yeah. They're the only people I trust to care for the horses my way. Matty and I have been together for four years, he knows the routine by now."

Did Val just out himself? Toby grabbed Valentin's elbow and pulled him further away from the activity in the barn. "Together or together-together?"

"Together as in lovers, life partners, significant others... Why do you look so shocked?"

"You're gay..." Toby was beyond shocked, closer to gobsmacked.

"As a daffodil... We thought you knew. Is it going to be a problem?" Val was starting to get a little defensive.

"No. God, no. I've never even heard a rumor about you or Matt for that matter." Eyes squinched shut, Toby worked to assimilate this new information.

"Really? Then you're not listening. We're discreet, but it's kind of an open secret."

"Gossip isn't my thing, but... Wow. How am I so oblivious? Shit. I need that beer more than I did before."

"Sure. Let's go back to our rig. Matt and Pietro went to Miss Kitty's with the guys, but they should be back in a couple hours. I need to figure out what to pack for this sponsor thing tomorrow." Val and Toby started walking back toward the RV lot.

“Business cowboy... white button-down, sport coat, jeans, boots, hat. And don't forget to have your boots polished at the airport. The four-one-one comes straight from Danielle, the image consultant who works with my agent. Companies want you to look like a cowboy, but not a hick... and don't forget to use your sir and ma'am manners. Sponsors eat that shit up.”

“Bull riders live in a completely different world. The rest of us are like the red-headed stepchildren of rodeo...”

“Gavin says the same. I wouldn't worry about the meeting. Everyone knows you're in the mix for the all-around championship. I hope you like almond milk...” Toby chuckled. He'd met with the almond grower a few weeks ago.

“You already had a meeting, eh?”

“On the way back from New Mexico. They're talking to people for another month or so. They want to announce in Vegas.”

“How do you know that stuff?”

“My agent gets paid to keep me up to date on potential sponsors. I'm pretty easy as a client but he's going to earn his keep this winter.”

“You're jumping to the PBR finally.” It wasn't a question.

“I'm not giving up PRCA completely, but yeah.”

“What's Gavin gonna do?”

“Don't know yet. He's got some family stuff going on and he's probably going to be competing part-time next year. The details are still up in the air.” Toby sighed hard. “This all happened today.”

“You heard Matt and I bought a horse ranch outside Missoula, about five hours from you guys. It's a little rough around the edges, but the bones are good. If I win the all-around or tie-down in Vegas, I'm gonna semi-retire next year. I'm thirty-one and don't want to be one of those broken-down cowboys who can't run his own ranch after I retire. Matt says he wants to keep riding, but it's going to be harder when I'm waiting for him at home. We're not any more settled than you are.”

“What about Pietro?”

“P's like a brother to me, but he's a rodeo lifer. He'll ride bulls until he can't make a living at it anymore. We offered him an equal share in the ranch, but he's not interested. He wants to go back to Mato Grosso someday and work the family cattle ranch with his brother. He'll marry some good Catholic girl his

mother picks out for him and live a miserable double life until he dies young of debilitating melancholy. That's the reality of being a gay Brazilian cowboy who isn't willing to give up his family. You have to remember, gay men are still murdered at a rate of almost one a day in Brazil even if they have some of the most liberal gay rights laws in Latin America."

"You managed to escape."

"I was lucky. My grandparents moved to Connecticut from São Paulo when I was twelve. I was sent to live with them and go to private school nearby. I have my U.S. citizenship now and no interest in going back. I love Matty and I want to build a life with him here. Besides, my parents all but disowned me after I came out to them when they came for my high school graduation and were introduced to my very white, very blond boyfriend."

"What happened to the boyfriend?" A wry smile crossed Toby's face.

"At the end of the summer, I left for Montana State and Ryan went off to Columbia. We saw each other on breaks for a while but... you know how it goes."

Toby nodded and they lapsed into a long silence while they finished their beer. With a sigh, Toby stared at Valentín for a moment. He needed to talk to someone, who wasn't Gavin, about being bi and doing right by Gavin. He didn't have enough information on his own. He wasn't even sure what the questions were. "Val, I need you to give me your word what I'm about to tell you won't go any further than you and me. I get that you'll tell Matt the bones of it, but Gavin doesn't even know..."

"Relax, Toby. I outed my family to you. You can trust me to keep your secrets."

"I don't know where to start... I kissed Gavin after he came out to me tonight. But it's more complicated..." Toby told Val the whole story of Gavin's drug-induced confessions in Austin and the conversation before Gavin took off.

Toby did not expect Val to laugh. "I am surprised. When you guys first came on the big circuit, we were sure you two were together. You two are this little self-contained unit that doesn't get close to anyone else on the tour. You're fun, friendly and helpful, but Gavin is the only person male or female, who holds your attention for long. Matty, P, and I are probably the closest, but you guys are so busy trying to hide your secrets from the world, you can't see what's right in front of you. It makes more sense now.

“Anyway, it didn’t take long for us to notice you were picking up girls right in front of Gavin and therefore probably not together. Even if Pietro hadn’t seen Gavin in a gay club in Reno, we knew he was gay just from the way he looks at you when he thinks no one will notice. Once he was back to competing after his wreck in Austin, you started looking at him the same way. His confession opened your eyes to a lot of things you never saw in your best friend before, eh?”

“Gavin was in a gay bar?”

“What? You thought he’s been celibate all this time?”

“No, at first I thought he’d been picking up girls occasionally once I left for the night, but after Austin I realized I hadn’t seen him with a woman in a really long time. He mentioned hooking up a few times, but I guess he went out to some gay club on his own when I wasn’t paying attention.”

“What’s the real problem, Toby? He loves you, you seem to feel something for him. Why not see where it goes?”

“I don’t want to have my whole rodeo career derailed by being something other than straight. And Gavin deserves to have someone who can love him completely without reservations. I don’t know if that can be me.”

“I’m going to ask some questions to clarify things for both of us. In your heart of hearts, how do you define your sexuality?”

“I’m bisexual. I know that. I lean more towards women than men I think. But I’ve never done more than look at a guy before tonight, so I’m not absolutely sure.” The truth was easier to voice than Toby thought it would be.

“How do you feel about Gavin?”

“He’s my best friend and the most important person in my life. And after the kiss, it’s obvious I’m attracted to him too. Is that enough to be love? Is it enough to never have sex with another woman? What if I sleep with Gavin and discover sex with a man is nice, but I genuinely prefer women? This is where I get myself all twisted.”

“Hold on. Do me a favor and imagine... after a few drinks with the guys tonight, Pietro finally makes a move on Gavin. One thing leads to another and the next thing you know they are sitting in the truck making out... kissing, touching, the whole enchilada. It’s not outside the realm of possibility, they’re both single, gay and a relationship between them wouldn’t be quite so complicated. With you jumping to PBR, they could travel together without

anyone on the circuit being any the wiser." Val gave Toby a second to consider the scenario. "Now tell me how that makes you feel."

Rage started bubbling up in Toby's chest with a vehemence he didn't expect and it hurt. Gavin was his. End of discussion. Even as kids, Toby hated having to share Gavin with anyone even at recess. It took Toby a second to flip it around in his head and realize how much pain he'd caused Gavin every time he slept with some girl who didn't mean anything to him. "Awright. Point taken. I still can't be sure it's enough."

"There are no guarantees in life, Toby. The best you can do is be completely honest and find a way to talk about what you're feeling. If you can't do that you will be doomed from the start, no matter how much you care about one another."

"Well, we have three hours in the truck tomorrow where he can't run away from me. That's a start."

"Give him a break, Toby. None of this is easy. He finally comes out to you and admits he's in love with you. You kiss him but you can't even tell him if he even has a chance to be with you. Gavin is as hurt and overwhelmed as you are."

"It's not my fault his feelings got hurt. If he'd just listened to me, I could have made him understand where I was coming from. We needed to talk things out. I wasn't rejecting him or anything like it, but we can't fall into bed blindly either. It could ruin everything."

"True enough. You should talk to Matty sometime. He's mostly gay, but not completely. I have no idea what it's like to be ambidextrous. You guys should come out and see the new ranch for a few days before finals. We can talk about how to keep your relationship off the radar and keep yourselves sane. It's actually good that there have been rumors about you and Gavin for so long. It's old news, even if it wasn't true before now."

"You sound so sure we're gonna do this."

"I am. He loves you, you love him. You always have, even if you are too afraid to admit it. The only question is whether you'll let your fears overwhelm your love for one another. My guess is the bull rider in you won't let anything get in the way of what you want."

"I'm glad someone has faith in me." Toby finished his beer and was contemplating going back to their RV for some much needed sleep when Val's phone rang.

“Sorry. It’s Matty. Hold on...” Val turned his attention to his phone. “Hey. What? No... I don’t have to, he’s sitting here with me... Okay. We’ll be there in ten... Love you. Bye.” Val hung up and turned back to Toby. “Gavin turned up at Miss Kitty’s and proceeded to get very drunk, very, very quickly. Matty and Pietro are a little too buzzed to drive your truck back. Boone was supposed to be their designated driver, but there are now more drunk cowboys than will fit in Boone’s truck. We need to go pick them up. You have your keys?”

“Yeah. Let’s go. Gavin gets mouthy when he’s been drinking. Shit. I hope he doesn’t accidentally out himself or say anything else he’ll regret tomorrow.”

“Matty and P are watching out for him. They’ll keep him out of trouble.”

“I hope so. Today’s been hard enough on him as it is. Come on. The sooner we get them home, the sooner they sober up.”

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Chapter 3

Bang... BANG... “Gavin! Get up. It’s time to go,” Toby called from outside the RV.

Gavin rolled over to check the time on his phone, but it wasn’t in the charger where it belonged. He grumbled to himself as he sat up on the side of the bed and took inventory. Shit. His head hurt and his stomach was grumbling along with him. “Hold on, dude. I’m moving... sort of,” he yelled back.

Standing was more of an adventure than Gavin was prepared for, but nevertheless he made his way into the small bathroom to pee and contemplate puking up any remnants of the Jack left in his stomach. With some effort, Gavin did his business, washed his face, and completely dismissed the idea of shaving. Back in the bedroom, he realized he must have showered and put on sweats and a tank sometime after returning to the RV last night, but he didn’t remember any of it. In fact, he didn’t remember anything after Toby told him to “get the fuck in the truck” outside Miss Kitty’s. Rummaging around his few remaining clean clothes, Gavin threw on a Rimrock Denim logo T-shirt and jeans. As he walked into the main room of the RV looking for his boots, Toby stepped through the door.

“Good morning, Rip Van Winkle. There’s aspirin, coffee and a huckleberry bagel with cinnamon cream cheese on the table for you. Eat now.” Toby moved around locking things down and getting ready to pull the slide-outs in. He stopped and turned back to the dinette where Gavin was nibbling on his bagel. “I put two melon Gatorades and a few dark chocolate-peanut butter protein bars in the truck for later. I got gas and hitched the truck. And I called Angie and told her we would be late for lunch.”

“You’ve been busy. What time is it anyway?” Gavin tried desperately to pretend there was nothing weird between them. He was only marginally successful.

“About nine thirty. Sorry I didn’t wake you up sooner, but I went to help Matt and Pietro load Val’s horses. The new gelding was being a twit and it took longer than I thought. They promised to save us a spot next to them in the RV lot in Ellensburg, so we don’t end up getting stuck near the busy street again.” Toby stopped talking, seemingly to take a breath.

“You’re babbling, Tobes. We’re okay. We haven’t done anything irrevocable. We’ll talk and everything will go back to normal.”

"Things haven't been normal since your wreck. I don't think there's anything we can say that will get that back, but we can figure out what we want a new normal to look like."

"You sound very Zen this morning." Gavin cocked his head like a curious puppy.

"I'm always pretty Zen, but I had a good talk with Val last night. He helped me see things a lot more clearly."

"You outed me to Val?" Gavin readied himself for a fight but didn't want to go ballistic unless he actually had a reason.

"Only after he outed himself, Matt and Pietro. He knew anyway. No damage done. Did you know Val and Matt have been together for four years without anyone spilling the beans? I don't think he's gonna out us to anyone."

"I always wondered about Matt, but Val and Pietro threw me. I think it's the Brazilian thing, they flirt with everyone, male or female. Wait. What do you mean out us?" Gavin's brain could come online any time now.

"Us, as in you and me. You're gay and I'm definitely not straight, bi probably, but that's more of a discussion than we're having now. You'd know if you'd stuck around and let me explain last night. It's water under the bridge at this point. Eat up. We need to hustle. Maria Elena is making brisket sandwiches and broccoli salad for lunch. I don't want to miss it." Toby didn't give him a chance to respond and dashed off to continue getting them ready to pull out.

Coffee and aspirin dealt with Gavin's headache and the bagel disappeared quickly thereafter, settling his stomach. Double checking the RV was buttoned up only took a minute before Gavin went ahead and pulled in the sliders and locked them down. Within about twenty minutes, they were in the truck and pulling on to I-90 headed home. Toby drove the first leg, and would probably drive the whole trip, since it was only a little over three hours home.

Gavin attempted to feign sleep, but Toby knew better. "Awright... Ready to talk now? You didn't give me a chance last night before you ran off and drank yourself stupid."

"Fine. Talk."

"Don't make this harder than it has to be, Gav. I don't deserve that. I was trying to be honest with you and you threw it in my face. I would have had this conversation last night, but in the end it was probably better we cooled off before things went any further south."

"I'm sorry. I didn't see what else there was to say right then, but I should have stayed and listened anyway."

"Until you came out after your wreck in Austin, I had no idea you were gay. Yeah, I wondered a couple times, but never seriously. I was fighting my own sexuality enough I didn't have the brain space to consider anyone else's. I like women. I like their soft smooth skin and their sweet scent. And I genuinely enjoy having sex with them." Gavin saw Toby register his twitching in his seat. "Hold on before you get all spun up. It wasn't until we were in college that I realized most boys don't notice some guys are sexier than others and I always did. I knew Dean Barlow was fucking hot and in exactly the same way I knew Angelina Jolie was too. Those feelings confused me until that night in New Mexico when I finally met Dean in person. We were standing at the bar and you thought my hard-on was for the girl Dean was dancing with, but it wasn't. I was thrown so off kilter by having a hard-on for a guy, I slept with that girl just to prove I still liked women and I sort of binged on girls for a while after that night. Do you remember?"

"I remember. Keep talking."

"Once the barn door was flung open by my attraction to Dean, I found myself attracted to men more and more. Not as much as women, but often enough to worry me. I couldn't let myself be anything but straight so I buried it and stuck exclusively with women. Before you ask... No, I never thought of you that way back then. You were my best friend, my brother, and even if I had noticed, I would have stuffed it into the deepest, darkest part of my mind I could find. No good could come from that sort of thinking. I thought you were straight as a board anyway."

"Fast forward to your wreck. Suddenly being attracted to you wasn't as taboo as it was before and I started seeing you differently. I began noticing your lips or the slope of your ass, things I never considered before. At first, I waited for you to talk to me once you were out of the hospital and not high on morphine, but you never did. It took me a while to realize you didn't remember the conversation at all, so I took it as a sign and pretended I didn't remember either. It was easier for both of us."

"But it wasn't easier for me. How do you think it felt for me to see you hook up with some bimbo you'd never see again when I genuinely love you? Especially when I was only getting laid about twice a year."

"Val told me Pietro saw you at a gay bar in Reno a while back, but he made sure you didn't know he was there. If you weren't ready to come out, he wasn't going to force you."

“Val was a fount of information. Jesus.”

“For what it’s worth, once I saw how much it hurt you when I hooked up—I pretty much stopped a few months after Austin. I mean I still get laid occasionally, but not when you’re around. I couldn’t when I knew how you felt.”

“That’s something, I guess.” Gavin appreciated the consideration, but in the face of everything else, it was a small thing.

“It’s not like you were celibate.” Toby almost sounded jealous.

“Really, Toby? You’re gonna go there? I get laid at most three times a year... Austin, Reno and Denver. And only if I could get away without you knowing I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. I’d dance for a bit and then cruise for a one night stand. I hate it, but I still cling to those nights like a life raft ’cause they keep me sane enough to make it through another few months. Even if I have to stay locked in the rodeo closet, I can come out to my family and stop listening to Mom and Piper talk up every attractive, single woman they meet because they think I need to settle down. And maybe... maybe I can find a nice guy and finally have a real relationship with someone who loves me.”

“What happened to wanting to be with me?”

“Yeah, that’s never gonna happen. Even if you loved me the way I want, you will never be with me for real. You’ll say the right things and probably mean them, but I would always be your dirty little secret. You said yourself, you don’t want to be anything but straight. There’s nothing stopping you from finding a pretty wife, who makes you laugh, and raising a house full of cute little blond babies. I want you to be happy, Tobes, and I have to accept that will never be with me.”

“You have completely missed the point. Let me highlight a couple facts for you... One, I’m not straight which should have been perfectly clear after I kissed you senseless last night. Two, if I wanted a pretty wife and a minivan full of kids, I could have had that fifty times over by now. Somehow it has escaped your notice that no matter who I was with or how much I liked them, I always came home to you. How many times have you woken up in the morning and not found me asleep in my bed, either on the road or at home? The answer is none. Not once in four years have I spent an entire night with one of my hook-ups. You’re the person I plan my day and my entire future around, no one else. This morning, Matt said we have this epic bond between us. If he didn’t know better, he’d think we’ve been married this whole time without ever realizing it.”

“Just without sex.” Gavin laughed.

“Without sex.” Toby shifted around in his seat before smiling just crooked enough for Gavin to know that it was meant for him. “But maybe we could work on that.”

Gavin grinned as he cocked his head to the side and looked at Toby through the corner of his eye. “Maybe.”

They were pretty quiet for the next hour or so, talking a little about the rodeo and planning the few days they'd be on the farm this week. About halfway through the trip, Toby pulled the truck and fifth-wheel into a rest area so they could stretch their legs and use the facilities. Gavin, who had been drinking a lot of Gatorade to combat his hangover, went directly into the restrooms. Routine told Gavin that Toby would take a minute to stretch before ambling into the restroom.

After taking care of business, Gavin was washing his hands when Toby entered the empty men's room. Their eyes met in the mirror and the sexual heat instantly spiraled upwards. His heart tattooing frantically in his chest, Gavin stood there waiting. Both men took a moment to feel their way through their conflicting emotions.

Without much warning, Toby manhandled Gavin into the handicap stall. Gavin was already panting with need by the time he let himself be pushed up against the wall. Once again, Toby kissed him hard and fast, with the only hint of gentleness in his hands, which roamed Gavin's stomach and sides. They kissed until a need to breathe overrode their lust. Gavin could see the questions floating around Toby like clouds. “It's okay, Tobes. Kiss me. Take what you need.”

Toby stepped slightly to the side and pushed his hard cock against Gavin's upper thigh before kissing him again. This was one of the rare occasions Gavin noticed the difference in their height. Pulling back, Toby whispered directly into his ear. “Not taking anything this time. This is for you.” Grabbing the front hem of Gavin's T-shirt, Toby pulled up the front and hooked it behind Gavin's neck exposing his chest and abs. Toby groaned as he kissed his way across Gavin's pecs and worried the closer nipple with his teeth and tongue. Gavin's knees nearly buckled as the pleasure washed over him. It was enough to motivate Gavin to pull Toby up for a kiss of his own.

One of Toby's hands wandered over his lower back and into the waistband of his jeans while the other explored the hard ridges of Gavin's abs. Gavin

could tell Toby was marveling at how different a male body felt under his hands. Soft, smooth lips found their way to his neck and the hot spot below Gavin's ear. Shudders racked Gavin as he turned his head to capture Toby in another long kiss. This time, Toby put his hand on the fly of Gavin's jeans and moved along the hard length aching for more attention. When Toby looked up into his eyes silently asking for permission to open his zipper, Gavin nodded slightly before lolling his head back onto the tile. Toby returned his attention to nibbling at Gavin's collarbone while undoing Gavin's jeans and shoving his pants and underwear down, freeing Gavin's cock and balls. With shaking hands, Toby stroked the skin around Gavin's groin without approaching his dick.

It took all of Gavin's strength to still Toby's hand and get his best friend's attention. "You don't have to do this. If you're not ready, it's okay."

"I'm good. I'm just having trouble slowing myself down."

"Don't worry so much. I'm not some fragile flower." Gavin bit at Toby's ear and the tendons in his neck.

When Toby kissed him again, he boldly wrapped his hand around Gavin's dick. Gavin almost laughed at Toby's gasp when he got his first feel of another man's cock in his hand. The feeling was familiar, yet foreign and was always a huge turn on for Gavin. Watching Toby's face as he experienced that for the first time was a rush. Gavin couldn't help but thrust into Toby's hand a little, looking for more friction. It didn't take long for Toby to get the idea, and he began stroking at a firm, moderate pace, palming the head every few strokes. Remaining even relatively quiet was increasingly difficult for Gavin.

Gavin turned more toward him and reached out to stroke Toby's cock through the denim, but Toby shook his head and shifted his weight, rocking his dick into Gavin's leg. "No, Gav. I want to do this for you."

For a moment, Toby glanced at Gavin's hard penis and licked his lips. Gavin couldn't help but smile. He knew Toby was contemplating dropping to his knees and blowing him. Gavin didn't want that right now. "Not this time, buddy. We're gonna be naked in a bed the first time you put your mouth on me. If you're not gonna let me play, let's speed this up before we get caught."

At that, Toby redoubled his efforts stroking Gavin off, alternately kissing him and gnawing at his neck. Silently, Gavin wondered if Toby was leaving marks on his skin but he wasn't sure he cared. As the end approached, goosebumps traveled down his thighs and the need to buck got even stronger.

Gavin widened his stance a little to let Toby get more contact between his dick and Gavin's thigh which Toby seemed to appreciate. A blotchy red blush crept down Gavin's chest as his orgasm became inevitable. Toby's panting and the whispered words of encouragement in his ear only pushed him closer.

Finally, Gavin arched his back and sprayed thick ropes of come into Toby's hand. The heady scent of sex enveloped them. Toby looked down at his wet hand as he continued to gently stroke Gavin's cock before looking up into Gavin's face. He blushed as he gathered the last of the come from Gavin and lifted his hand to lick across his palm. If Gavin hadn't come a minute ago, he might have come again. With an embarrassed chuckle, Toby kissed Gavin gently with Gavin's come still on his lips. "That was hot as hell. I almost came the second I touched your dick the first time."

"You sure I can't return the favor? I'm feeling pretty selfish."

"Nope. That was for you. Think of it as proof I'm not confused and a promise I'm not playing you." Toby stood leaning on the wall beside Gavin, naked in his honesty.

"Thanks, but I didn't need proof. You'd never intentionally lie to me. I need to kiss you again." Gavin wrapped his muscled arms around Toby and settled them on his tight little cowboy ass. He raised Toby up slightly by his ass and sunk into a slow, wet kiss.

"Come on, Gav. We need to get going." They stopped to clean up a little at the sink before Toby slipped his hand into Gavin's and led him out of the restroom and didn't let go until they stepped out into the late August sun.

Maybe Toby wasn't ready for a pride parade, but he was trying. Gavin couldn't ask for anything more, he knew how hard this was. Lord knows, it had taken him this long to be ready and he wasn't attracted to girls at all. Gavin was still skeptical but less than before. Back in the truck, they continued towards home. It seemed the episode at the rest area had released some of the tension and let them settle back into something closer to normal. Some things had to unfold at their own pace. There weren't any shortcuts in moving their relationship from friends to lovers. Moving too fast and demanding too much would derail things from the start. Gavin smiled to himself thinking perhaps the sex part could go faster than the relationship part. A quick hand job in a rest area bathroom gave him the best orgasm of his life, but that could have just been the idea that Toby was touching him. He barely managed to dream it was possible, but the reality was something altogether different, better and more intense.

“Hey... I’m gonna talk to my parents tonight after dinner. Would you be there as moral support? I think they will be disappointed, but I’m not worried about any major drama. In the worst case, I stay with you until we leave for Ellensburg.” Toby rented the small apartment over the garage from Gavin’s parents. He signed a lease, so they couldn’t kick him out even if they wanted to put him out on the street.

“Of course I’ll be there. It’ll be like the night we told them we were going to do rodeo full time the summer after our freshman year at Wazzu. Somehow I think you being gay will provoke less of a response than running away and joining the rodeo did.”

“You’re probably right. I don’t want them disappointed in me, like I did something wrong by being gay.”

“You know you didn’t, right? It’s the way you are and there’s nothing you could have done to change it.”

“I know.”

“Are you going to tell them about us?”

“I assumed you wouldn’t want me to tell them anything about you.”

“Tell them what you want. They are your family. Hell, they’re my family too.”

“Honestly, I hadn’t thought past coming out myself. This is all so new. I don’t even know how to define what we are to one another yet. Are you my boyfriend... lover... partner...? I think it’s too soon and too up in the air right now. We can ease them into it when you’re ready to tell your mom.”

In a move that shocked Gavin, Toby reached across the console and took Gavin’s hand in his. “You need to do whatever makes you the most comfortable. I will deal with whatever happens. What difference does it make if they find out now or six months from now? It doesn’t matter to me one way or another.”

“Really? Wait... Yesterday you didn’t even want to admit you were bi, and today you’re willing to come out to my family. What did I miss in between there?”

Toby’s grin was as crooked and wicked as Gavin had ever seen it. “I had my hand on your dick and tasted your come. I understand what I have to do to make sure that happens again. And I nearly had apoplexy when Val suggested you and Pietro would make sense as a couple... All I could think was ‘No, he’s

mine!' That was enough to start the dominoes falling and led me to accepting maybe you and I could build something amazing."

"God, Toby. How did I ever doubt you?"

"You had reason. I didn't handle things the way I should have."

"Neither did I. I've been thinking..."

"Isn't that how every trip to the ER started when we were kids?"

"Probably. Anyway, if I'm gonna be home more, I can't live with my parents. I never bothered moving out before now, because, well, you're fifty feet away over the garage and why pay for a place to store my stuff. What do you think about cleaning up the old Gorman homestead? It's up the road from my folks. Dad put a new roof on the place when he bought it. Remember, they used it for some of the pickers before they built the bunkhouse. It's been buttoned up for a few years but was in good condition the last time we inspected it. There's a small barn with a decent corral with room to expand."

"That's the log house by Broad Creek, right? The barn's gonna need a ton of work. It might be easier to tear it down and start over."

"Yep. I'm hoping Mom and Dad will sell us maybe five acres around the house cheap so most of the expense will be in fixing it up. Building a new barn would mean we could set it up so we had enough room to breed a few horses on the side, maybe the light-colored tobianos you love so much." Gavin smiled, knowing he'd sweetened the pot.

"You like them too. And what's this 'we', you got a mouse in your pocket?" Gavin did like the pale paint horses. His horse at the farm was a palomino paint named Whiz that Toby and his dad picked out for him when he turned sixteen.

"I thought you'd want to live there with me and we could start building something that was ours for after we retire. Like Dad has his hard cider and Mom has the sheep. We could raise a few horses. I'm not talking about an entire ranch, maybe four or five good breeding mares... Just think about it. You don't have to decide now. Like I said, I'm just thinking."

"Famous last words. Don't you think setting up house is moving a little fast?"

"First, would you have thought twice about it before you kissed me? Second, we've been best friends for fourteen years, how much slower can we go?"

“Point taken. I don’t want to fuck this up before we can figure it out.” Toby sighed and Gavin realized Toby was still holding his hand.

“I think there are three bedrooms. We can go as slow as you want.” He squeezed Toby’s hand gently.

“We should let your little announcement settle before we make those kinds of plans. If it doesn’t go well, we could be looking for a ranch of our own soon enough. I know it’s gonna be fine, but you hear so many horror stories. I can’t help but consider the worst case scenario, which frankly isn’t all that horrible.”

“I’m still scared out of my mind. My family means a lot to me.”

“It would suck for me too.”

“Let’s get home. There’s no point in worrying about things we can’t control.” The rest of the drive went quickly. They’d done it so many times it was all routine.

Hazy Hill Farm was the only place Gavin had ever lived, except for the dorms during college. He loved this place. The farm was in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains close to the heart of apple country and was as much a part of him as his blood and bone. He was the fourth generation of Hayes to inhabit this corner of the world and Gavin was proud of that tradition. His great-grandfather bought the original forty acres in 1915. Gavin’s grandfather and father bought adjacent properties over the years as they came available, expanding their operation to include fifty acres of apple orchards, twenty acres of cherries and more than four hundred acres of pasture, timber and hay. It was a large diversified operation with many moving parts, all of which required expertise and experience.

Gavin had always marveled at how his dad seemed to orchestrate the whole thing with relative ease and a lot of hard work. While his father was the true farmer in the family, his mother was the animal lover. Cattle, sheep, horses, dogs and chickens responded to her in an almost supernatural way; there was a reason his father left all of the livestock in her capable hands. Toby always described Angie as Mother Nature personified. Gavin thought he was a good blend of both his parents. They teased his sister Piper that she had to be adopted because she didn’t seem to get any of the Hazy Hill genes. Piper was a nurse anesthetist married to a financial analyst for one of the big local wineries. They lived near the river in a fancy condo, one town and an entire world away from the farm.

By the time they pulled up into the driveway, Gavin's family was waiting for them on the front porch. Toby backed the fifth-wheel into the garage and they disconnected it without any trouble. As they approached the house, his mother ran down the steps and into Gavin's arms.

Angie kissed his cheek. "I'm okay, baby. It was just a scare. Everything's okay."

"I needed to see for myself." Gavin was trying not to sound like a frightened child.

Toby anxiously waited his turn to hug Gavin's mother. "Angie, you sure you're feeling okay? I can help with the diet and supplement stuff. You should join Gavin and me for yoga when we're home..."

His mother smiled her gentlest smile at Toby. "Oh Toby... I think I scared you more than the rest of them. I'm fine. I need to change my lifestyle a little to stay that way. Don't worry about me. I'll be here for a long time yet."

"I know. I just... after my dad..." Toby's eyes went misty before he could beat the emotion back.

Angie hugged Toby again, holding him tighter and longer. Gavin hadn't even thought about the fact that Toby's father died of a heart attack. He should have been more sensitive when he told Toby about his mother's trip to the hospital.

Any kid would be traumatized by the loss of a parent even as a teenager, but for Toby losing his dad also meant losing his mother. Marianne Prescott was never maternal, his father Drew was definitely the more involved and affectionate of the pair, but after the death of her husband she turned savagely cold and distant to her only child. It was as if the death of his dad meant it was time for Toby to be grown up already. From the day after the funeral, Marianne went off and did her own thing and expected Toby to do his, without any guidance from his mother. Other than food and shelter, Toby paid his own way through high school and college.

Gavin also keenly felt the loss of Drew Prescott. While Gavin knew his father loved him and would kill rocks to protect him, he didn't have much time for many activities away from the farm. It was Drew who did those things with the boys. He was their soccer coach and the one who drove them to Seattle for Mariners games and that kind of stuff. Drew listened to all the high school drama and weighed in with his opinions without judging or dismissing their concerns. He was a good dad and great friend to Gavin. Drew was also the one

who took the boys to the rodeo for the first time a few weeks before he died. To this day, Toby kept a photo of his dad tucked in the safety vest he wore when he was competing.

Piper and Gavin's dad hugged them as well before they all made their way into the kitchen. Angie busied herself heating up the sandwiches Maria Elena had saved for their lunch. Keith and Piper sat at the table with Gavin and Toby and talked about the rodeo and the drive back from Coeur d'Alene. It was their normal post-rodeo debriefing. They asked after their friends and how everyone was doing in the standings. Gavin was proud of the fact that his parents had taken the time to understand the rodeo world even if he didn't think they really appreciated it.

"Piper, I'm glad to see you, but I thought you were going home yesterday."

"I'm working day surgery this month, so I was able to switch shifts with Annete so I could be off today. After Mom's scare, I needed to touch base with you guys over dinner at least. Chad's coming after work. I also thought you might have some medical questions about Mom's condition."

"Dad explained pretty well. I think I'm okay. Mom, could you sit down and relax, please. Lunch can wait a few minutes."

Angie spun around with a fork in her hand gesturing aggressively at her family. "Oh no. Not you too. I am perfectly healthy right now. It was a bit of a wake-up call. I know I frightened you, but I'm not going to stop taking care of my family or this farm so you don't feel guilty."

"Okay, okay... I'm looking forward to the brisket sandwiches. Maria Elena is the best."

"She is. Just to prove I'm no slouch, I'm making a very healthy grilled chicken, rainbow chard and brown rice for dinner. There's also cherry crisp for dessert. I wanted to use up some of this year's cherries before the rest went in the freezer. I even bought vanilla frozen yogurt instead of ice cream."

Toby laughed. "Pretty soon you'll be eating like Gavin and me all the time."

"Son, I am never going to live on the grass and bark you two eat everyday." Keith was a meat and potatoes guy. His dad was teasing, but one wheat grass smoothie and their entire diet was relegated to grass and bark.

"Where are the dogs?" Gavin realized their menagerie of dogs, most of whom had a purpose on the farm, were missing. Thistle and Briar were Australian cattle dogs who herded both cattle and sheep. His mother couldn't

handle the livestock without them. Chico was his dad's dog, a German shorthaired pointer mix Keith used for hunting. And then there was Axel, a black Chihuahua-Papillon mix, who was mostly his mother's familiar. The little guy was rarely more than five feet away from her. He rode with her while she worked the farm, either on horseback or the ATV she used. Axel didn't seem to understand he topped out at eight pounds and tried to help Thistle and Briar herd sheep if you didn't catch him in time. Luckily, he was appropriately respectful of the cattle.

"Axel's in the laundry room and the others are out in the kennel runs. Reid, the farrier's new assistant, was here checking the abscess in Pedro's hoof again. We didn't get around to letting them out before you boys pulled in. I'll get them while you're eating your lunch." The assistant was a nice kid, but the dogs made him nervous, so they penned them up when he was on the farm. Gavin was the first to admit they could be overwhelming. "What are you boys doing this afternoon?"

"We're gonna unload the trailer, do some laundry, and probably workout. After that, I was thinking we'd ride out and do the afternoon cattle check for you. I also wanted to swing by the Gorman place and take a look around while we were out there."

Keith's eyebrow lifted quizzically. "You thinking about moving out there? It's a good spot and it's sitting there empty."

"It's just an idea at this point. Figured I should go see how much work it would take to make it habitable."

"Keys are in the lockbox. I'll get a home inspector out to evaluate the place, if you're serious. It's been empty a while. Someone's gonna need to test the septic and well, too. It could get expensive in a hurry. Worth looking at though." His dad didn't bat an eye at the idea of Gavin moving out of the main house. "Building something new might be easier and cheaper in the long run. There's that spot with the great view of the mountains a little further up Broad Creek."

"We'll ride around and take a look."

Angie slid their lunches onto the table. "Make sure you have the new version of the iRanch app on your phones so you can make notes while you're out. Everyone's down in the middle pastures, except the bulls, who are still across the road."

"Easy enough."

“I have the picking crew getting started on the Galas in the south section. I could use some help mowing and moving picnic tables around down in the pick-your-own area. You boys up for some manual labor tomorrow?” Gavin could tell by the look on his father’s face that while the request may have been phrased in the form a question, it was a thinly veiled command.

Gavin glanced at Toby to confirm before answering. “Absolutely. We’re at your beck and call until Thursday.” Hard work was always preferable to working out to stay in shape, and it wasn’t like they didn’t work for Keith whenever they were home.

Grinning evilly, his dad winked at him. “Good. We’ll start cleaning out the cold storage shed Wednesday.” The cold storage rooms were kept just above freezing to stop the fruit from ripening before it was shipped to the co-op for packing. Cleaning them was a cold, wet, miserable job. Gavin hoped his father was kidding.

They finished their lunch and set about cleaning and unloading the fifth-wheel. They had the work done in a couple hours and were just in time to saddle Whiz and Rowan, the bitchy chestnut mare Toby liked to ride, and head out to check the cattle. They bred Highland cattle on Hazy Hill to be sold as both breeding stock and beef. Highlands weren’t as large as some other breeds, but they produced exceptional meat. With long shaggy coats and great horns, they looked cool and their gentle dispositions were endearing. As usual, the cattle all seemed fine, though Gavin did note that the big hairy beasts were messing with them by blocking the gate out of the pasture like annoying bovine roadblocks. Thistle and Briar took no time to clear the cattle for him. It was nice to be out on horseback for a few hours away from the rest of life. They came to the crest of a large hill where they could see most of the farm laid out in front of them. Gavin always felt closest to this land and the farm when he sat on horseback in this spot where he could see it all. He glanced over at Toby and smiled. Late afternoon sun illuminated Toby’s handsome face under his ball cap and lit a fire in his pine green eyes as they took in the view. Toby loved this place almost as much as he did. It was home.

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Chapter 4

Dishes were done. Piper and Chad were on their way home, leaving Toby, Gavin, Angie and Keith sitting around the kitchen table drinking tea and talking about the farm. Toby was getting a little frustrated waiting for Gavin to spring his big announcement on his folks. He didn't think Gavin would chicken out, but this was one of those things you couldn't ever un-say. After another few minutes went by, Toby caught Gavin's gaze, urging him to get it over with. They often had entire conversations with just a series of facial expressions.

Angie, with Axel sitting quietly on her lap, stared across the table at Toby and then Gavin. "Okay, boys, what's got you so antsy? Tell us, maybe we can help."

With a long, shaky sigh, Gavin palmed his hands across his face. "It's nothing bad. I just have something I need to tell you. I've wanted to say something for a long time, but I don't want to disappoint you. I can't keep lying anymore." A fat, lonely tear slipped down Gavin's handsome face.

"It's okay, baby. Whatever it is, we'll deal with it." Angie knew. Toby could see it in her eyes.

"Mom, Dad, I'm gay." Another tear joined the first on Gavin's cheek.

Shoving back his chair, Keith stood and stormed around the table. "Gavin, stand up. Right now." Startled, Gavin complied with his dad's order. Keith reached out and pulled his son into a long, tight hug. He'd never admit it, but a tear matching his son's appeared on Keith's face. "We love you, son. It wouldn't matter if you were straight, gay, green, purple or a Huskies fan, we'd love you just the same. Although if you were a Huskies fan, we'd always hope you'd see the error of your ways and repent." They both chuckled a little through their tears.

Following her husband, Angie grabbed Gavin and held his face between her hands. "Baby, I love you more than anything. Did you honestly think who you love would matter to us?" Angie turned to Toby and hugged him too. "Thank you for supporting him through this. This isn't going to be an easy secret to live with while he's still riding. He's going to need you."

Before releasing her from the hug, Toby kissed her cheek. "You knew and you never said anything."

“Mothers always know and Gavin had to tell us when he was ready. We couldn’t push him any more than we already were.”

“You knew. You both knew. I nearly gave myself an ulcer worrying. Shit. I’ve known since junior high, when did you figure it out?”

“You haven’t had a girlfriend since Jenna and we never saw a girl on your arm in any of the photos on the behind the scenes rodeo blogs. It wasn’t that hard to puzzle out. So to answer your question, probably since your senior year at State.”

“Jesus. Does Piper know?”

“Yes. Why do you think she pushes every single woman she comes across at you? She was hoping you’d come out just to shut her up.”

“I never wanted to disappoint you. All parents have dreams for their kids and I haven’t fulfilled any of them and probably never will. I’ll never get married or give you grandchildren to spoil. There will never be another generation of Hayes kids to take over the farm. I’m a good saddle bronc rider, which I know is a disappointment in itself, but I’ll never be world champion especially if I step back next year...” Gavin ran out of breath and hung his head.

Toby hadn’t truly appreciated the burden Gavin had been carrying until now. He’d assumed Gavin’s unease at coming out was about fear of the unknown, but it was more than that. Gavin felt like he’d failed his parents in every way, which was bullshit, but you can’t fight fear with facts.

Keith roared in response. “What in holy hell are you talking about? I’m so damn proud of you, I don’t know how to put it into words. No father could ask for more. You are a good man, Gavin. Honest, honorable, and hard working. You’ve followed your dreams so far and you could go so much further, but you’re choosing to sacrifice that to support your family. You love this land with your whole heart and will be an amazing steward of this farm and family legacy one day. As long as you are happy, none of the rest matters.” Keith put his hand on the back of Gavin’s neck and looked him in the eyes.

“And who says you won’t get married and have kids one day? Don’t let who you love, dictate your future. It may look different than any of us imagined, but it’s the same in all the ways that matter.” Angie scooted around her husband and hugged Gavin again.

“I love you both so much.” Gavin cried quietly in his mother’s arms.

Toby sat back down at the table to watch the byplay between Gavin and his parents. This was the reaction he expected from Angie and Keith. They were good people and loved their kids unconditionally. He wasn't as lucky in the parenting department; his mother was never going to be as accepting of his bisexuality or his nascent relationship with Gavin. She would come around, probably, as long as she kept receiving her check each month. Finally, Gavin stepped back from his mother's embrace and turned to beam at Toby with a smile so bright and wide open he could hardly look at it. Toby peered up at him and grinned right back, feeling this new connection between them flare to life. Never had Toby wanted to reach out and touch someone just to make a physical connection as tangible as their emotional one. He stole a glance at Angie and Keith, who were standing with their arms around each other leaning against the kitchen sink and saw their wise smiles. Whether he and Gavin said anything about their relationship or not, his parents already knew something had changed between their son and his best friend. "I told you it would be okay."

"You did." Gavin's eyes were still red, but they sparkled with a happiness Toby had never seen there before. If he was responsible for even a corner of that happiness, Toby thought they might be okay.

Angie cocked her head and asked, "How long have you known?"

Toby chuckled. "Ummm... For sure, since the hospital after his wreck in Austin. But Gavin doesn't remember telling me 'cause he was high on pain meds at the time. As far as he knows, he finally came out to me yesterday." Fuck. Had it only been twenty-four hours since his world turned upside down. It had been building for a year and a half but the last day had been a crazy ride.

"Apparently you're not the only one who wondered." Even Gavin's laugh sounded lighter.

They talked for a while about Gavin's experience and a little bit about how next year might work for everyone. "We'll talk more, but your dad and I are gonna go watch some TV before bed. What are you boys up to tonight?" Bedtime in the Hayes household was early, usually about nine as five am comes early on the farm.

"We were going to head over to Toby's to play video games for a bit, but I won't be late. I need to decompress a little."

"Okay. It's not like we're waiting up. Sleep fast, boys. Love you both." Angie and Keith moved toward the door to the family room.

"Mom, Dad, I love you too. Thank you. For everything. Good night."

They let themselves out of the house and jogged up the stairs to Toby's apartment. His place might be small, but it was all his. After graduating from college, Gavin's folks knew as well as he did, there was no way Toby could live with his mother full time. One of them would have ended up in prison by the end of the first month. In any case, the Hayes family offered him a place to live and claimed him as one of their own.

They pulled off their boots and hung their ball caps on the pegs by the door. Gavin flopped onto the couch and picked the remote up off the coffee table to turn on the gaming system and television. Toby dropped down next to Gavin and grabbed his controller. "How you feeling, dude? That was intense."

"Honestly, I'm still a bit numb. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy I told them finally. I shouldn't have doubted they would be great about it. I feel stupid for wasting time with the shame and stupidity for nothing."

"You weren't ready. There's nothing stupid or shameful about it."

"I guess... I wasted a lot of time with you too."

"No. I was the one not ready until now. I'm still not sure I'm ready to own this thing between us, but I want you more than I want to hide. Somehow your parents figured out things have changed between us. I'm starting to wonder if I was ever able to hide anything from them."

"Unlikely. They won't push though."

"Yeah, we're gonna have to come clean soon though. Like before we get everyone excited about us moving out to the Gorman place..."

"We don't have to tell them anything. They can think whatever they want. As long as we know what we have, does it matter what anyone else knows? Not that we even have anything yet, but you know what I mean."

"We have something, even if it's still so new and nebulous we can't define it. I don't blame you for being scared, but that's a different tune than you were singing yesterday. What happened to not being my dirty little secret?"

"I dunno. Maybe we shouldn't make any big decisions until things settle out a little. The future might be clearer if we wait 'til the end of the season. Things could fizzle out and we'd have made a wreck of it all for nothing."

"Is that what you want? Really? Neither of us has any history with relationships, it's gonna feel like we're reinventing the wheel for a while, no matter what we do. And you know, this thing between us, it ain't gonna fizzle

out. Either it's gonna fly us straight to forever or it's gonna explode in a huge fireball of regret."

"My vote's for forever. But, I want to be with you, any way I can have you, for as long as you'll let me. I am capable of compromise."

"For what it's worth, I think any chance we had of keeping our relationship on the down low with anyone who matters to us, like your family or Val and the boys, is long gone. If they don't know already, they'll figure it out soon enough. It's my mother I'm not sure about. Part of me wants to tell her in hopes she disowns me and I can stop paying her twenty grand a year to pretend she loves me."

"Fucking hell, Toby. I thought you stopped sending her money after Oscar moved in with her."

"I was going to, but I started thinking about my dad. And I know he would want me to take care of her. It's a man's job to take care of his mother. I can't be there to mow the lawn or fix a dripping faucet, but I can make sure she has enough money to live comfortably. I know she helps out Grandma Betty, too."

"She's not using your money for rent and groceries, Toby. Shit, dude, I'll send money to Grandma Betty, if it will get you to stop funding your mother's casino habit." The rumor around town was that Toby's mother and her boyfriend, Oscar, went out to one of the casinos on the Yakima Reservation almost every weekend to party.

"I want to do right by my dad and honor my parents."

"Toby, you risk your life, day in and day out, to earn that money. She shouldn't get to waste it on booze and slot machines. Your mom has a good job as a secretary for the high school and doesn't need you to support her. We both know your dad wouldn't approve of that crap.

"If anything, you should be putting money away so you can help Grandma Betty when she finally moves to an assisted living place. An extra twenty grand a year would get her into a much nicer place than she could afford on her own." Gavin's grandparents were all gone by the time they were twelve. Grandma Betty filled the void and he doted on her.

"You're right. It needs to stop, but I don't know how to make it happen without a huge messy scene. I don't want the drama. It's been easier to leave it alone."

“Come here.” Gavin waved Toby over to his corner of the couch. When Toby shifted over, Gavin put his arm around Toby’s shoulders and pulled him into his side. “It’s gonna suck, but you can’t let her take advantage of your guilt. She may be mad for a while but she’ll get over it. She’s still your mother.” A gentle hand stroked Toby’s hair at the back of his neck.

“That’s never mattered before, but I hear you. I’ll talk to her after this weekend.” A sigh reaching all the way to the soles of his feet escaped Toby’s control.

“Let’s skip the video games and maybe we can find something else to occupy our time before I have to sneak across the yard and pretend I spent the night in my own bed.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you slept on my couch.” Toby grinned wickedly.

Gavin blushed as he looked at Toby out of the corner of his eye. “Not a chance in hell I’m sleeping on your couch.”

Caught between treating Gavin like his girlfriend and like his best friend, Toby was unsure how to proceed. This part of being with a man always confused Toby. He wasn’t sure what the expectations were. He wanted nothing more than to kiss Gavin and enjoy the simple comfort of being close, but he didn’t know if Gavin would think it was too girly. Toby craved sharing that kind of intimacy and softness with Gavin in a way he never had with anyone else. With a quick glance at Gavin, he scooted even closer and dropped his head onto Gavin’s shoulder, hoping he’d take the hint.

Somehow Gavin knew exactly what was percolating around in Toby’s confuddled mind. He slid a finger under Toby’s chin and lifted his head enough to plant a lingering kiss on Toby’s lips. “Do what you want, Toby. If you want to sit here and make out for a while, I’m all for it. If you want to drag me into your bedroom like a caveman and claim the orgasm I owe you, more power to you. One of the best parts of being in a relationship with another man is that the roles aren’t predefined. Top or bottom. Dominant or submissive. Rough or gentle. There aren’t any rules and you can switch it up any time. Did you believe I’d think less of you for wanting to kiss and cuddle for a while after the day we’ve had?”

“No... sort of... I don’t know. When I’m with a woman, I know what’s expected of me. I’m supposed to be her cowboy fantasy. They want me to be

the Marlboro Man or Tim McGraw. It's the take-charge, hard-partying, cowboy gigolo they want. They don't care about any part of me that doesn't fit the illusion. But you already know the real me. The one who doesn't fit the stereotype. The guy who does yoga and likes video games and hip-hop. I don't know how to act or what you expect from me when it comes to being more than your best friend. I'm off balance and flailing to find purchase here."

"Be yourself. It's that simple. I don't want the cowboy, I want Tobias Bartholomew Prescott, the man, in all his amazing glory. Ask for what you need and if you ever wonder what I want, ask me. You never have to guess. And for the record, you can't be surprised those were the women you found for a one-night stand in a cowboy bar after a rodeo."

"I have never wanted to be soft and tender with someone. Historically, I've done the minimum after-sex canoodling I can get away with before I bolt. It's always felt clingy and uncomfortable. Here with you, right now, I crave the closeness almost more than the sex, tho I'll probably claim that orgasm you owe me later." Toby deflected the rawness he was feeling with a little humor. "You don't think I sound, I don't know, unmanly?"

"No, you sound human. Everyone craves touch and comfort, Toby. As much as you claim to like women, you don't trust them with any part of yourself, except your dick. With me, it's different. You feel safe and that opens up a level of intimacy that has never appealed to you before. So, no, it's not unmanly. I've always wanted to share that sort of intimacy with you. Do I seem effeminate to you?"

"Umm... No. You are definitely all man." Toby stretched up to kiss Gavin while patting his hard belly. The long strokes of Gavin's hand up and down his back he got in return were worth the self-examination. "How'd you know what was knotting me up?"

"I've belonged to an online support group for closeted gay men for a couple years. The things newbies worry about are pretty universal. The group moderator is a shrink in Seattle and he's the one who's been encouraging me to come out to at least a few of the people I trust most. John thinks having a relief valve will make a big difference for me. And so far, he seems to be right."

"Wow. You are part of this secret gay world I know nothing about."

"Like your yoga friends, who all seem to look like NFL cheerleaders, are any different." When they had a day off in some random city, Toby would hop

online and an hour later some beautiful woman would pick him up and they would go off to some “yoga class” for half a day.

“I don’t sleep with my yoga friends, you know that right? I belong to a sports performance yoga group and when I have a free afternoon, I go online and ask if anyone knows of a good studio in the area. I don’t want to leave you without transportation, so I barter a ride from the studio owner for a photo and an interview with a top twenty bull rider they can put in a press release. If you look at my clippings folder, half of the articles are *Nationally ranked bull rider, Toby Prescott, visits local yoga studio*. Did you think my week at the Sports Performance Institute was a sex-filled vacation in the desert?”

Gavin laughed. “It crossed my mind, but you came back all fired up and kicked my ass for the next month with all your new positions and movements.”

“It was an intensive yoga instructor retreat with a bunch of trainers from some of the most elite sports teams in the world.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? You just said it was some yoga retreat in Arizona.”

“I get enough crap for the yoga and mind-body fitness stuff. I don’t talk to anybody about any of it unless they ask. Everyone comes to me when they have a problem, but they still call me downward dog and yoga boy all the fucking time. I know some people mean it as a teasing sign of respect, but from most of them it’s insulting. Why didn’t I tell you more about the retreat? You didn’t ask. You never do.”

“You’re allowed parts of your life that don’t involve me. I always figured, if you wanted me to know more about the yoga stuff, you’d tell me. It was never because I wasn’t interested.”

“Okay. Would you be willing to stay an extra day in Albuquerque to take a class with one of the women who taught at the intensive? I’ve wanted to take her mind-body seminar for a while, but I couldn’t manage to schedule it.”

“Am I good enough for a yoga class at that level? I wouldn’t want to embarrass you or hold you back.”

“You don’t approach yoga as a spiritual practice, but your poses and movements are good. It’ll be fine. I wouldn’t suggest it if you weren’t up to it.”

“Then let’s do it. Assuming we are both physically capable after this next stretch of events. Do you realize we have one off week in the next eight? We’re in the RV for Ellensburg, Puyallup, and Pendleton, then we fly to Albuquerque,

then a bye week, followed by Tulsa, Badlands, Billings and finally San Francisco. That's a full month of airports and hotels."

"The glamorous life of a rodeo cowboy. Tell me all of our rooms have a kitchenette... I can't live on Subway for that long without losing it."

"Everywhere but San Francisco. We've never been there and by then I thought we'd need a few days in a hotel with a gym and some good food." Gavin squeezed Toby and kissed the side of his head. "We could also go out to one of the clubs and dance together without people caring. San Francisco is big enough we shouldn't bump into anyone if we're careful."

"We'll see. I don't know if I'm ready for full on San Francisco gay. I'm not saying no, just give me time to process the idea."

"Apparently, stereotypes aren't just about cowboys. Ya know, most of the gay community is more like us than not. There's more to it than drag queens and body glitter."

"I know... just baby steps. Okay."

"Sure. I get it. Take your time. Can we go to bed now? I want you see you naked." Gavin dragged his T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the sofa.

"You've seen me naked hundreds of times." Toby followed with his own shirt.

"Yeah, but your dick is hard this time." Gavin laughed as Toby looked down and saw the obvious bulge in his jeans.

"So it is." Toby rubbed his hands on Gavin's bared sides, enjoying his smooth skin for a moment before brazenly rubbing his hard-on against Gavin's. Sex was easier than all this complicated relationship stuff. "Yours is too."

"Come on, dude. I remember something about owing you an orgasm." Gavin led them into Toby's bedroom.

By the time Toby grabbed a couple hand towels from the bathroom, he'd worked out for himself that gay sex could get a little messy, Gavin had pulled the sheets and blankets to the foot of the bed and was spread gloriously naked across his bed casually stroking his own cock.

Just a little too masculine to be classified as pretty, Gavin had never looked so unbelievably sexy to Toby before this moment. His silky skin seemed absolutely lustrous in the low light from the bedside table. You would think with his dark, almost black, hair and golden tan skin, Gavin would have more

body hair, but he didn't. In fact, he was nearly hairless, save the well-trimmed patch at his groin which framed his hard cock beautifully. As far as Toby could tell, Gavin's cock was about average, maybe a little longer, but the remarkable part was the wide mushroom cap which would eventually stretch his ass wide and scrape against his prostate on every pass. Toby may be a virgin in the area of man sex, but he knew he liked ass play and he thoroughly enjoyed the blue silicone butt plug he had hidden in a box under his bed.

"I found condoms in the nightstand, but we won't need them tonight. Got lube, babe?"

"In the plastic bin under my bed." Toby prepared himself for the teasing he was sure to get when Gavin saw the plug. Wait... Babe? Really? Yeah, Toby wasn't going to let that continue much longer.

Diving over the side of the bed to look underneath, Gavin pulled out the green plastic shoe box. Toby actually groaned at the sight of Gavin's high, round ass wiggling as he stretched for the bin. If Toby did squats all day, he still wouldn't have the high, tight, bubble butt Gavin had without trying. Toby's ass, on the other hand, was small and hard muscled but it seemed a little flat and ordinary in comparison. Vanity made Toby acknowledge that he had the better arms.

"Well, well, well... What have we here? Two different lubes, a vibrating prostate wand, and a sweet silicone plug. Tobes, I didn't think you had it in you. We are going to have some fun with these. One day, you'll fuck me while wearing the plug and think your head's gonna explode. But for now, a little regular lube is more than enough."

Hands on his hips, wearing only his jeans, Toby blushed and looked away. He knew there was no reason to be embarrassed, but he was. Gavin now knew all of his secrets, the sexual ones anyway. Toby would have felt naked even if he were fully dressed. A moment passed silently as Gavin waited Toby out. Finally, Toby looked him in the eye and gave him a crooked smile.

"It's all good, Tobes. I have my own little box of toys, though mine is better hidden as I don't want to risk Maria Elena discovering it while vacuuming." Maria Elena was the wife of one of the orchard workers at Hazy Hill. To make a little extra money while her kids were in school, she kept the farmhouse clean and made a hot lunch for the family and farm employees during the week. Toby would marry her just for her Mexican chicken stew, if she weren't nearly fifty years old and already married to Arturo.

“Still hiding things in the baseball card box in the top of your closet?” It was where Gavin hid his porn and, rarely, pot when they were in high school. Toby stepped closer to the bed.

“Why mess with something that works? Get naked and come here.”

“You’re just going to sit there and watch?” Toby was a little uncomfortable not being in control.

“Yup.” Gavin put the lube on the bed and started tugging on his cock again as he leaned against the headboard.

Rolling his eyes, Toby undid the buttons of his fly and shoved his jeans to the floor before tossing them on to a chair in the corner of the room. “You expect me to dance too?”

“Not this time. Now hurry up before I finish without you.”

Toby laughed. “Don’t you fucking dare.” He quickly stripped off his underwear and socks. Finally naked, Toby hurried forward and leaped onto the bed, nearly bouncing Gavin off. More laughter filled the room. The blatant happiness on Gavin’s face pushed Toby into leaning over and kissing him deep and hard. Tongues wrestled and teeth clicked, but as the initial frenzy passed, the kiss became languid and sexy. The taste of Gavin’s kisses was quickly becoming addictive, and Toby couldn’t find a reason to fight it.

Soon Gavin lifted himself up and slid on top of Toby, settling comfortably between his legs. Kisses flowed from lips to jaw to neck to collarbone only to return and start again. All while the two men rocked together, cocks rubbing like they were aiming to start a fire with the friction. Toby arched his back as Gavin sucked at his nipples and nibbled at his pecs. Gavin’s hands were everywhere from his shoulders and arms to his hips and thighs in a pattern so random it made Toby’s head spin. Moving down Toby’s body, Gavin gave his abs and hips the same treatment.

Toby wasn’t stupid. Gavin was building up to a world-class blowjob. He’d had his share of oral sex since he lost his virginity at sixteen, but it had never been this kind of whole body experience. His heart pounded in the same crazy rhythm as his cock thrummed almost painfully. Gavin’s eyes never left Toby’s face. His best friend’s attention was singularly focused on him and it was intoxicating, but eventually the pleasure was too great as Toby’s head fell back and his body writhed with need. A tiny, coherent part of Toby’s now nearly primal brain prayed that he wouldn’t come the instant Gavin’s mouth touched his dick.

Raising himself onto his knees, Gavin knelt between Toby's splayed legs. The loss of contact with Gavin made Toby lift his head. Gavin was looking at him with heavy, passion-drugged eyes and at the same time, he was practically strangling the base of his own cock, apparently trying to stave off his own orgasm. It was the single hottest thing Toby had ever seen. After a few beats, Gavin resumed his tour of Toby's pelvis and groin without any direct contact to his dick or balls. Suddenly, Gavin grabbed him by the hips and pulled his ass up to rest high on Gavin's long thighs, practically rolling him onto his shoulders. Jesus, it was hot.

It didn't take long for Gavin's intent to become clear. Toby nearly began hyperventilating when Gavin started rubbing his hands over Toby's thighs and licking his taint and balls. But this was merely distraction while Gavin lubed up a finger and started gently stroking over his hole. It was awesome and maddening at the same time. Dizzy from the overwhelming sensations spinning around all over his body, Toby bent himself in half, pulling his knees practically to his ears. Gavin's unoccupied hand moved from his thighs to his abdomen, and his mouth seemed to be circling the vicinity of his cock, yet never touched his dick. It was the sweetest torture. "Gav, please. Have mercy. Shit... so good. Please..."

His begging was instantly rewarded. Gavin started licking the underside of his cock at the same time he slid his slippery finger into Toby's ass. Licking the head and slit of Toby's achingly hard dick, Gavin continued moving the finger in his ass to the same tempo. It wasn't long before Gavin added a second finger. There was a little discomfort, but the pleasure of having those fingers brush over his prostate drove any thought of pain from his head.

"So fucking hot. You taste so damn good. Could do this all night." Gavin resumed lapping at Toby's cock like it was the cream filling of an Oreo.

"Come on. Suck me. I can't take much more. Please, man." Toby was still begging.

"Awright. Here we go." Toby couldn't see it, but he heard and felt Gavin's sinful smile. Gavin backed off and lowered Toby's butt back to the bed and adjusted his legs to give him more room to work. Lips gently caressed the head of his cock without much pressure or purpose, but it was a promise of more to come. When Gavin finally took the crown of Toby's dick fully into his mouth and began to suck, Toby's hips thrust up without his consent.

"Whoa there, cowboy. I may ride bucking horses for a living, but I ain't ready for that yet." Gavin's laugh was light and almost airy. Toby focused on

getting back control of his body while Gavin continued to suck and rub the underside of his cock with the breadth of his tongue. As his command of his body came back, Toby began to push back at Gavin's fingers trying to get them deeper into his ass. "Toby, I would never have believed you were a greedy bottom if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes."

Instantly, Toby froze. His insecurities about being bi and less than masculine roared back to life. Gavin quickly stopped what he was doing to look up into Toby's face. "Hey. Easy... It wasn't an insult. You should take responsibility for your own pleasure. And there's no shame in bottoming. Accepting the receptive role makes you more of a man not less. Be yourself and enjoy." Gavin stretched up to kiss him while still pushing his fingers in and out of Toby.

It didn't take long for Toby to get his mojo back. The hot, wet mouth surrounding his cock helped immeasurably. At one point, Gavin was penetrating his ass with the fingers on one hand, rolling Toby's balls in the other all while he continued to bob his head and suck him deep. The hand on his balls returned to touching him pretty much everywhere Gavin could reach. Toby reached for Gavin, stroking his hair and touching the side of his face. Gavin gazed at him with such softness and heat, Toby felt their connection all the way to his soul. It was intense and it brought him closer to his orgasm. Still squirming and rocking his hips, Toby knew the end was near. Goosebumps raced across his thighs and up his back, and his balls tightened in their sacs as they drew up close to his body. "Just a little more. Jesus. So good... Coming... coming..."

At that, Toby erupted in an orgasm that knew no bounds. It swamped every one of his nerve endings and disrupted the functioning of his not-insignificant muscles. He dropped back onto the bed feeling boneless and replete. As the haze in his mind cleared, he saw Gavin kneeling between Toby's shaky thighs with one hand jacking himself off and the other rhythmically squeezing his balls. Toby could not believe how utterly gorgeous Gavin was as he approached his orgasm. Those stunning abs flexed, as his thigh muscles bunched and released. The unselfconscious, sensual moans and grunts Gavin made nearly had Toby's spent cock twitching to reinflate. Within a few moments, Gavin's cock sprayed Toby's neck, chest and abs with come.

Toby grabbed one of the towels and wiped himself off with a crooked grin splashed across his face. They shifted until they were again lying face to face, kissing softly and teasing skin with lazy fingertips. In all the years he'd been

having sex, Toby never felt this completely satisfied in the aftermath. He'd had hot passionate sex with some of the women he was with, but once it was over he always felt vaguely uncomfortable and it made him a bit antsy. This was so completely different. He could stay here with Gavin and bask in the easy affection all night.

"You're quiet. You okay?"

"I'm great. Better than..." Toby's smile and gentle kiss seemed to settle Gavin.

"Good. My phone is set to go off at three thirty. Come get some sleep." Gavin pulled Toby into his arms and tugged him to his side with Toby's head on his chest and their legs tangled together. Gavin made a space against his body that Toby fit into perfectly. It was a wonderment. The last thing Toby was conscious of hearing was Gavin mumbling, "So much nicer than the damn couch."

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Chapter 5

Grandma Betty still seemed pretty spry for eighty. Gavin studied the wedding portrait of Betty and Jimmy Foight hanging in the hallway of the home they shared for more than thirty years. She had always been a beautiful woman, but to Gavin's mind Grandma Betty seemed to get more so every year. Her hair may have gone from nutmeg to silver blonde and she might not be as thin as she once was, but none of that dimmed the light that was Toby's Grandma Betty. Gavin's grandparents were all dead before he was out of elementary school, so Grandma Betty and Grandpa Jimmy were the only grandparents Gavin had ever known.

As she ushered them into her living room, Gavin could see a stiffness in her gait as she tried to hide the pain in her hip. He also noticed clutter had accumulated on the hall table. It looked like unopened mail and a lot of it.

"I'm so happy my handsome boys could come see me today. The gossips at the cafe will think I'm one of those cougars with you two escorting me to lunch." Grandma Betty's green eyes, much like Toby's, twinkled with her teasing laugh.

Gavin kissed her cheek. "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me..." Gavin stammered like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*.

"A movie before your time." Toby's grandmother laughed and patted Gavin's arm.

"Maybe, but it's a classic. I like old movies." It was true. They were in hotel rooms so often, he watched a lot of old movies to pass the time.

"What can we do for you while we're here?" Toby looked around for anything obvious.

"Nothing right now. Helena was here yesterday." Helena was a neighbor who was paid to help with the heavier cleaning and drive Grandma Betty on her errands a couple afternoons a week.

"You sure? We may not be so bright, but our backs are strong." Toby grinned.

She reached over to pat Toby's shoulder. "Funny boy, run upstairs and grab my purse from the chair in my bedroom, please. It will take too long if I go."

"Sure, Grandma." Toby headed off to do his grandmother's bidding.

As Grandma Betty puttered about the kitchen getting ready to go, Gavin took the opportunity to look around for any more red flags. He didn't know why but something in the little bungalow felt off. The mail was one and it looked to be a lot of unopened bills and bank statements. The number of pharmacy pill bottles on the kitchen counter also seemed to be multiplying since the last time they visited about three weeks earlier. Returning to the kitchen, Gavin hugged Toby's grandmother again. Grandma Betty gave the best hugs. "We thought we'd take your car this time. Toby's truck is high and I know you have a hard time climbing in and out."

"Thank you, Gavin. Getting old isn't for sissies, don't let anyone tell you different."

"Nothing about you is old, sweetheart, except maybe in years. How many of your friends have a tablet computer and know how to video chat? I love talking with you when we're on the road. Keeps me grounded."

"You don't need me for that, but it's nice to hear."

"Tell me about the hip. Has the doctor said anything about doing a replacement?"

"I have good days and bad, like everyone else and Dr. Anderson says a lot of things. The hip is better when I take a good walk every day, but the rain this month got me off schedule and... It doesn't matter. It'll get better. It always does."

Toby walked back into the kitchen. "You need to do whatever the doctor tells you to do, Grandma."

"No, I don't. I'm not leaving my house just so I don't have to climb stairs. Jimmy told me he loved me and kissed me goodbye for the last time right in this kitchen the morning he had his stroke. I can't walk away from my last memory of him."

"You don't have to walk away from anything, but you could still move somewhere without stairs and take the memories with you. Do you think Grandpa would want you suffering because of him?"

"No, he wouldn't. He would think I was being stubborn and sentimental which would be accurate. We were married fifty-six years, he knew me better than anyone."

"He did. Grandpa Jimmy loved you more than his own life. He wouldn't want you to hurt if it could be prevented. Just think about it."

“Mrs. Vohlick from my parents’ church is living over in an assisted living center off Cottonwood Avenue. She loves it. She doesn’t have to cook for herself every day, she takes exercise classes at the community center and there is always someone available if she has a problem. Plus, there’s absolutely no upkeep or yard work to worry over.”

“Let’s go get some lunch. We can talk more and maybe you’ll let me schedule a couple tours, just to see what’s available.” Toby flashed her a look that would make the most pathetic, begging puppy proud. Gavin couldn’t help but laugh.

Sonrisa Cafe was one of the few places in town that served good food and had options that wouldn’t blow their diet. The Latin-inspired food was some of Gavin’s favorite. Settling into their normal pattern, they talked about Toby’s extended family who were scattered around the country and the farm. Grandma Betty poked them about finding nice girls and settling down to give her great-grandchildren. Gavin glanced at Toby and almost choked at the slight blush Toby was fighting.

Toby was nearly dancing in his seat waiting for his vegan tacos with the rubbery cashew cheese he liked. Gavin, as usual, ordered the grilled salmon sandwich with mango salsa and avocado, and Grandma Betty chose the roast chicken and salad. Lunch was fun and easy, but not without some unpleasant discoveries. Grandma Betty confessed there were nights she slept on the recliner in the den because she couldn’t face climbing the stairs. Later, when they were nearly finished with their lunch, she also admitted she hadn’t seen Toby’s mother in almost two weeks and hadn’t spoken to her daughter in more than five days. Toby’s face told him that his best friend was close to losing his shit. Gavin did his best to walk Toby back into the land of the marginally sane before Toby raced out of the restaurant and did something he’d regret to his mother.

They spent another hour with Grandma Betty before heading back to the farm. Without even discussing what Toby was going to do, Gavin knew. After a call to make sure his mother was home, Toby was going to go yell at his mother and cut off her allowance so he could focus on getting his grandmother the extra help she needed. Before getting out of the truck and going back to work, Gavin had to remind Toby of the reality he faced. “Tobes, you gotta listen. You can’t go off on your mother. Focus on Grandma Betty and what she needs. Your mother could make things incredibly difficult for you. Eyes on the prize.”

"I know. I'll calm down before I get there. It's just... The last time I got concerned about Grandma Betty, Mom promised me she checked in with Grandma Betty every day and saw her at least once a week. Ignoring me is one thing, but I can't let Mom get away with neglecting her mother."

"You won't, but you need Marianne as an ally not an adversary. Keep your cool and it'll be okay."

"I know. I got this." Toby's small tight smile told the whole story.

"You do." The urge to kiss Toby good-bye before he got out of the truck struck him hard. To be safe, nobody could know what they meant to each other and that meant no reassuring kisses good-bye. Not that he was sure about what they meant to each other at this point. Gavin got out of Toby's truck and went straight back to work.

Spending the next couple hours playing musical pastures with the cattle helped keep him from worrying for a bit. Thistle and Bramble scrambled around herding the last of the cattle through the gate into fresh pasture while Gavin sat on horseback and supervised. Gavin's mother raised grass-fed, pasture-raised beef because the quality was superior and it was by far the healthiest diet for the cattle, so the complicated ins and outs of rotational grazing were an essential part of daily life on Hazy Hill. Gavin noted in the ranching app on his phone that this group of young mothers with calves had been successfully moved to the east pasture closer to the cherry orchards. After closing the gate, Gavin whistled for the dogs and headed home. Along the way, he pulled his phone back out and sent Toby a text message.

You got this. Have a killer reward planned. Call me. <3 G.

Spending time with his mother always left Toby aggravated and on edge. He knew when the call finally came, it would be to get Gavin to meet him at The Bullpen, a local dive bar with cheap beer and great scratch-made food including Hazy Hill steaks and hamburgers. If it was a normal conversation between Toby and his mother, they'd have a few beers and be home in time for dinner, but if Toby and Marianne fought, it would be Jack and bar food for dinner. Gavin was definitely hoping for the former.

The next day's drive to Ellensburg was only two hours, but they also had sponsors to schmooze at the rodeo kick-off event that evening. For most people, even casual competitors, rodeos were all for fun, but for professionals like Gavin and Toby, they were work. Yes, they loved what they did, but they only

made money if they rode well and maintained their sponsorships. Events like the rodeo kick-off gave them the opportunity to market themselves to the public and sponsors which was especially important to Toby who was making the jump to the more celebrity-driven PBR next season. Cultivating fans and courting media attention were the way to attract more and bigger sponsors; doing that with a hangover was less than optimal.

Gavin took some extra time grooming Whiz. He hadn't had much time to spend with the horse lately. The palomino paint was probably Gavin's best friend, save Toby. They'd been buddies since Gavin's sixteenth birthday when Toby and his dad brought him home from a horse show in Oregon. He didn't think he would be a saddle bronc rider today if it wasn't for Whiz.

But what he was really doing was keeping busy so he wasn't fretting about Toby. It had been more than two hours since Toby had driven off to see his mother. Just as he sent Whiz into the pasture with the rest of the farm horses, Toby's ringtone sounded from his front pocket. Gavin quickly answered. "Hey, dude."

"Hey."

"How'd it go?"

"My mom is a narcissistic bitch."

"In other news, the sky is blue... Did you expect something else?"

"Yes. Grandma Betty is struggling to get through the day and all my mom worries about is how it all affects her. I don't get it. I don't understand how she could be married to my dad and have no sense of family. I don't get it."

"It is what it is, Tobes. Where are you?"

"Halfway to The Bullpen. Come meet me."

"Are we drinking beer or whiskey? I need to let my folks know if we're gonna miss dinner."

"Just beer. Angie's making a vegetarian lasagna recipe she found in one of the cookbooks from the healthy hearts program at the hospital. We need to support her efforts to stay well. If you leave now, we'll be home in time to sit down for dinner."

"On my way. See you in fifteen." Gavin disconnected the call. He managed to change his shirt and get off the farm in time to make it into town with two minutes to spare.

The Bullpen had been a fixture in town for the last decade. The owner was a retired minor league pitcher and a high school classmate of Gavin's dad. It was primarily a locals bar as it was too far from anything to attract tourists, except during the fall apple-picking season. When Gavin walked in, Toby was already sitting in a booth in the back corner with a pitcher of beer and two glasses, one of which was already half empty. Gavin slipped into the booth with him and poured himself a beer.

"What happened?" It wasn't hard for Gavin to guess it wasn't good from Toby's tight jaw.

Toby shrugged. "You know what happened."

"Tell me anyway."

"Same old crap mostly. She was harping on why I live at the farm when I could afford to live somewhere 'nice'. Hazy Hill is my home and my family lives there. Why would I live anywhere else? She can't comprehend valuing anything beyond money. Anyway, when I finally got her to focus on Grandma Betty, she accused me of wanting to stick my grandmother in a home."

"Can't she see her mother needs more help?"

"She doesn't want to see it. When I told her I couldn't afford to send her money every month and take care of Grandma Betty, too, she tried to play the poor widowed mother card and make me out to be the bad guy. Jesus, Gav. Why does she treat me like this?"

"I don't know, but it's been the same since your dad died so I don't understand why you thought it would be different."

"Because it's Grandma Betty... I genuinely believed she would want what's best for her mother."

"Yeah well... that was never gonna happen."

"Hey. You didn't come out unscathed either... My mom thinks you are poisoning me against my family."

"Not news to me. I think I was eighteen the first time she said it." Gavin remembered the conversation well. Toby didn't know half of the horrible things his mother had said about Gavin and his family over the years.

"Anyway. I accused her of being ungrateful and spoiled and she hinted she would freeze me out of helping take care of Grandma Betty. I told her if I was footing part of the bill, I had every right to participate in the decision making

and I would take her to court if she did anything stupid. It's not like my grandmother doesn't know how her daughter is."

"Shit, Toby. This could get ugly. She can't mean to push you that far." Marianne was Toby's mother. Taking her to court would kill something in Toby. But Gavin knew Toby would do whatever he had to in order to protect his grandmother.

"I gave her a check for three grand and told her it was the last one. No matter what happens, she's not getting another fucking dime from me. I'm done."

"Good. It's about time."

"Even now, I'd still give her anything she needed but I can't let Grandma Betty suffer for my mother's selfishness."

"I know. No one would expect you to turn your back on your family, but she shouldn't have been taking advantage of you all this time."

"Hey, I voluntarily kept sending her cash after I moved out."

"Because she made you feel guilty about not being there to split the rent and utilities with her. She convinced you it's normal for a son to pay his mother room and board when he's home from college. You know my folks still won't charge me rent."

"Yeah, well we both work the farm for free when we're home. I think it all comes out in the wash, don't you?"

"It does. I sometimes wish they'd ask more of me, but they won't. I've tried and they won't accept any money from me. It's part of why I want to buy the Gorman homestead from them. It's time to grow up and build the life I want."

"Finish your beer. We need to get home. I promised Angie I'd bring her a couple beginner yoga DVDs and some articles on supplements she might want to consider. Besides, I seem to remember something about a reward for not murdering my mother..."

"Yeah, we won't have time before dinner. Your reward is going to take some time for us to ummm... thoroughly experience."

"Come on. Let's go home."

Settled on the sofa in Toby's apartment, Gavin had his stocking feet on Toby's lap where Toby was absently massaging his left foot. "I'm glad you told my folks everything going on with your mom and Grandma Betty. They want to help and they'll find a good lawyer if you need it. You okay?"

"More or less. Every time I think this time my mother's going to be different and every single time I'm disappointed. She isn't going to change. I don't know why I think she will. My mom doesn't love me, she doesn't even like me. She never has."

"She's your mom and you love her. It isn't good enough and you deserve more, but I do think she loves you in her own way." Gavin groaned in pleasure as Toby worked a knot out of the arch of his foot. "Damn, that feels good."

"Hold still. It's supposed to feel good. I'm glad I have a family who has, for reasons which defy understanding, made me one of their own."

"You've been a part of my family since the day I brought you home from school and introduced you to my mom..."

"I was so upset to leave Spokane, but from the very first day of the school year, you took it on yourself to befriend the short, pudgy new kid. Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I was that my dad got laid off and we moved in with my grandparents for a while. It felt like my world was imploding at the time, but it worked out okay. I got you out of the deal." Toby's crooked smile was almost flirty.

"It was fate. You were this force of nature who held my attention from the moment I saw you in the hallway outside Mr. Donohue's classroom before school. And nothing has changed in fourteen years." Gavin leaned over and kissed Toby.

"Can I have my reward now?" Toby broke out the puppy face again.

"Does that face work on women? It makes me want to swat you on the nose with a newspaper. Let's go. It's time for bed anyway. And we need to actually get to sleep at some point because the rodeo kickoff event is gonna run long after our bedtime tomorrow."

"Okay. You gonna let me share the big bed with you in the trailer? I'd kinda like to see what it's like to wake up with you in the morning. It turns out I don't like you sneaking out of my bed in the middle of the night like a trick."

"Well, it's your secret I'm keeping. Come out to my parents and I'll wake up with you every day."

"I know... I didn't think I'd ever want to share my bed with anyone, but with you I do. I really do. After we get home from Ellensburg, I'll talk to them."

"No. We'll talk with them. Together."

"Together. Like everything else." The smile crossing Toby's face was crooked and a little shy.

"Come to bed. I owe you a reward and I think you're gonna like it."

"Your naked body plus my naked body... what's not to like?"

"I thought you'd be more resistant to us being together like this."

"Why? Have I ever shown any reluctance to go after anything I want?"

"No, but I thought you were straight, mostly. I never knew I could be one of the things you'd want." Gavin looked into Toby's pine green eyes, studying the flecks of brown and gold like there would be a test later.

"Mostly?"

"I thought I saw you staring at my lips a couple times last year... and I know I saw you checking out my ass running up the steps at the Cody Stampede this year."

"You were wearing those little blue and orange split shorts and nothing else but your running shoes. Even a straight guy would look."

"I'm sorry sweetheart, no straight guy would have noticed my ass. And, you had me running stairs in eighty-five degree heat; I'd have run naked if it weren't for the chafing."

Toby stood up and walked toward the bedroom. "Fine, but you still have a nicer ass than most of the girls I've slept with."

It took Gavin a second to think about that before he shook his head, got up and followed Toby. This time it was Toby who was naked and stretched out on the bed like some sort of offering to the gods. He watched Gavin stalk closer to the bed before Toby wrapped his large square hand around his own cock waiting for Gavin to join him. As he undressed, Gavin cleared his mind of everything but Toby. Staring at Toby's rampant erection was enough for Gavin to forget his own name let alone anything else going on in the world. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say Gavin had daydreamed about Toby's cock. Average in length but thick and in the most amazing shade of dusky plum,

Toby's cock was this fat tusk of a thing with a blunt knob head and slight upward curve.

When he'd finally withdrawn from his reverie about Toby's dick, he looked up at his best friend's amused grin and the lube and condoms on the bed beside him. Out of his clothes, Gavin stood at the foot of the bed stroking his own member. "Turn your ass over onto your hands and knees."

Toby hesitated for a moment and Gavin wasn't sure what to make of it. He raised an eyebrow and waited for Toby to say something or comply with his command. Reaching some sort of conclusion in his own mind, Toby flipped over, presenting his tight little cowboy ass for Gavin to admire. Gavin climbed up on the bed behind Toby, pressing his hard dick against Toby's ass before covering Toby's back with his chest and whispering in Toby's ear. "Stop fretting, Tobes. I won't fuck you until you ask me for it. Only you can decide when you're ready. Once you cross that Rubicon and enjoy it, there won't be any way to claim you're straight and what happened between us was an experiment. Bottoming will change the way you see me and more importantly yourself. When you're ready, I'll be there and until then there's plenty for us to do, so relax."

With a snap of his head, Toby turned to glare at Gavin. "This is real, Gav. I'm not fucking with you, well I am, but you know what I mean. Do you need me to tattoo it on my forehead for you to believe me? God, you feel good over me."

Gavin rocked his hips, sliding his erection down the cleft of Toby's ass and nudging his balls. "I believe you. I want you to be sure." Kissing along Toby's neck and spine, Gavin pushed down gently on Toby's shoulders. Toby obliged Gavin and lowered his shoulders to the bed and spread his knees further, lifting his ass. Between Toby's thighs, Gavin grabbed his cock and flipped it backward so he could suck him from behind. A steadying hand on his ass kept Toby from bucking hard enough to pull his dick out of Gavin's mouth. Groans and moans from Toby were so wickedly hot Gavin was nearly humping air. Licking from the slit all the way past Toby's balls, Gavin grinned as Toby pushed back against his tongue. Gavin went back to the head of Toby's cock and sucked gently while stroking his thumb across his hole.

"Come on, Gav. Don't tease." Hips pushed back harder against Gavin's thumb, hoping to push it inside.

Gavin sat back on his heels and watched Toby buck for a moment before leaning forward and biting Toby's ass hard enough to sting.

“Holy fuck. Give me something. Please. Feels so good.” Toby lifted his ass even higher, presenting it to Gavin.

With a chuckle, Gavin pulled Toby's ass open so he could press his lips to Toby's fluttering hole, making sure he rubbed the stubble on his chin against the skin of Toby's ass. Moving to lick all the way up and down Toby's crack, Gavin reveled in the musky masculine scent he already associated with Toby. Gavin went back to licking the underside of Toby's cock only this time he ended by sucking on Toby's balls in turn. It was fun to blow Toby's ever-loving mind. Releasing Toby's testicle from his mouth, Gavin quickly began to lap at Toby's pink hole before plunging his tongue in deep enough to make Toby cry out at the pleasure of it.

Rimming was one of Gavin's favorite parts of sex. It was so intensely intimate and right on the edge of raunchy that it made the whole experience even hotter. Toby responded with the surprise and joy Gavin had expected. He doubted any of Toby's hook-ups would dare do something so risqué, at least relative to straight sex. Gavin pushed his face between Toby's cheeks and continued to lick and fuck Toby's hole with his tongue. Each moment that passed drove Toby closer and closer to losing it. Finally, Gavin once again grabbed Toby's cock from behind and pulled on it in time with his tongue. Toby seemed to be torn between thrusting into Gavin's hand and pushing Gavin's tongue deeper into his ass. It wasn't long before he found a rhythm that worked for him. Gavin slapped Toby's ass with his free hand and saw the goosebumps emerge on Toby's thighs and butt. The end was nigh, cliché but true. In one final twist, Gavin lubed two fingers before flipping onto his back and shoving his head under Toby and sucking his cock all the way to the root. Once Toby started to shallowly fuck his mouth, Gavin stabbed two fingers into Toby's ass, targeting his prostate. Toby screamed his release as pulse after pulse of hot come filled Gavin's mouth. Eventually, Toby's cock became oversensitive, and Gavin pulled off to crawl up and lie beside Toby for a carnal kiss with the flavor of Toby's semen still in his mouth.

Toby instantly wiggled his thigh between Gavin's legs and grabbed Gavin's ass to heave him closer to Toby's body. Gavin thrust against Toby's thigh and hip as they continued to kiss. Within a few minutes, Gavin groaned as he painted Toby's body with his release and continued to grind against Toby until they were both covered in his come. Unexpectedly, Toby pushed Gavin onto his back and proceeded to lick Gavin's come from his skin. They kissed again and again until Gavin dragged them to the shower to clean up.

Once they were back in bed, Gavin laid there and looked at Toby, still edged with disbelief that this man he'd loved for so long might love him back. Toby had felt so out of reach for so long Gavin sometimes wondered if he were dreaming. He knew whatever happened in the future, he couldn't and wouldn't regret what was happening now. It could still blow up in their faces, but at the moment, it felt right and safe. "What'd you think of your reward?"

"We have got to do that again, but I want a turn next time. So fucking hot. Jesus..."

"Mission accomplished." Gavin laughed deep in his chest.

Toby chuckled and rolled closer to Gavin. "I didn't know sex could be like this."

"Like what?"

"Easy, fun... emotional. Sex makes me feel closer to you, not more distant. I don't have to impress you or worry you'll get the wrong idea... It's nice to be able to be just me and enjoy what happens between us. I want you to fuck me, Gavin. Not tonight, but soon. I may be new to the ways of man-sex, but I know I'm going to prefer bottoming. I mean I want to fuck you silly too, but I am so rigidly in control of so much of my life, I like being able to let go and allow you to drive the sex train. Does the perception that I'm weak or effeminate bother me? Some, but everything you've done to me and with me has felt so amazing and none of it has made me feel anything but empowered. I'm working on reconciling all that, and as the great philosopher, Kurt Cobain once said... 'I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I am not'.

"But I have to live in the real world and in order to keep doing what I love, a piece of me has been locked in the dark and has to stay there. As much as I want to be able to walk into the light with you and not be afraid of the consequences, that's not possible. Things are a lot better than they've ever been, but mainstream rodeo fans still won't support a gay or even a bi cowboy, maybe someday soon, but not yet. I don't know how to do this without living a lie."

"I understand better than anyone and I've come to one conclusion. Compromise isn't cowardice. I do have to live in the real world and I'm not meant to be some gay rights trailblazer either. I need my sponsors and fan support to make this life I love work. So in order to have both you and my rodeo career, I need to carve out safe spaces where I can be as authentically me as possible. That's why I came out to my folks and I'm hoping you will too.

Being a real couple on the farm would go a long way towards lifting that burden. Our closest friends know already and will help too. We don't have to scurry around in the shadows in order to be together all the time."

"Come here." Toby lifted his arm and gestured for Gavin to cuddle up, resting his head on Toby's shoulder. "You think we can do this and not ruin everything?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't. It's going to be hard, especially when you're on the road without me. We're gonna have a conversation about monogamy and the temptations on the road. But, yeah, I think if we're both willing to work at it and we're careful, we'll be okay. Generations of gay cowboys rode the circuit without detection, I don't see why we can't too."

"What's to discuss about monogamy? I'd never cheat on you, Gavin. Ever."

"That's easy to say here in bed with me, but out there on the road and lonely... I wouldn't blame you if you slipped, especially with women, who obviously have attributes I don't. As long as you don't keep secrets from me and aren't emotionally attached to someone else, I can accept the occasional one night stand. What we have is worth more to me than some unrealistic notion that sexual fidelity is the most important commitment in a relationship."

"Not going to happen. I wouldn't hurt you that way. Remember, we weren't even in the neighborhood of a relationship and I couldn't sleep with random women once I saw the pain on your face when I did."

"Okay. I'm not giving you permission to cheat. I'm saying it won't be the end of the world if you do. There's a difference."

"Fine, but it won't happen and I know you won't either. It's not who we are, Gav. It's just not. And for the record, I'm bisexual, not a dog, and while I may be attracted to both genders, I don't need both to be happy. I will never lie in bed with you wishing you had tits. That's not how it works, at least not for me."

"I hear you. I... I want you to be happy. Being in a relationship is new for you and I don't want you to feel like I'm tying you down."

"You don't have a string of long-term relationships behind you either."

"Nope. Just the one and it's still going strong after fourteen years."

"You weren't in love with me from the beginning."

"Yeah, pretty much was, though I didn't realize it was more than friendship for a couple years."

“You are amazing.”

“I love you, Toby and I don't see that changing now. Go to sleep. We have a shit ton of stuff to get done tomorrow.”

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Chapter 6

God, he loved this.

Toby roamed around the arena taking in the atmosphere. The crowd was big and really loud which always brought great energy to a ride. But it was the smell of the rodeo that always got him... leather, earth, sweat and a little manure. As he walked back to the contestants' area, he could also smell a mix of food from the concessions: popcorn, cotton candy, and fried whatever, belonging to the people in the stands. He didn't have to ride until the *Pulling Rank* season finale event that would be broadcast live on one of the cable sports networks during prime-time. The idea of the event was to get the best bull riders on the circuit and the best bulls in the sport together to compete on a regular basis in front of TV cameras. That is to say, they wanted to ride on the coattails of the PBR for advertising dollars and public attention with an elite bull riding competition. The fact that they did it at the expense of all the other disciplines didn't seem to bother the organizers one bit. Toby knew they would argue that more money in the pockets of the association benefited all of rodeo, but it rankled a lot of the bull riders, though not enough to turn their noses up at the huge purses at the *Pulling Rank* events.

Gavin was riding in a less than an hour. Their merry band of not-quite-straight cowboys had already started off well. Matt had placed second in bareback for the day, and Val had finished third in steer roping and was in good shape for the all-around going into tie-down roping. Gavin was off doing his warm up before he settled down for his visualization and relaxation exercises. They'd learned early that preparing their mind for the ride was probably more important than preparing the body on the day of the rodeo. Gavin always needed the relaxation more than the visualization, but the two went hand in hand.

Saddle bronc riding was different from the other roughstock events, mostly because you actually have to saddle the bronc which made timing your pre-ride routine critical. A lot of saddle bronc riders liked to saddle alone so any mistakes in set-up were their own, but like in all things, Gavin and Toby were more of a team. Gavin was definitely the boss when it came to his chute procedure, but Toby knew his role was mostly keeping his best friend calm and confident.

The horse Gavin had drawn for today's ride was Hard Cheeze, a huge buckskin, who was relatively new to the circuit and had been racking up points this year. Rumor had it, he had been ridden exactly once in his rodeo career. In any case, Hard Cheeze was the kind of horse Gavin loved, big and fast with a high buck. Exactly like Major Tom, the horse who nearly killed Gavin the year before. It was funny, Gavin had put the wreck behind him before he was even cleared to compete again, but for Toby the fear and panic still lingered after more than a year. Since the wreck, every time he watched Gavin compete, Toby chewed his lip and ignored the fighter jets swooping around in his belly as he stood on the rails praying Gavin wouldn't wreck again.

When he finally got over to the contestants' area, he found Gavin leaning on the wall drinking a bottle of water. The day was warm for Labor Day weekend; Toby had been pushing water on everyone who would listen. It was easy to forget to drink in the business of getting ready to compete. "You okay, buddy?"

"Yeah. I'll do the rest of my warm up after we saddle, same as every other rodeo." Gavin rolled his eyes and smiled warmly.

"I know. Sometimes you need to be reminded that all is right with your world."

"All *is* right in my world. If it got any better, I might start dancing in the aisles."

"I'd pay to see that."

"You'll get your chance in San Francisco and maybe Las Vegas. Come on, Cody wanted to talk to you about his shoulder. The PT and the docs say he's all better, but the shoulder still doesn't feel right, I told him to find a massage therapist who specializes in rehab, but he doesn't want to hear it from me. So, I promised him yoga boy would straighten him out. You should think about opening a little rodeo performance clinic and charging people."

"I've thought about something like that, but probably not until after I retire." His idea was to hook-up with some of the big rodeo schools and teach people about rodeo-specific training, stretching and nutrition. He also wanted to finally get certified as a yoga instructor so he could teach for real. One day, he thought they might start their own rodeo school, running just a couple sessions a year, maybe with Val and Matty so all the roughstock events would be covered. "It was an idea I have noodling around." They walked toward the crowd of cowboys bullshitting and passing the time until their event.

"I like it. Maybe more like part of a bigger rodeo school... I bet we could start our own and maybe do it at Val and Matt's ranch... They already have an indoor arena. We should put a bug in their brains about it at lunch tomorrow." Somehow Gavin got it without his having to spell it all out. Toby was always amazed with how in sync they were.

As they approached the group of cowboys, Toby moved off toward Cody, the reigning saddle bronc world champion from last year. They talked for a while about Cody's shoulder and his rehabilitation. Toby reiterated what Gavin had said about finding a massage therapist. After a bit they moved on to talk about the rodeo and who'd drawn which horse, typical rodeo chatter.

"I pulled Raw Sienna, that nasty, little bay mare. She's super quick and throws her head to the side when she hits her front feet and just dumps off the side."

"She's a good draw for you though, proolly the money horse today. Gavin drew Hard Cheeze. That horse is so bloody big, I don't know if anyone can stick him."

"My brother Jesse covered him last year. It was his second or third outing but they were in Florida and Jesse thought the horse didn't like the humidity much. Couldn't have picked a better horse for Gavin though. When I saw the day sheet I told Dusty that Gavin was a shoe in to win the day. He's strong and his long legs give him so much leverage in the stirrups he kills it on the behemoths."

"Cody, I'm surprised you spend much time scouting the competition."

"I pay attention to the folks who can beat me on any given day. He keeps goin' like he's been, Gavin'll be in the mix for world champion soon enough. His body is so fluid nowadays, he might be the prettiest rider on the circuit to watch. Don't tell my brothers I said that."

"Pretty doesn't always score."

"No, it doesn't. He should go spend a month in Alberta next year so he sees some consistently better horses for a stretch. It'll polish him up a little and he'll jump in the standings afterward. I told him that last year, but he ignored me, so I'm telling you now."

"Did you even want to talk to me about your shoulder?"

"Yes, but I knew Gavin already gave me the same answer you would. I've been in this business a lot longer than you, he could be the future of saddle

bronc if he wants it bad enough. He won't listen to me, but maybe he will listen to you."

"I'll try. I've always wanted to compete in Canada more."

"While you're there, seek out a stock contractor by the name of Alger Leclerc. Ask him to watch Gavin ride and tell him it's a favor for me. He'll invite you out to his ranch between rodeos and he'll put you on as many bulls and horses as your bodies can handle. Listen to his mystical French mumbo-jumbo and I promise you'll both feel a difference in just a couple days."

"Why would you do this for us? I mean we're friends, but you're a hall of fame cowboy... and we're not..."

Cody ignored his question. "You're both stuck in the in-between. You've both gotten this far on talent and hard work. Gavin needs someone, like Alger, to help him focus on the final details that will make him a superstar. You're gonna be a star no matter what happens, especially once you move up to the PBR."

"How does everyone know that?"

"Cowboys gossip worse than chickens in a henhouse... But in this case, you share an agent with Dakota Haskell who happens to be married to my sister, Lindsey."

"Well, shit... I'm gonna split my time between circuits, at least enough that I qualify for finals, but yeah I'm switching." Toby was always surprised how fast rumors spread.

"It's the right move. Once you're on the big tour, you'll make three times what you do now."

"I know. Fewer rodeos, more money, and opportunities I can't even dream about now... what's not to like?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm up fourth, I've gotta finish getting ready. Thanks for the advice on the shoulder."

"Happy to help. I'll talk to you after." Toby wandered away to find Gavin. It didn't take him long. He was talking with Matt and one of the stock contractors. They were laughing and kidding around about something Toby couldn't hear. He almost stopped dead in his tracks when he took in the entirety of Gavin Hayes. Standing there in his jeans, black and royal chaps, black safety vest, blue shirt and his pale straw Stetson, Gavin was a picture-perfect modern rodeo cowboy, and he took Toby's breath away. Gavin looked up and smiled

broadly, Toby caught a glimpse of the bright denim-blue eyes he knew so well and returned the smile. Matt stepped in front of him and pulled him aside, well out of hearing range of the others.

“What the hell, Matt?” Toby wanted to talk to Gavin. Dammit.

“You gotta stop ogling Gavin like that. Jesus. Just seeing you look at him gave me a boner. Lesson one in managing the cowboy closet: No looking at your guy with all that naked emotion. Keep your poker face on. There’s plenty of time for flirting and sexy smiles back in your RV after you ride.”

“Fuck. I didn’t even realize it was happening. He looked over at me and it lit me up like a damn Christmas tree.”

“Aww... New love. I remember the honeymoon rush. Hell, it still happens with Val now and then four years later. But, you gotta be more discreet, man, or you’re gonna get yourself in trouble.” Matt’s teasing went serious at the end.

Toby’s brain was stuck on the *new love* part. Was he in love with Gavin? Toby didn’t know, and he didn’t even know how to figure it out. The question had been swimming around in the depths of his consciousness for a while, probably since Gavin’s wreck, but now it was starting to percolate to the surface more and more. He hoped the answer would reveal itself in time because Toby didn’t think it was something you could think your way through. You had to feel it and those kinds of emotions weren’t amenable to rational thought. “I hear you. This is all so new, I was caught off guard.”

“I know. That’s why Val sent me to supervise...”

Gavin strolled up beside them. “You guys okay?”

“We’re good. Loverboy here was about to melt the hardtop just looking at you and get y’all outed on the first day.” Matt shook his head and shrugged. “Val asked me to chaperone and it’s a good thing too. Fucking amateurs.”

“I saw you making eyes at me. I liked it... a lot. Just not here, okay?” Gavin smiled at him with promises in his sparkling blue eyes.

“I know. I’ll be more careful.” Toby blushed weakly. He was normally a tough guy to embarrass, but somehow with Gavin he’d turned into a big pile of sensitivity and girly emotions.

“You fix Cody up?”

“Yeah. I told him exactly what you did and explained how to find a clinical massage therapist near his house, but mostly we chatted. He’s already heard I’m going to PBR next season, so it’s out there.”

Matt piped in. "All anyone's gonna say is about time. You're too good to be making shit money out here with us, even if it's still more than what the rest of us earn per rodeo."

"You could ride bulls, I'll even offer to teach you, mostly so I can watch you get your ass kicked."

"Shut up. Bull riders are crazy bastards. That's something you should think about when it comes from a bareback guy."

Toby leaned in close and whispered to Matt. "Don't you snicker every time someone says bareback in polite company? I'm not gonna be able to keep a straight face anymore." They all cracked up.

Matt slapped Toby on the back as he kept laughing. "Kid, you don't have a straight face or anything else for that matter. You can't fool me."

"I fooled you for years there, dude."

"Not in your wildest dreams. I pegged you as bi within ten minutes of meeting you. Shit, Gavin took me longer to suss out than you."

"How?" Toby genuinely didn't know.

"I watched you pick up enough girls that I could tell you weren't faking it. But at the same time your compass always pointed at Gavin instead of north. He's where you look for reassurance and stability plus you protect him like you're his fucking *Patronus*."

"Harry Potter, really? You are a renaissance man, Matty." Gavin laughed at the reference.

"Hey... Don't dis J.K. Rowling." Matt pretended to scowl.

"Not dissing her... I'm dissing you." Gavin laughed again.

"Enough." Toby wasn't appreciating the tenor of this conversation.

"Plus, Val pointed out how you nearly slobbered yourself when you met Dean Barlow. But, overall, you were actually pretty good at covering your tracks from anyone who didn't know what they were seeing."

"That's something, I guess." Toby thought he'd been so careful, but apparently he'd been oblivious once again. "Gavin, Jake's headed out to the chutes. Time to go grab your gear. I'll meet you out there."

"Yes, sir." Gavin smiled before he trotted off to get his stuff.

Toby and Matt watched him go. Gavin's hips swayed gracefully with every step forward. Toby couldn't help but appreciate what those Rimrock jeans did for his ass. It was almost enough to elicit an audible moan, but he managed to protect his dignity and hold back the sound.

Matt shook his head as Gavin turned the corner at the end of the aisle. "Is it me or has his ass gotten rounder in the last few months?"

"Why are you paying attention to Gavin's ass?" Toby wasn't used to the rush of jealousy.

"Easy, man. I'm in a relationship, not dead. You know Gavin is hot enough to get a dead man's attention."

"The answer is yes and no. Since we increased his cardio time at the beginning of the season, he's down to about eight or nine percent body fat. But his metabolism seems to take the fat from anywhere but his ass. It makes him a little crazy. He thinks he looks like J.Lo from behind. It's pretty funny."

"There ain't one scrap of woman or swish in him... other than the fact he's worried his ass is too big. Most of us have these little cowboy butts... his is a work of art in comparison."

"If you say much more about Gavin's ass, I will take a swing at you. Fair warning."

"I hear you. Hard to believe you've been together for less than a week."

"No, you were right the other day, we've been together for more than a decade. We just didn't see it for what it was. Now, we do."

"Come on. We better catch up or Gavin's gonna wonder where you are." Matt turned and walked down the corridor to the bucking chutes. Toby followed, pausing to grab a couple more bottles of water and an energy bar from the stack of cases outside the medical room.

Once they found Gavin, Toby handed him the energy bar and a bottle of water. "Half the bar and half the water."

"I know. Geez. You'd think we hadn't done this a thousand times by now."

"Yeah, well... You don't think it makes a difference this close to competing. I know better. Eat."

"Yes, sir." Gavin smiled a little weakly before he started nibbling on the energy bar.

Matt laughed. "You two bicker like my grandparents."

The next twenty minutes went by quickly as he and Gavin were busy saddling and going through the final pre-ride warmups. It was all routine and not colored by any of the recent developments in their relationship. Cody moved into first place with a solid eighty-four point ride, and Jake was right behind him with an eighty-two, but there was plenty of room for Gavin to move to the top with a good ride. Hard Cheeze seemed to be raring to go and had a bit of a fit when they tightened the back cinch and that boded well for his ride.

Measuring the rein was sort of a mystical thing for saddle bronc riders. An old cowboy adage said "you don't measure the rein to get it right, you measure it so it's close". Too short and you'll pull yourself up out of the saddle and get bucked off and too long and you have no leverage to right yourself after the buck. Saddle bronc riders were constantly kibitzing about how much rein an individual bronc takes and everyone has their own theories. Gavin took all three of the common measurements and averaged them out. He pulled the rein snug to the base of the mane, then up over the bronc's head to his eye on the far side and finally to the midpoint on the swell of his saddle. Usually, all three measurements came out about the same, but sometimes not. Guesstimating the average, Gavin added the width of his hand to the measurement and marked his rein with a braided piece of yarn made from wool grown on Hazy Hill. His mother made them in all sorts of bright colors, and he used them like the favors ladies of the court would give to the knights for luck before a joust.

Gavin climbed across the bronc's back, chattering the whole way as to not startle the horse. It didn't seem to work. As Gavin dropped into the saddle and started getting his feet in the stirrups, the horse started bobbing his head and stomping his feet a bit, but Toby didn't see fear in the horse's eyes, he saw a whole lotta mad. A soft hand on the horse's neck seemed to pull him back from the red zone and he settled in the chute some.

Toby shifted to his spot near the corner of the chute where he could see Gavin's face. "You're set, buddy. Clear your head and don't try to anticipate. Remember, you gotta dance with the one who brung ya..." A wry smile from Gavin told him everything he needed to know. Gavin was ready and if the horse cooperated, this was going to be a hell of a ride. After setting his feet and getting in position, Gavin nodded to the gate man.

Hard Cheeze bolted out of the chute more like a bull than a bronc without a single stride before the first leap and buck. Gavin kept his hips in front of his

shoulders as the horse tried to cut right then left to buck him off. The bucks were dramatic, almost vertical and Toby knew if Gavin stuck the score would be huge. Smooth and graceful, Gavin moved with the horse, responding to each buck and change of direction. His ride had an elegance that gave Toby goosebumps. If Gavin won the day, this was a ride people would be talking about for years to come.

At about five seconds into Gavin's ride, Toby bit the inside of his lip hard enough to draw blood. His nerves watching Gavin were getting the better of him. Eight seconds doesn't seem so long until you're watching someone you care about risking everything at the rodeo. Toby forced himself to pull back on the fear. Gavin looked like he was in complete control of the bronc. Part of Toby wanted to search out Gavin's family in the stands, but he didn't dare look away. Once the pickup men moved into position, Toby knew he had witnessed something special.

The buzzer sounded and the pickup horse moved parallel to Gavin. He leaped onto the back of the pickup horse and vaulted over him and stood in the middle of the arena pumping his fist and hollering his joy. Toby and Matt were standing on the rails screaming with the rest of the crowd and their hands in the air. Gavin waited close to the gate to receive his score. The stock contractor and a few rodeo officials shook Gavin's hand before the score went up on the board. Ninety-two points, a new arena record and a personal best for Gavin.

Toby raced to the contestants' gate. Gavin was already being congratulated by the saddle bronc riders loitering there watching the rest of the competition and even though there were still six riders left to go and anything could happen, they all knew this was the winning ride. Not only would Gavin win the three grand for the first place finish today, he'd also go home with another six thousand in bonus money for breaking the rodeo record.

Gavin spied Toby trying to make his way through the sea of well-wishers and sprinted toward him. Toby barely got out a "Holy fuck, man. Congratulations," before Gavin was hugging him. It felt so right, Toby tried not to revel in it, but it was tough.

Gavin whispered in Toby's ear. "That was for you, Tobes. All for you."

Toby stepped back and exchanged a look with Gavin that said so much more than the words. Suddenly, Val, Pietro and Matt were crowding around trying to hug Gavin too. Soon, Gavin was on the move, climbing rails and racing up into the stands trying to get to his family. Toby watched from the

arena floor as Gavin got more quick hugs and congratulations. After a minute, Toby waved his arm to get Gavin's attention. He needed to get back to the floor for some media interviews. Gavin climbed back down, Toby handed him the other half of the energy bar and another bottle of water. Gavin downed them both before heading to the media corral.

Toby watched from a distance as Gavin gave a great television interview with the Real American Country network and answered a bunch of questions for the local press. They headed back to watch the end of the saddle bronc competition with rest of the riders. It got pretty exciting when some nineteen-year-old kid from Central Washington University scored an eighty-three, moving into third place in his second pro rodeo. In the end, Gavin won the day handily; no one even came close to touching him. He had to do another round of interviews and take about a thousand photos with rodeo organizers, sponsors, local politicians, the rodeo queen and her court and more.

Toby and Gavin had won their share of events along the way and the frenzy afterward was the last thing they wanted to face when it was over. By the time the second round of interviews was done and they had watched Val kick ass in tie-down roping, there were only a few hours before Toby had to start his pre-game for the evening event. Toby knew Gavin's sister, Piper, had seen his mother and Oscar at the hotel but they hadn't come to the rodeo that afternoon. He couldn't help but wonder if they would show up at the restaurant to have an early dinner with everyone or if she would just show up at the arena where she'd have a chance at getting on television again. The television people always asked for the seat numbers of any family in the audience, mostly so they could get reaction shots if anyone wrecked. Every time the camera landed on his mother, she always looked like the perfect doting mother cheering on her son from the stands and every time she left an event without so much as speaking to him, Toby was left hurt and annoyed. Anyway, Toby didn't have time to dwell on it now. He needed to shepherd Gavin out of the arena and back to the trailer so they could change before meeting at the restaurant. More than that, Toby needed a moment alone with Gavin.

They got back to the RV without much of a delay. There were still a lot of people who wanted to congratulate Gavin on his ride. Once inside the trailer, Toby slammed the door closed with his foot before hauling Gavin into his arms and kissing him breathless. "So proud of you. All those people want a piece of you, but we walk through this door and you are all mine. I spent the whole rodeo half-hard. Every time I looked at you, all I could see was you naked in

my bed. So hot. Even Matty commented on how good your ass looks these days.” Toby dove in for another kiss. He could feel Gavin smile against his lips.

“Happens to me all the time, watching you. My ride was all about you, Tobes. All the work to increase my strength and flexibility, nagging me about what I eat, pushing me to run and run and run... It all came together today. My body felt powerful and my spirit invincible. You made it happen by sheer force of will. I couldn't have achieved half of it on my own. Thank you for making me a better athlete and a better person. I love you so much.”

Gavin leaned in to kiss him as Toby whispered, “I love you too.” Where those words came from Toby would never know, but they were true. God, they were so true. Toby looked up at him with such wonder and disbelief. “I mean it, Gav. I love you. I think I always have.”

Tears welled up in Gavin's eyes but did not fall. “Oh, Toby. I never thought I'd ever hear you say it. I never thought this could be real. But it is.” Gavin dropped his head to Toby's shoulder and hugged him tight.

Toby slipped his hands in to the back pockets of Gavin's jeans and pulled their hips impossibly closer together. He could feel Gavin's erection hard against him. Gavin spread his legs a little and reached down and lifted Toby up a bit by the swell of his ass to bring their cocks into better alignment. They kissed and rubbed together in an erotic dance promising so much more for later when they had time. At the sound of a loud click, Toby whipped his head towards the door where he noticed two things. One, the door was slightly ajar. It must have sprung back when he kicked it closed. And two, Marianne's boyfriend Oscar was standing outside the door and had just snapped a picture of them kissing with his phone.

“Oscar.” Toby blinked trying to process what he was seeing. His mother's boyfriend stepped into the RV and stood there staring for a moment. They were too stunned to even move out of the embrace that had been so safe and comforting a few seconds ago.

For a middle-aged guy with a little beer belly, Oscar Flores was still surprisingly attractive. Half Native American, half Mexican, Oscar grew up the hard way on the local reservation, but he'd finished school and had a good job as a foreman at one of the local fruit packing plants. Toby always thought he was the kind of man his mother needed to make her happy, and he always seemed to treat her like she was the center of his universe. The sneer on Oscar's face told Toby this was a different guy than the one he'd had brunch with on Mother's Day.

“Well, this is a surprise. You mother sent me to get directions to the restaurant 'cause the GPS in her car can't seem to find a satellite. I went to knock on the door and I coulda puked when I saw Gavin playing tonsil hockey with some fag in the middle of your trailer. Took a picture so you'd know what a pervert your friend is and then I realized the fag was you.”

Gavin stepped out in front of Toby, protecting him from himself mostly. Toby knew Gavin was preventing him from taking a swing at Oscar. “Get out of my trailer or I'm gonna call the cops. We've done nothing wrong.”

“You do that and this picture is gonna get emailed to every rodeo news site in North America. And I know you don't want that to happen. You'd both lose everything.” Oscar's laugh was dark and without humor.

Toby stepped out from behind Gavin. “No, we actually wouldn't... All we'd lose is our rodeo careers, but it doesn't matter right now.” More truth spilled out of Toby unbidden. Rodeo wasn't everything, Gavin was everything. He was suddenly a lot more confident about the world. “What the fuck do you want, Oscar?”

“You and your little boyfriend over there are gonna tell Marianne you've decided to keep supporting your poor widowed mother the same way you have been all this time. It's what your father would want. And when I propose to your mother next month, you are going to give her your blessing and offer to pay for the big, fancy wedding she's always wanted. That's all for now, but if I think of anything else I'll let you know.”

“You're blackmailing us? Really?” Gavin was indignant.

“You're the one with the dirty secret. You don't have to decide now. We're staying at the hotel... in the room next to your parents... until the end of the rodeo. Just think, by Wednesday morning you could be the next gay power couple, I'm sure there will be plenty of national press willing to run the photo.”

“Oscar, you can't do this. We haven't done anything wrong. I love Gavin and that's nobody's business but our own.” Toby's words kept surprising him.

“Well, the way I see it, I love your mother and I'll do anything to make her happy and if that means I have to shake down a couple pillow-biters, that's what I'm gonna do. If you love him like you say, all you gotta do to protect him is open your wallet. Think about it and let me know what you're gonna do. Don't worry about the directions; I'll get them from one of the parking attendants. See you boys at dinner.” Oscar heaved himself back out the door and off into the overheated afternoon.

Gavin dropped onto the couch and rubbed his hands over his face and hair. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to give him what he wants. I'll be making more money next year and I have enough in savings for the rest. Don't worry, cowboy. I won't let this touch you."

"The hell you will. We are in this together. I'm not gonna let you deal with this alone. You know it will never stop... This year it's a wedding, next year it will be a car, then a trip to Europe... He will bleed us dry if you start this."

"What else is there? You want to come out like Michael Sam or Jason Collins? Can you handle that kind of attention? If you want to know what the seventh circle of hell feels like, come out as a gay rodeo cowboy. What about Val, Matt and Pietro? You don't think they'll be outed too? It is a giant mess with only one solution I can see. I open my checkbook again and again until I retire." Defeated, Toby collapsed onto the steps up to the double bunk beds.

"There has to be another way. We need help and I know where to get it. Here's what's going to happen, dude. We're going to get ready for dinner and pick up Val and the boys like we planned. After dinner, we're having a family meeting with everyone who will be affected by this fiasco... and I mean everyone. My parents, Piper and Chad, Val and Matt, Pietro, you and me. We'll lay everything out and see if we can't find another way out of this. We're not alone and we don't need to have any more secrets from our family. There have been too many already."

"Gavin... We can't... I can't..."

"Shut up. You might not be able to alone, but we can together. This is not up for debate. If you don't do this with me, I'm going to do it without you. No one threatens my family. I won't stand for it. Oscar thinks we're weak, but he's going to find out that this fag fights back. Get in the damn shower. We have to leave in twenty minutes."

"But..."

"No buts. We're going to dinner, having a meeting and then you are going to ride your ass off tonight. Lord knows, we may need the money." Gavin managed a light laugh and Toby couldn't help but follow along.

"Yes, sir." Toby smiled before he moved to stand in front of Gavin. "I do love you, Gavin Hayes." He reached out to stroke the side of Gavin's head.

“I love you too, Toby Prescott. C’mere...” With a tug on Toby’s arm, Gavin pulled him into a quick kiss. “I will never get tired of hearing that. Now go shower... nineteen minutes.”

Toby scurried off to the shower. They were ushering Val and the boys into Toby’s truck fifteen minutes later. They had briefly discussed cluing their friends in on what was going on before dinner, but decided not to trust anyone’s acting skills but their own.

The dinner itself was okay. Lots of congratulations and toasts for Gavin’s amazing ride. Toby was glad that hadn’t gotten lost in the drama. The owner of the restaurant even comped them dessert when he heard why they were celebrating. Ellensburg fancies itself as Rodeo City, USA and it carries over to all the local business owners. It was nice. Oscar was smug but mercifully quiet throughout dinner, Toby had been worried he would bait them throughout the meal. Marianne didn’t seem to be aware anything was out of the ordinary. Gavin and Toby tried to behave normally, but they both caught a couple looks from Piper and Matt which told them they hadn’t been wholly successful.

Keith cheated and slipped his credit card to the waiter after they ordered so he could pick up the check for dinner. Toby grumbled a bit but accepted he’d been bested with his own trick. Gavin’s dad liked providing for his family and paying for dinner was part of that for him. The friendly cat and mouse they played was as much for show as a contest of wills between them. Oscar and Toby’s mother were the first to leave the restaurant. Marianne was tired from the long drive and her excursion to the county fair which was host to the rodeo.

As soon as he was sure they had left the building, Gavin announced they needed to have a family meeting back at the hotel, but he and Toby needed a few minutes with Angie and Keith first. Everyone staying at the hotel had suites, so Piper volunteered their room for the meeting, leaving her parents’ room free for the time being.

Val, Matt and Pietro were a little confused about their role at a family meeting. Toby smiled as he looked at his friends who all seemed so worried and confused. “Boys, accept that you’re important to us and we want you there. I’ll explain better later and you’ll understand. We don’t have much time. I still have to get ready to ride and it’s already going to be a miracle if I manage to cover my bull tonight, never mind making the short-go.”

Chapter 7

Gavin watched Toby fidget. He wished Toby didn't have to come out this way, but Oscar forced their hand. No one should be forced out before they are ready. It was hard enough in the best of circumstances. Once Gavin's parents were settled in the sitting room of their suite, Gavin sat on the small sofa beside Toby.

Toby's fists were clenched tight on his lap, Gavin wondered if he was having the same trouble not reaching out and holding the other's hand. Shaking his head to clear his mind, Toby sighed before looking up at Gavin's mom and dad. "Angie, Keith... something happened today after Gavin's ride and you guys are too important to me... Shit. I don't know how to do this. There hasn't been any time for me to figure out what I wanted to say."

Angie smiled gently at him. "Toby, whatever it is we'll figure it out. Together. That's what family does. We're going to love you no matter what. Just tell us what's going on and why Marianne and Oscar weren't invited to the meeting."

Gavin laughed bitterly. "Yeah, therein lies the problem... It's okay, Tobes, tell them. I know you're not ready. I wish it could be different, but this is where we are. I promise you, it will feel so much better on the other side."

"I know. This is hard for me." Toby looked at Gavin, begging him to understand the reticence had nothing to do with him. Gavin did understand and he wished there was a way to make this easier.

Angie stared at her son and his best friend for a moment. "Toby, are you trying to tell us you're gay too? Because we already know."

Toby looked at her and cocked his head like a confused puppy. Gavin felt some of the tension leave Toby's body as he leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees. "I'm bi, not gay, but mostly... yes, that's what I'm trying ineffectively to say."

"Does that mean you're going to keep dating women along with men now?"

"Umm... in other circumstances it might, but no. I'm hoping I'm not going to have to date anyone ever again." Toby glanced sideways at Gavin before reaching over with a shaky hand and interlocking his fingers with Gavin's.

Gavin did not expect his mother to laugh and slap her husband's arm. "Oh, thank God! I thought I was gonna have to make Keith take you out to the parking lot and beat some sense into you." They all laughed as much to release some of the anxiety they were all feeling than real amusement.

Keith leaned back in his chair and appraised the boys. "We weren't sure you two would ever figure things out at the rate you were going. We've been waiting for this conversation for almost as long as we've known Gavin was gay." Keith looked at Toby for another moment before standing. "Toby, stand up. Right now." In a repeat of Gavin's coming out, his dad hugged Toby tight and kissed the top of his head like he did to Gavin when he was little. "Did you think we would react any different to you than we did to Gavin?"

"You're not my parents and I'm the guy in love with your son, the one who makes Gavin's homosexuality something other than theoretical."

"Listen hard, Toby, and don't ever forget what I'm about to say. You may not bear our DNA but you've been as much our son as Gavin for a long time now. Even if you and Gavin don't make it to forever, Hazy Hill will always be your home. No matter how angry we may be or how disappointed we become, we will never, ever, turn you away. We love you, Piper loves you. You belong to us as we belong to you. That's family."

"Thank you." Toby wiped the tears from his eyes. Knowing he had somewhere he belonged, no matter what, meant the world to Toby. Gavin understood how untethered Toby had felt since his father died. His parents had always tried to make Toby feel welcome and part of the family, but never had it been stated so plainly.

Angie leapt from her chair for her turn to hug Toby and kiss his cheek. "Don't thank us yet. There's responsibility that comes with being a full member of the Hayes clan, but we'll talk about that another day. I love you, Toby. I know you already have a mother who loves you, but I love you just the same."

"Yeah, the jury is still out on whether my mother loves me right now. We don't have a lot of time. If it's okay, can we explain today's drama one time with everyone before I have to get back to the rodeo grounds?"

Keith nodded his head. "That's fine. I have to admit you have us worried. Let's get to the part where we fix this." Toby and his mom walked arm in arm out the door and turned toward Piper and Chad's suite.

Gavin smiled. "Your mouth to God's ear, Dad." Gavin hugged his dad. "Thank you for accepting Toby so readily. He didn't want to lose his place in our family."

"I meant what I said, Gavin. He's one of us, more than ever now, and he will always have a home at the farm. We're gonna have to talk about what this means for the future sometime soon."

"You're leaving him part of Hazy Hill in your will, I assume. I'm good with that. If I have my way, we'll be living together on the farm for the rest of our lives."

"Your mouth to God's ear, son. It's a little more complicated, but that's the gist of it. Let's go get this over with." Gavin and Keith walked to the other suite where they found Toby standing in the hallway. His dad made his way into the room leaving Gavin with Toby.

Toby once again took Gavin's hand as they walked into Piper's suite, but instead of leading him to the main room, where they could hear everyone chattering, he pulled him into the bathroom. Gavin laughed and hugged Toby. "What's with you and bathrooms?"

"Temporary privacy... I need you for a second." Toby held on to Gavin like he was his only lifeline. Burrowing his face into Gavin's neck, Toby breathed deeply for a moment. Gavin knew they needed to reconnect before they went into the other room. "Thanks for sharing your family with me."

"You're very, very welcome. Feel better? I told you they'd be okay with it."

"I know. It feels like I'm stuck on some crazy amusement park ride. We need to hurry this along. I need to do some yoga before I start my pre-game warm ups. I'm gonna ride for shit if I don't get out of my head."

"Don't worry. I'll get you there. You'll have two full hours to focus on rodeo. I promise. Let's go agitate the natives on our behalf..." Gavin took Toby's hand and led him into the sitting room. Piper, who was sitting on Chad's lap, took one look at them holding hands and squealed like a sugar-addicted five-year-old, though Gavin thought that might be an insult to five-year-olds. She looked squarely at her husband. "You owe me a hundred bucks. I told you they were together." She turned to the rest of the people. "He didn't think it would happen until they both retired, but I saw how much things changed after Gavin's wreck and last weekend they were even weirder. I told Chad in the car on the way home you two were doing the horizontal mambo. He didn't believe me."

"Good Lord, Toby. Can we keep a secret from anybody?" Gavin leaned into Toby's shoulder and Toby wrapped his arm around Gavin's back.

In unison, the rest of the room said, "No!"

Val raised his hand. "Will you please tell us what's going on?"

"Tell them, Gav. It's your meeting. I still don't know how anyone can help us." Toby sighed and leaned a little harder on Gavin.

"Fine. In the smallest nutshell... After we got back to the RV, Oscar apparently stopped by to ask us a question about dinner and caught us kissing in the living area of the trailer. He managed to snap a photo on his phone before we even knew he was there." Everyone erupted with all due anger at Marianne's boyfriend.

"What a douchebag!" Chad wasn't a hotheaded guy and even he looked ready to lynch Oscar.

Toby laughed at Chad's outburst, it was so out of character. "If only that were the bottom of Oscar's barrel. Okay, I have to back up a little. Some of you don't know all the history. When I moved to the farm, my mother made some noise about losing the rent I paid being a hardship, so I kept sending her money."

"You were what, twenty-one? Why would she expect you to pay her rent when you were still in college?" Piper looked completely perplexed.

"Once I turned eighteen she expected me to help out with the bills and that morphed into rent when I was away at school. It doesn't matter. My dad would have expected me to take care of my mother for as long as she needed. Anyway, I've been worried about my grandmother for a while and last week while we were home, we found out that Grandma Betty is struggling with all the stairs in her home and after a little digging I found out that she can't afford to live in any of the really nice assisted living facilities in the area without some financial help. I can't afford to help her and send my mother money every month. So, I stopped by my mother's townhouse to talk about what we should do. Let's just say it definitely didn't go the way I expected. So I basically gave her one last check and cut her off. Fast forward to this afternoon. Oscar caught us in a clinch and proceeded to blackmail us..."

Gavin shook his head as all holy hell exploded around them. He raised his hand and whistled to get everyone to settle down. "And in order for him not to out us to every sports media outlet in the known universe, he wants Toby to resume sending money to his mother and... you're gonna love this... After Oscar proposes next month, Toby is also supposed to finance the big, fancy wedding Marianne's always wanted."

“You have got to be shitting me?” Matt’s face was red with embarrassment when he realized the language he’d used in front of Gavin’s mother and sister.

“Relax, Matt. I raise cattle for a living and am surrounded by farmers and cowboys every day. I think Piper and I have grown immune to swearing. Besides, have you met my husband and sons? Dinner conversation at our house wouldn’t exactly be out of place at your average truck stop.” Angie had given up trying to police their language a long time ago. They tried to keep it clean, but it didn’t always work so well. Gavin glanced over at Toby, who was smiling broadly and looking at his mother with such adoration. It was sweet. When Gavin realized what made Toby so happy, he couldn’t help but smile himself. The casual reference to her sons, plural, was all it took to make Toby’s afternoon.

Val shifted in his seat. “Okay, we get that Oscar is a douchebag, to quote Chad. And Matty, P and I will do whatever we can to help, but I don’t see what we can do except be supportive of whatever you decide to do.”

Toby stepped away from Gavin to get a better look at Val. “I was recently reminded I had better friends than I knew and was admonished for not letting them in more. Do you recall anything about that, Val?” Val had the good sense to blush before Toby continued. “We seem to only have two options... Either I start writing checks and get caught in a never-ending cycle of demands for more until we’re bled dry, or we come out publicly, and take all of Oscar’s ammunition away. I have to consult with my agent on the best way, but most likely, we’ll lose most of our sponsors immediately and our careers eventually, but we’ll keep our self-respect and be able to be honest about our relationship. We might even help some gay kids see being gay isn’t about the stereotypes. I guess there’s a third choice, we could walk away from rodeo without saying anything, but it seems pretty cowardly to me.” Toby stepped back and took Gavin’s hand again.

Gavin gave Toby’s hand a tight squeeze. “I would rather come out than give Oscar and Marianne one fat nickel of the money Toby makes on the back of a bull. But one of the major problems with coming out is that we wouldn’t just be outing ourselves. You’ve said yourself Val that your relationship with Matt is an open secret on the circuit and because you guys are close to us... gay by association will follow. We don’t want being friends with us to wreck your lives.”

Leaning into his partner, Val peeked at Matt before speaking again. “Don’t worry about us. Matty and I are ready for whatever happens. We have the ranch

and are prepared for a life after rodeo. Pietro, what do you want to do? You're the least likely of us to get skewered, especially if we leave the circuit at the end of the season, but you're going to be in a hell of an awkward position."

Pietro had been so quiet all afternoon, Gavin wondered if his family was overwhelming for the Brazilian so far from his own family. "Nobody should worry about me. I won't lie, but I won't answer personal questions about my friends either. Paul Kazchek is looking for a travel partner for next season. His brother's gay so he shouldn't have an issue with me or the cloud of dust following me around for a while. It'll settle as soon as the next scandal comes around. You all do what you have to do. Make decisions based on what's best for you and your family, I'll be fine."

"Mom, I don't think P is understanding why he's here or why we're worried about how this will affect him. Could you please explain it to him, like you and Dad did for Toby a little while ago." Gavin knew his mother would get it.

"Sure." Angie smiled at Pietro. "What the boys are trying to say is while you may not share a name or blood, they consider you family. They have chosen to claim the three of you as their own and therefore what affects you, affects them. They want your input in the decision making and support for whatever decision they come to at the end of the day, even if you don't necessarily agree with them."

Pietro looked at Val and Matt, who both shrugged, then Gavin and Toby who just nodded. "If those are really the only options, you should come out. But this is your mamá, Toby. Your mamá... Are you sure she would go along with Oscar blackmailing you?"

Toby stared at his boots for a beat before he answered. "I don't know. I wish I could say she'd never hurt me that way, but I don't know."

"We've known your mother for a lot of years, Toby. She may not be the most loving person, but I never got the impression she was evil or even spiteful, just sort of self-centered. Maybe you should talk to her, before you decide what you should do." Keith had always been kind to Marianne especially right after Toby's dad passed away.

"See Pietro, this is why we need you in this patchwork family. No one else even thought to question whether Marianne would go along with Oscar's plan. She clearly had no idea anything was going on at supper..." Gavin always had trouble giving Toby's mother the benefit of the doubt. He was glad someone did. Maybe they could avoid this whole mess by going around Oscar. It was worth a try, in Gavin's opinion.

Toby was back, half-leaning on Gavin and holding his hand. It was surreal. Gavin had wanted this for so long, he'd stopped believing it was possible, but Toby was Toby... defier of gravity, practitioner of yoga and lover of Gavin... To have Toby claim him so openly was a marvel. He'd always thought being together would be a slow evolutionary process building gradually over time, but the reality of it was more like their romantic relationship seemingly burst fully formed from the friendship and physical attraction that had been there all along. Gavin had his family around him and Toby in his arms. Everything else would work itself out, one way or another.

"So, I guess I talk to my mother sometime tomorrow. I'm only competing in *Pulling Rank* this weekend, so I'll find some time to get her alone. Possibly during the football game tomorrow... maybe Oscar will go to mass..." Toby squinched up his face trying to decide on a strategy.

"Hey, boy-o. There is no way I'm letting you do this without me in the room. If we have to go to the police, you're going to need someone who can corroborate what was said." Gavin put his hands on his hips almost defiantly.

"Oscar can rot in prison for all I care, but we're not putting my mother in jail." Toby was shocked that Gavin had gone there.

Outraged on Toby's behalf, Pietro scowled at Gavin. "Did you forget who you're talking about? You don't talk bad about someone's mamá like that. It's not right." The Brazilian came out more when Pietro was upset.

"You're right, P. I'm sorry, Toby. I was talking about Oscar, not Marianne. But in any case, we can't count on Marianne being loyal to Toby in this. She could side with Oscar. I don't want anyone going to jail if we can help it, but I won't stand by and let them hurt you, Tobes. I can't." Gavin didn't know how he was going to accomplish that since almost any outcome was going to hurt. A quick look at his watch told Gavin it was time to get this show on the road. "Okay, we're out of time. We need to get back, Toby still has to ride tonight. So, if you're going to the rodeo grounds, saddle up..."

"Mom, Dad... I'm sorry for the drama. We'll see you guys at the arena. Matt and Val have been together four years and have managed to stay off most people's radar the whole time. We didn't last one day before getting outed. It's fucking ridiculous. Dammit. Don't forget we're hosting the post-rodeo fiesta for the family. We have beer and yes, relatively healthy snacks ready to go at the RVs. We invited Marianne and Oscar, but they already had plans, so no worries there. Come on, Tobes."

Toby put an arm around Gavin's waist. "Wait. Before we all rush off, I want to say thank you. Thank you for loving us unconditionally, even though we love one another. Thank you for helping us find an option that comes before nuking our careers. Thank you for supporting us even when being friends with us may torch your own careers. I'm normally a pretty independent guy and it's not easy for me to admit when I can't do something on my own." Toby elbowed Gavin playfully. "And sometimes I need to be reminded forcibly I have family and friends who will be there for me when I need them. Just... thank you."

Keith stood up and shook Toby's hand before the hugs-go-round started as they tried to get out the door. It didn't take long, but Gavin could feel how frazzled and uncentered Toby was getting. Every minute out of his routine might as well have been an hour. The drive back to the arena was largely silent. Val, Matt and Pietro retreated to their trailer as soon as they got back.

Gavin lead Toby into the RV and made a show of closing all the blinds and locking the door before dropping onto the sofa and patting the spot next to him. "C'mere. You have ten minutes for us to adjust before you start your warm-up."

With a deep sigh, Toby slid onto the couch and almost instantly snuggled into Gavin's side and dropped his head on Gavin's chest. Moving his hand slowly up and down Toby's back, Gavin let him be for a few minutes. It said a lot that Toby felt safe enough to let Gavin comfort him this way. "God, Gav, I never thought I could need a hug so badly. It's a little unnerving."

"Hey, you've had a bit of a day. Give yourself a break. You came out today. How does it feel?"

"Anticlimactic. I had it built up to be this big thing and it is, I guess, but it doesn't change anything. I am still the same guy I was yesterday and I'm good with that. The people I care about accepted what I was before I was even sure. At least it's over. Time to get back to living and forget this drama-filled parody of our lives we're in right now."

"I'm with you, man, but you gotta understand... Coming out never ends. Whenever someone new comes into your life you have to decide if you're going risk telling them. Sometimes it's like being pecked to death by a duck. Come on, you need to get moving."

"I know. I needed this, you, before I lost my mind. I'm just going to add twenty minutes of relaxation yoga to my regular routine. I need you to do me a favor though."

“Anything.” Gavin meant that more than Toby probably realized.

“I can’t deal with anymore discussions of Oscar or my mother tonight. I want to get back to focusing on rodeo. We need to celebrate your amazing ride with the family at our after-party tonight. Piper already found the video on YouTube, we can all watch it again with you, which is always fun. Anyway, I need normal for a little while. We can talk and stuff in the morning, but tonight I need this.”

“Done. Now go put on your old gray sweats and a tank top so I can enjoy watching you do your yoga.” Gavin laughed at Toby’s incredulous expression. “What? I like looking at you. I ogle your sexy little body every time I catch you doing your yoga thing. I like the sweats because you usually go commando and I get a peek at your dick, but the bike shorts are pretty awesome too.”

“Have you always been incorrigible or is this a new development?”

“Always. I usually hide my horndog, but I don’t have to anymore.” Gavin gave Toby a cheeky smile as he walked away.

An ice-cold beer wasn’t the worst way to end the day. Gavin fished another freezing bottle of Corona out of the cooler and sat back in his camp chair between Toby and Piper. Chad was somewhere helping Pietro and Val take bags of trash over to the dumpsters, but everyone else was gone finally. Somehow their little family after-party had morphed into something bigger as people wandered over to congratulate Gavin again and commiserate with Toby over his tough break. Overall, Toby’d ridden well, he covered both bulls and tied fifth in the first round on a mean little bull named Letter Bee and finished second in the short-go on a big, ugly Brahma named Mustachio. He missed winning second place in the event by half a point. Gavin thought the judges scored Toby’s bull low in the first round because he was small, but even so, Toby cleared five grand in prize money. The cash they won this weekend would go a long way toward paying for plane tickets and hotels over the last two months of the season.

Gavin crossed his ankle over his knee, sipped his beer and half-listened to the conversation Piper and Toby were having. He was feeling pretty mellow, this wasn’t his first beer of the evening, but he wasn’t to the point of even being a little buzzed either. It wasn’t unusual for Gavin’s mind to fixate on how gorgeous Toby was. Some people might think he was a little short, but all bull riders were, and for Gavin, all that power in a pint-size package really turned

his crank. He could see the strain Toby was feeling under his bright smile and easy laugh. So many things were clearer now than they had ever been.

Piper smacked Gavin's arm. "Gavin... Are you listening to us?"

"No. I'm prioritizing the list of crap I have to get done before I can go to bed. What did you ask me?"

"What time for brunch tomorrow?"

"Not brunch, lunch... like twelve thirty, one o'clock... here at the bistro. I need to stick as close to my normal routine. I'm distracted enough as it is."

"I hear you. I'll let Mom and Dad know. They want to spend some time at the fair looking at the cattle and sheep anyway, so that'll be easy enough."

Gavin saw Val and P stepping into their RV. Matt must still be settling the horses for the night. It wasn't long before Chad pulled his wife out of her chair and kissed her briefly, but what Gavin noticed was his hand slid gently across her stomach as he did so. A happy light bulb went off over Gavin's head. "So Chad... Piper... Have you told Mom and Dad yet?" The smile on Gavin's face couldn't get any brighter. His sister and brother-in-law both looked confused then guilty. Toby raised an eyebrow to Gavin who looked from Chad's hand to Piper's face and back again. That's when Toby got it.

"We were supposed to tell everyone at supper, but with your big ride, we didn't want to steal your thunder and then all the crap with Oscar... It hasn't seemed like the right time."

Toby leaned over and kissed Gavin's cheek like it was the most natural thing in the world. "We're gonna be uncles. How cool is that?"

Chad laughed. "Damn straight." It was funny to see Chad blush at the worst gay pun in the world. "Or not... but someone's going to need to teach the little guy—" Piper elbowed him, hard. "—or girl... how to ride a horse and to love the land and the pride in growing things that nourish people. Piper and I may understand those things intellectually but it's not an essential part of us. We're gonna need you for that. Mom and Dad will help, but it's gonna be you. You both are also the best role models I know for following your dreams and living the life you want, not the one that's expected of you."

Toby palmed his eyes hiding the wetness gathering there as he stood. "I'm honored. We're honored you think of us that way. You guys are going to be great parents. Congratulations."

Still sitting in his chair, Gavin decided to lighten the mood with some smartass. "Yeah, what he said. But, ya know, I think you're buttering us up for a whole lot of free babysitting." Gavin stood up and hugged Chad and Piper. "It's great news. Tell Mom and Dad at breakfast tomorrow. They could use some happy."

"You sure you don't want to be there?"

"I got to know before they do. It's all good."

"Mom suspects something already. I have a feeling she's known for a few weeks already."

A chuckle bubbled out of Toby. "I swear that woman is a witch, absolutely nothing gets by her."

"Here's to hoping it's a genetic mom thing. I'm gonna need it." Piper leaned into Chad and laughed.

"You feeling okay, sis?"

"Most days. I got nauseated in the surgical suite a few times, but it hasn't been bad. The mood swings might kill Chad before it's over. I'm due in the middle of March, so you both better plan accordingly."

"Just don't pop until after Austin and we'll be fine." Gavin stared at his sister for a second. "You look so happy... content even."

"I have everything I've ever wanted, well soon anyway." She put her hand on Chad's which was still sitting protectively on her belly.

"Good. You guys deserve it. Now go home to the hotel and get some rest. Let Chad pamper you a little. You've only got seven months to bank enough sleep for the next eighteen years." Toby kissed Piper's cheek and shook Chad's hand. Gavin hugged them both before walking them to their car. Along the way, Toby and Piper chattered about prenatal yoga and something about ginger tea while Gavin and Chad talked about the rodeo and the horse he'd drawn for the next day. More hugs and good nights finished off the evening. It was a nice end to the day and their impromptu party.

Toby and Gavin spent another half hour cleaning up and packing chairs and tiki torches back into the storage compartment under the trailer. By the time they made it to bed, it was one thirty in the morning.

Feeling vulnerable after the run in with Oscar, both men checked and double-checked the blinds were all closed and the door was locked tight before

they crawled naked into the queen-size bed that had historically been Gavin's. It wasn't surprising Toby was still wide awake and a little wired. The adrenaline rush of riding bulls took a long time to wear off. Sleeping was not going to be possible until he crashed hard. Gavin thought maybe he could speed the process up a little. Shifting onto his side, Gavin tucked his body under Toby's arm, resting his head on his boyfriend's shoulder. Running a hand over Toby's hard abs, feeling the soft hair and skin, Gavin tilted his head up, looking for a kiss. That innocent, almost chaste, kiss grew and grew into a passionate and frenetic devouring of one another. They both had a mountain of unresolved emotion and anxiety that needed an outlet, and sex was a pretty healthy one. Gavin's tongue sought its mate, tasting the fruity toothpaste Toby liked. The kiss went on and on with bodies sliding together and hands wandering wherever they could reach.

Toby's hands settled in Gavin's hair, gently gripping and occasionally tugging Gavin's head into a different position. Rhythmically squeezing Toby's ass, Gavin encouraged him to rock harder against his leg. A long, calloused middle finger slipped between Toby's cheeks to tease his puckered opening. Toby groaned and pushed back into the sensation. "Gav, need you... please... I'm ready, so ready. Fuck me, please..."

Gavin grinned as he bit at one of Toby's nipples. The arching of Toby's back and canting of his hips would have made Toby's desires perfectly clear even without the words, but Gavin needed every last syllable. More importantly, Toby needed to say it so there was no doubt in his mind this was what he wanted. God, he was so beautiful. Gavin's heart raced as he watched Toby's body respond to every touch, every kiss, every nibble. It was intoxicating. "I got you, man. Relax. I'll take good care of you, body and soul."

"Always do... Love you, so much. Didn't know that's what it was... do now though... Please, Gav..."

"Got you... promise. As much as I want to watch your face, it's going to be easier on your side unless you want to ride me."

In a New York nanosecond, Toby maneuvered himself to have his back against Gavin and pulled his top leg up to his chest. Gavin reached up onto the shelf built into the headboard and grabbed the lube and wet two fingers. For what felt like hours, Gavin played with the outside of Toby's anus, in reality it was about five minutes. He could feel Toby opening up as they both relaxed a little. After reapplying a little more lube, Gavin worked first one then two fingers into Toby's passage. Knowing what was coming, Toby moaned and

pushed Gavin's fingers deeper and harder against his prostate. Three fingers had Toby panting and making a whole symphony of sounds as Gavin continued to stretch his ass. Gavin's dick ached, it was so hard. Toby reached back to stroke Gavin as best he could in the awkward position. Twisting his shoulder, Toby stretched his neck to kiss Gavin some more.

Gavin kept kissing as he removed his fingers and backed off enough to get a condom on and slick himself up with more lube. Back in position on his side behind Toby, Gavin slipped his cock back and forth over Toby's hole. It was an amazing moment of anticipation as he started kissing Toby again. Frustrated, Toby rocked his hips into Gavin trying to get more contact or more urgency from Gavin. But Gavin was having none of it. He was going at his own pace so he could be sure Toby was ready.

Poised with the head of his cock in position against Toby's hole, Gavin nudged gently, waiting for Toby to invite him in. Toby slid his hand between his legs and back to where he could touch his own pucker but Gavin's dick as well. He was finally frustrated enough to grab Gavin's cock and thrust his ass back to take Gavin inside. Gavin gasped at the warm tightness as he slid slowly deeper until he was in as far as he could go. A strangled groan escaped Toby as he accepted the sweet fullness of being penetrated by another man for the first time. For a few heartbeats, both men held perfectly still, enjoying their physical and emotional connection.

Gavin's breathing picked up in pace as he began to struggle to remain motionless with the onslaught of overwhelming pleasure. "So good, Tobes. Please tell me I can move..."

With a soft grunt as he wiggled his hips, Toby smiled. "Tear it up, dude."

Rolling his eyes, Gavin chuckled as he slowly pulled out, applied more lube, and slid back in. After a few gentle thrusts, instinct swamped intellect and Gavin began fucking Toby harder and faster. Once they found a rhythm, Gavin wrapped his arms around Toby's chest and started kissing and sucking at Toby's neck and shoulder. It didn't take long for Toby to take the hint and bend around so their mouths could reach one another.

The drugging kisses and the enveloping warmth of Toby's body did their job bringing both men closer to the edge. Gavin needed a little more, so he pulled out of Toby completely. An out-of-character whimper was Gavin's first clue Toby wasn't happy about having Gavin's dick taken from him. Rising up on his knees, Gavin moved to straddle Toby's bottom leg and encouraged Toby

to move his top leg further up against his chest. More lube and Gavin slowly moved back into Toby, but now he felt like he could go harder and deeper.

Watching Toby's face as they came together was a bonus. The new position also gave Gavin more ability to hit Toby's prostate. Not long after, Toby's keening and hip motion began to get more frantic. Gavin grabbed Toby's dick and began stroking. The upward spiral of their lust was rapidly approaching its peak. He was so close to his own orgasm that Gavin had to fight it back in order to give Toby time to come first. Feeling the telltale flush of goosebumps racing up his thighs, arms, ass and back, Gavin was never so happy to feel his partner come around his cock. Once he felt Toby go off, Gavin plunged over the edge right behind him. They were both out of breath with their hearts still pounding when Gavin collapsed onto Toby and kissed him, hard. His hands moved around Toby's back and sides as they returned to reality.

Still panting, Gavin kissed Toby's hard pecs in a few places. "You okay, Tobes? I should have gone a little easier on you, but I got so swept up in how good it felt..."

"It was perfect. I didn't want you to baby me. You fuck like a god, man."

"Thanks... I guess." Gavin climbed out of bed to dispose of the condom and clean-up. He brought back a cloth for Toby. "Do you feel any different?"

"Not the way you mean. Sex with you is a camel of another color—better than I've ever had before and it's not because you're a man either or at least not just that. It's like all the emotion and sensation between us is set on this feedback loop that grows and grows until the pleasure of it explodes all around us. So much more than getting each other off."

"Yeah... We'll have to try the other way around soon. I want to watch you come inside me. It's a whole different thing. It's fun to see you experience all this for the first time with me, but this is all new for me too. I've never loved the person I'm sleeping with before either and it is different. Then again everything is different than it was a week ago."

"It's like one moment to the next, we were both changed. It wasn't anything dramatic, just a few words and all I thought I knew about myself was different, better, more at peace. That was the moment we crossed the Rubicon, not this one. I don't know what's going to happen with Oscar or my mother or moving to the PBR or our careers in general, but I do know I will never regret acknowledging how I feel about you or making love with you tonight."

Gavin had reached the end of his post-sex energy. “Love you. Sleep now. Talk later.”

“Okay, caveman.” The covers got pulled up from the foot of the bed and they squiggled around to find a position where they were both comfortable. Sleeping together was still so new, there was a little trial and error before they settled and fell into the darkness together.

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Chapter 8

Sitting at the dinette, Toby listened to the sounds of people going about their business getting ready for another day of rodeo. He may not have to compete today, but Gavin did, so they'd do their best to keep them in their normal routine which right now meant breakfast. A few sips from his vat of green tea with honey was just the thing to get him moving. Toby had left Gavin in bed sleeping, but that wouldn't last much longer. He rummaged around the fridge for stuff to make egg white omelets. By the time he heard Gavin in the bathroom, the food was about ready to go on the table. Toby grabbed his cell from the counter and thumbed out a text to his mother asking her when they could get together for a few minutes. No point in putting it off.

Gavin walked in from the bedroom and paused to kiss Toby. "Didn't like waking up without you." He moved off to set the table for breakfast.

"I always get up before you. Breakfast is ready when you get out of the shower every single morning. How do you think that happens? The breakfast fairy?"

"Sorry. I just had plans this morning. And I thank you for feeding me every day. I'd be living on toaster pastry and frozen pizza if you didn't."

"What plans?"

"I wanted to wake you up with a sleepy morning blow job, but that got shot to hell when I woke up alone. Anyway, what's for breakfast? Smells good."

"Our menu this morning is egg white omelets with mushrooms and spinach, whole wheat toast, and your own cask of green tea... which means stay away from mine." Gavin had a habit of misplacing his extra-large Day-Glo orange travel mug and sneaking sips of tea from Toby's.

"No turkey bacon? Not even the vegan bacon that tastes like smoky, salty plastic?"

"Nope. Too much salt lately, you don't need to be retaining water before you ride." Toby was the boss when it came to nutrition.

"Okay... I miss real bacon... Come sit with me. I hate it when you eat standing at the counter."

"You can have all the bacon you want... as long as it's at a restaurant with waiters and printed menus." Toby thought it was a brilliant rule to keep Gavin

from feeling deprived. Two plates of breakfast in hand, Toby crossed the small space and slid them onto the table before sitting across from Gavin.

"Thanks, man." Gavin took two bites of omelet before looking up at Toby. "This is great. What's the plan for today?"

"I texted my mother to arrange a meeting, but she hasn't replied yet. I'm hoping Oscar will go off to mass or somewhere and we can get this over with before it messes with the schedule. I need to get in some yoga and a run today or I'm going to be a cranky boy later. Plus, John Dobrowski from the national PR team called me this morning because you didn't answer your phone last night. They want you at the *Tough Enough to Wear Pink* event visiting breast cancer patients after lunch. A van will pick you up outside the rodeo ticket office at two thirty. You should be back by five at the latest. It's all in your voicemail."

"Hard as they are, I like doing hospital visits. But they don't usually ask me to do those PR photo things."

"Breaking the arena saddle bronc record made you the local celebrity of the day. Check out the local paper online... There are some great photos of your ride and a really cozy picture of you and Cody behind the chutes."

"Aww... Baby, you jealous? 'Cause we've both met Cody's wife. He's no threat to you."

"I'm not jealous, just feeling a little territorial where you're concerned this morning." Toby reached across the table to touch Gavin's hand. "It'll pass. You're mine and I know that. Sex seems to have brought out my alpha male today."

"Piper calls it testosterone poisoning, but whatever. I am yours. I've always been yours for the taking and will be for as long as you want me. There is no one on Earth who is a threat to you, at least where I'm concerned. Well... except maybe David Beckham... Yeah, he'd give you a run for your money..."

"Jackass... Eat. We gotta be ready for my mom to call back. Do I need to pull out the ironing board or are your pink shirts ready for later?" Part of *Tough Enough to Wear Pink* day at the rodeo was, unsurprisingly, that almost all of the men and women competing wore pink shirts to help raise awareness and money for breast cancer screening, treatment and research.

"I'm good. I got all my ironing done before we left home." Gavin frowned at the Marine Corps T-shirt he'd been given when they visited injured soldiers

in Texas and the gray cargo pants he was wearing. "I'll change after we have lunch with the family. I don't want to get my clothes sweaty and wrinkled before I have to be at the hospital."

"And somehow I doubted you were gay..."

"Now who's the jackass?" Gavin laughed with Toby as they finished up breakfast. It didn't take long for them to do the dishes and get everything put away. They were about to grab their yoga mats and head outside to run through their morning routine when the ding of Toby's cell phone receiving a text message sounded.

"Oscar's going out at eleven; we can go see her then."

"It's gonna be okay. We'll be okay."

"She's never going to accept any of this, but I gotta try to put this genie back in the bottle. I shouldn't have to lose my career because we're together."

"No, you shouldn't. No one should be faced with this kind of choice. Unfortunately, that's not the world we live in. People are fired or passed over for promotion or not hired in the first place because they're gay every single day. There's nothing special about us. We don't get a pass because we're being blackmailed."

"Part of me wants to come out and get it over with. There will be a bunch of noise and a whole lot of hate pointed in our direction, but if it made things easier for the next guy or if one gay high school kid could see he can still do anything, be anything... even a rodeo cowboy... I would gladly make that sacrifice. The problem is rodeo isn't ready. Public opinion is changing but not enough, not yet. We come out now and we'll be forced out of rodeo before it could make any difference at all, like generations of gay cowboys before us."

"So what do we do?"

"We hope Marianne has Oscar on a short leash and she's willing to help."

"Grab the mats. We have plenty of time to get through our morning yoga routine before we have to go. In any case, Starbucks is on the way back from the hotel... We can get those strawberry protein smoothie things as a reward when it's over."

"Deal."

Toby approached the hotel room door with Gavin just behind him and stood there. He raised his hand to knock and couldn't make himself do it. Their last meeting hadn't gone well and Toby was worried she wouldn't even talk to him about Oscar. Finally, Gavin rolled his eyes and knocked.

Marianne Prescott opened the door and invited them into the suite. She seemed surprised to see Gavin with him, but Toby couldn't do this without him and Gavin wasn't going to let him come alone. His mother was an attractive woman even in her late fifties. While Toby shared the same eye color as Marianne, that's where the resemblance ended. If Toby favored anyone, it was really his dad. Sometimes Toby wondered if that's why his mother had pushed him away after his father died.

He could remember how much in love his parents were. When he was about eight, he came downstairs long after his bedtime and found his parents listening to the radio and slow dancing in the living room. He sat on the stairs and watched them for a while as they danced completely unaware of him. They looked so happy and Toby thought they might be the most beautiful people in the world. Eventually, his mom saw him and shooed him back to bed with a giggle and a blush he didn't understand then, but did now. It was one of his favorite memories. No, she had never been a particularly affectionate or involved mother, but he always thought she loved him in her own way. It sucked he wasn't sure of that anymore. The feeling of being adrift in the world without a family was palpable even knowing he had Grandma Betty and Gavin's family to fall back on.

"Hi, Mom. Sorry for the cloak-and-dagger text this morning, but we needed to talk to you... alone... Shit, I don't even know where to start." Toby scrubbed his hair with his hands.

Gavin stepped in to give Toby a second to get his head together. "Let's sit down and talk. Nothing irrevocable has happened yet and we can still work all this out." They moved further into the sitting area and sat on the loveseat.

His mom sat on the side chair with her leg folded under her. "What's up, Toby? You've got me worried and you've brought Gavin into our family business. I'm not sure what to make of all this."

"I guess I should start at the beginning..." Toby looked at Gavin. "There's no graceful way to do this, is there?"

"None whatsoever." Gavin smiled and winked at him. The gesture warmed Toby and gave him confidence he couldn't have found anywhere else.

“Mom, I know this may be upsetting, but I hope not... I’m bisexual.” There he said it again and didn’t get struck by lightning.

“So what? You’ll find a nice girl to marry and break her heart screwing around with men on the side?”

“Jesus, Mom... I’m bisexual, not a man-whore. You should know me better than that. Maybe some bi people need to be with both genders, but that’s not how it is for me. While I am attracted to both men and women, I am perfectly capable of being honest and forthright. You really think that little of me?” Toby leaped to his feet and stomped over to the window. “Gavin, this is never going to work. We should go.”

“We need to try. We’re not the only ones who are going to get screwed if we don’t find a way to fix this.”

“Fine. Your turn.”

“Okay then...” Gavin looked at Toby’s mother calculating what to say next, but he ended up just blurting it out. “I, on the other hand, am full-on gay and in love with your son.” Marianne sputtered, but Gavin raised his hand to stop her from speaking. “In case you’re wondering, he loves me too.”

“It figures. He and his hippie-dippy parents made you think you are that way, but you can still find a girl and have a normal family. You don’t have to be like that because he is.”

“Mom, I’ve been this way since before I even met Gavin. It doesn’t matter anyway because Gavin and I are together and that isn’t going to change. You need to think carefully about what you say next because I am about one syllable away from walking out the door and never coming back.”

“Why are you here, Toby? Do you want my approval? You never needed it before and you’re not going to get it now. You have the option of finding a woman and living a normal life. Choosing to be with Gavin and ruining your life is ridiculous.”

That was the moment when Toby started losing it. “Fucking hell. I’m twenty-six years old, I don’t need your approval. I hoped I’d receive something other than contempt, but I will not stand for you disrespecting Gavin or my relationship with him. It’s exactly the same as what you and Dad had together.”

“This travesty isn’t anything like my marriage to your dad. Tell me why you’re here and get to the point.”

“Fine. Oscar showed up at our trailer yesterday and stumbled on me kissing Gavin. He managed to take a picture with his phone before we even realized he was there. We confronted him about it and he informed us that either I continue to send you money and pay for the wedding you always wanted or he was going to out us. I came here today to try and talk with you before we considered going to the police and having Oscar arrested for blackmailing us, but whatever. You want to play this like we’re strangers, fine. I thought you might love me enough to stop your boyfriend from torpedoing my career, but you don’t and never have. We’re wasting our time.”

“Both of you stop! Jesus. You’re not even fighting about Toby being bi or being with me or even Oscar’s crap... I’m sorry your husband and your dad died. More sorry than you know... but there’s going to be a lot of collateral damage from your unresolved bullshit if you don’t find a way past this... Toby, you need to control your temper and remember what’s important here. Marianne, you have to decide if you are willing to lose your son over this. And I promise you, if Toby loses his rodeo career because you sided with Oscar, you will lose him.”

“You never liked Oscar. How do I know you’re not punishing me for last week?”

“Jesus, Mom... Listen to yourself... You think I’d come here and tell you about something I’ve kept private all this time just to get back at you for fighting with me about Grandma Betty? I came here to be honest and let you know I’ve fallen in love for the first time in my life, but like always you want to make this about you.”

“That’s crap, Toby. You’re here to save your precious career, like sitting on the back of a dirty bull is somehow noble.”

“No, that’s not true or at least not completely true. I wanted to tell you last week before I got so worried about Grandma Betty. I knew you wouldn’t react well to me being with Gavin and I didn’t want that clouding the issues.”

Marianne pointed sharply at Gavin. “It’s always about him. It’s always been about him. Your father drops dead of a heart attack and you don’t turn to your own family, you run to Gavin and his perfect parents... I told your father this would happen. I warned him if we didn’t get you away from that damn farm, you’d turn gay for that boy.”

“And you wonder why I turned to Angie and Keith... The first thing you said to me after telling me my father was dead wasn’t that you loved me or that

we'd be okay... You told me I needed to stop crying and grow up, I was a man now and needed to act like it. I was barely fifteen.

"When I finally got to Hazy Hill, Angie hugged me and let me cry then she fed me grilled cheese and tomato soup, I think. Later Angie, Keith, Gavin and Piper curled up on the couch with me and watched stupid action movies one after the other until I thought I could sleep. Sometime near dawn, Keith found me crying on the bathroom floor because I didn't want to wake up Gavin, he sat down beside me leaning against the tub with his arm around my shoulder and cried with me and for me. He told me I'd be alright, that he and Angie would help any way they could... that I was loved. They gave me the solace that should have come from you, but never did."

"Bullshit. I was never good enough for you... You belonged to your father, I was always a distant second. Once Gavin showed up, I fell further and further down the list until I lost you completely when Drew died. Now you tell me you're going to kick me out of your life, that's rich. I haven't been a part of your life since you left for college."

"Since the day Dad died, you haven't shown any interest in me or what I'm doing at all. Tell me... What was my college major? How'd I do in my first rodeo? How many times have I been injured this season? Can you answer even one of those questions?" Toby paused dramatically. "I didn't think so."

"You were hurt?" His mother seemed genuinely concerned, but it was much more of an indicator that she had no idea what his life was like.

"I ride bulls for a living, I'm always hurt, but not badly so far this year. I've had a sprained wrist, two sprained ankles, a gash in my calf took thirty-two stitches to close, a couple broken fingers, and a slight ACL tear that's still not great, but I have a good brace now so..."

"You haven't missed much time. I sometimes look at the rankings and you've only been moving up."

"I rode the next weekend after most of those injuries but I missed three weeks of competition with the knee. But none of that is the point... You were the parent. It was your job to stay involved in my life, but you didn't. I was forced to grow-up fast which was okay but you weren't even there to back me up."

"Yeah. I was working two jobs in order to keep a roof over your head. It was almost two years before I got my job at the high school. You always were ungrateful."

“No, I wasn’t. For what it’s worth, I cooked and cleaned and did anything I could think of to help without being asked to do any of it. All I wanted was for us to be a team. I was trying to find a way to get closer to you without Dad there to be a bridge between us. And you never saw any of it. This isn’t getting us anywhere. Come on, Gav. We’re leaving.” Toby started toward the door with Gavin following. He stopped and looked back at his mother. “There was a time when the tiniest bit of affection and attention from you made me the happiest kid in school. I should have given up a long time ago, but part of me believed you loved me and didn’t know how to show it without Dad around. I’m sorry for wasting your time. Tell Oscar he’s never going to see a dime from us and as long as we never hear from him again, we won’t go to the cops. Make sure you watch for us in the news. We’re gonna make history as the first openly gay or bi professional rodeo cowboys... Your friends are going to be full of questions, I hope you’re ready. You know the saddest part? I would have been honored to pay for your wedding. I was so glad you found someone who loves you and makes you happy again after Dad...” Toby shook his head and turned back to the door before he whispered, “Good-bye, Mom.”

Gavin didn’t say a word as they walked through the hotel; he just kept a steady hand on Toby’s back. Toby could feel the sadness and disappointment rolling off Gavin, and he knew it didn’t have a damn thing to do with his own rodeo career. His mother’s lack of care and empathy had always been a sore spot for Gavin, but Gavin had grown up with the most loving, touchy-feely parents imaginable and couldn’t imagine not having that in his life. Once they were back in the truck, Toby couldn’t hold back his anger another second. He roared as loud as he could and banged his hand on the steering wheel so hard he felt the reverberation all the way into his shoulder.

“Maybe you shouldn’t drive, dude. Slide over, I’m coming around.” While Toby slid across the bench seat, Gavin got out and dashed around to the driver’s side. “You need to relax before you take a swing at someone, probably me. Use your Pranayama meditation. Clear your mind and put one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Breathe deeply, feel the air move all the way into your lower belly. Concentrate on the hand rising and falling on your abdomen...”

“Thanks. You really do listen to me yakking away about the yoga stuff.”

“I do. Always. It may not be spiritual for me, but it is important and has definitely improved my bronc riding. It’s getting to where I crave the yoga more than even the running when I miss a few days. Come on. Sit up straight,

hands in place and breathe deeply. Inhale all the peace and love from the world and exhale all the anger and negative thoughts..." Gavin went back to being quiet as he drove the few minutes back to the rodeo grounds, only pausing to pick up the strawberry smoothies he'd promised. They both needed the reward. Toby felt his ragged emotions come back under some semblance of control before they even made it back to the RV.

By the time they got to the Cowboy Bistro for lunch, they were the last ones to arrive. Everyone at the table looked up at them expectantly, and it crushed Toby to disappoint them. He'd lost his temper and the whole conversation went off the rails. All of these good people were going to suffer because he couldn't keep his shit together. It wasn't fair, but there was nothing he could do now. "No joy on our mission. I got distracted and screwed it up. Gavin tried to get us back on point but... my mother and I in the same room with something more important than the weather on the agenda rarely ends well. I'm sorry." Toby tried to move toward the food line, when Angie stepped into his path and hugged him tight. He ignored the pressure behind his eyes as he hugged her back.

"It'll be okay. We're all here for you whatever happens." Angie kissed him on the cheek before she turned to Gavin and repeated the maneuver. Toby wasn't sure but he thought he heard Angie say something about talking mother to mother. He hoped she didn't mean what he thought she did, but he knew better than to tell Angie what she could or couldn't do.

They grabbed plates of delicious roast turkey and a variety of side dishes before sitting down with the family. Toby was kind of glad they were in a public place and couldn't really talk about what was going on. He needed some time to sit with the fact that he'd shut his mother out of his life for good. Lunch conversation moved around them even when some of the cowboys and their families stopped by to congratulate Gavin on his ride and catch up with people who they hadn't seen in a while. In a small, dark and bitter place in Toby's mind, he wondered how many of these good people would turn hateful once they knew he loved Gavin. How many of them would shield their children from even looking at them? Toby shook his head trying to displace the entire line of thinking.

With a sad smile, Gavin leaned over to him. "It wasn't your fault. I don't think this could have gone any other way. She could still call Oscar off. Try and have a little faith."

"I don't have the luxury of having faith in someone who has been disappointing me over and over for eleven years." Toby sighed as his shoulders slumped. He looked up at Gavin begging for understanding. "I can't do this now. Cover for me. I'll see you back at the trailer." He needed to think for a while and Toby didn't want anyone to hear the conversation he was about to have with his agent. Jerry was a great advocate, but he wasn't the most sensitive soul and he was definitely going to explode when Toby explained his predicament.

"I'll come with you. Give me two minutes to finish my lunch."

"No, stay here and be with your family. I'll be there when you're done."

"They're your family too." Gavin looked down the table encouraging Toby to do the same. "No one thinks this was your fault, especially not me."

"I know. Promise. I need a little space. Eat your lunch. It's gonna be okay." Toby would keep saying it until he believed it. As he walked away, he couldn't help but look back and watch them all talking and laughing. He wished he could do something to stop the chaos bearing down on them, especially Valentín and Matt, who didn't deserve any of this.

Once he got back to the RV, Toby turned on the AC and sprawled on the sofa trying to get his equilibrium back. After a while, Toby hit the speed dial for his agent and waited for the call to connect. His conversation with Jerry went exactly how he expected. There was some yelling and some "what the hell were you two thinking?" and a whole lot of demands for anatomically impossible things to happen to Oscar. All his bluster was followed by Jerry's sincere statement that Toby's sexuality didn't matter to him or his agency. They spent a few minutes formulating a first sketch of a plan for what to do next, but Jerry knew the sports agents for a couple of the professional athletes who had come out recently and he wanted to touch base with them before they went too much further. In the end, Toby felt slightly more in control of the situation and what his options were, but he still felt like he'd been thrown by the rankest bull on the tour.

He needed to run, needed to burn off all the conflicting emotions surging around his head and body. Mile after mile, Toby would use the steady rhythm of his stride to clear his head and let him focus on punishing his body without Gavin to pull him back from the edge. After he changed into his workout gear and running shoes, he went out and sat beneath the trailer's awning and began stretching.

It wasn't long before Gavin returned looking pretty grim. Toby was genuinely glad to see him and smiled crookedly as Gavin approached. "Hey. What happened?"

"You ran out on me, worried my parents and confused our friends with an exit that would make Speedy Gonzales proud. I know you're feeling guilty and need some space to deal with it, but I'm leaving in half an hour and you'll have the whole campsite to yourself for a few hours. Jesus, Tobes. What could possibly be so important it couldn't wait an hour?"

"Inside. I'll explain where no one will hear over the air conditioning." Toby lead Gavin into the RV. "I couldn't justify putting off calling Jerry another minute. As it is, he's pissed I waited this long to tell him what's going on."

"What's his plan?"

"He thinks an in-depth interview with a smaller outlet will work to our advantage... something online like OutSports or Huffinton Post. It will let us control the story longer and hopefully minimize the amount of a circus it will cause. Jerry's convinced Oscar won't carry out his threat for at least a few days after the deadline. He wants the money and he won't get it without another attempt at blackmailing us. So, Jerry wants us to do an interview at Hazy Hill with a reporter who will probably spend a couple days following us around, asking questions and taking pictures, probably right around Pendleton. He's gone off to talk to some agents he knows who have managed high-profile athletes coming out, not that we're high profile or anything, but we are medium-size fish in this little pond. We need a solid plan and then we need to let the commissioner's office know what's coming. Leaks are inevitable once that happens. So we're still in a holding pattern for now, but wheels are in motion."

"Good. That's pretty much what I expected. Shit, I have to get in the shower right now if I want a prayer of being on time." Gavin kissed him briefly. "Go finish stretching. I'll be out in fifteen."

And that's what Toby did. Gavin managed to say good-bye before Toby ran off into the late afternoon heat. When he got back to the RV, there was a small cooler on the picnic table with bottles of water and sports drinks on ice inside and beside the cooler were two dark chocolate-peanut butter protein bars. The cooler had a sticky note on it that said "Drink Me" and the protein bars had a note which read "Eat Me". A bright laugh came over Toby as he read the notes. He did feel a little like *Alice in Wonderland*. Did that make Gavin the Cheshire Cat? Toby thought it might.

As he moved to sit down in the shade and drink the bright orange liquid Gavin left for him, Val ambled up to the RV. Toby didn't realize how dizzy he was until he tried to sit and he pretty much collapsed onto the bench of the picnic table. Sweat beaded on his forehead as his heart rate started to climb. "Fuck."

Val raced over once he saw the condition Toby was in. "Dammit Toby. How far did you run? It's over eighty fucking degrees. Gimme your keys. Don't move a muscle." It didn't take long for Val to return with a pitcher of cool water, a washcloth and a towel. "What the hell were you thinking?" Every rodeo cowboy had the symptoms of heat exhaustion drilled into them by the medical teams. Toby should have known better.

"I wasn't thinking, that was the whole point of the run. What time is it anyway?"

"Almost four. You need to wet yourself down and cool off. I switched the AC on inside, but if you go in there now you'll cramp up." Val grabbed Toby's wrist to check his heart rate.

He wet the cloth and started wiping the water across his overheated skin, but it wasn't fast enough so he dumped the pitcher of water over his head and down his arms and legs. "I ran for almost an hour and a half so I'm guessing it was somewhere around eleven miles."

"You're lucky you didn't pass out on the side of the road somewhere. If your heart rate doesn't come down in the next five minutes I'm taking you to the sports medicine truck for an IV. This is nuts. Gavin's going to flip out, he's already close to the edge worrying about you. Jesus, man. Are you trying to kill him?"

"What did he say?"

"Absolutely nothing. But you didn't see his face when you skipped out in the middle of lunch. Everything okay between you guys? This is a lot of stress on something so new."

"He's worried, but handling it better than I am. I buckled under the guilt sitting there at lunch like nothing was wrong, like my mother's boyfriend wasn't going to hurt everyone I care about. I had to call my agent anyway, so I bolted. I wanted a little time to get my shit together, but when that didn't work I needed to run hard enough to get to the place where my mind is quiet. I guess I over did it."

“Ya think... Keep drinking, *tolo*. You have to finish that crap and then a bottle of water before I let you stand up.”

From experience with Val and Pietro, Toby knew *tolo* was the Portuguese word for fool. “Okay, okay... I’m a little overheated... Relax will you.”

“No. I won’t relax. Your heart rate was well over one hundred beats a minute. I’m going to get ice packs from the freezer.” Val came back with another sports drink and a couple ice packs and dish towels. “These can go in your armpit, groin, or the back of your neck. Pick your poison.”

After wrapping the ice packs in towels, he stuck one under his arm and the other he pressed to the side of his neck. He wasn’t about to freeze his junk; he had plans for later. “Feel better?”

“Yes. But do you?”

“Yeah. I’m okay. I’m sorry. I seem to be fucking up everything I touch right now. Gavin and I find our way to something great and because I can’t close a door properly we get outed the first day back on the tour. Oscar tries to blackmail us and my own mother won’t help me stop it. I flip out at lunch and manage to hurt Gavin and who knows who else in the process. I need to run off all that and I end up with heat exhaustion because I wasn’t paying attention to my body. I honestly don’t know how much more Gavin or I can take, Val. I really don’t.”

“Have you talked with Gavin or anyone about this crap? Really talked about how overwhelmed you’re feeling?”

“Gavin knows. He always knows.”

“If you guys are going to make it, you can’t go all cowboy and protect him from how you’re feeling. Even if he knows, it will help to talk it through, you might even stumble on some truth you hadn’t considered before. And it’s just as true in reverse. Sometimes you have to make Gavin talk, especially when he doesn’t want to burden you. He was devastated when you walked out of lunch. He thinks you’re going to decide being with him is too much trouble and you’ll go back to hooking up with every buckle bunny west of the Mississippi until you find one you’re willing to keep.”

“Not gonna happen. Even before things got physical between us, he was my whole world even if I didn’t see it for what it was. It might be different if I hadn’t sat in that ICU room holding his hand and staring at the monitors for hours just so I knew he was still alive. If he died that night, I would have

crawled into his grave right behind him. Just a tiny glimpse of a world without him at my side was nearly enough to break me.”

“I remember, but what Gavin remembers is his heart breaking every time he watched you hook-up with some girl you’d never see again. I know it changed after Austin, but he endured that for a lot of years before then. You have ground to make up before he can be confident this thing between you is gonna last. Pushing him away and being secretive isn’t going to help his confidence any. Give me your wrist.” Val checked his heart rate again. “Better. Flip the ice around and keep drinking.”

Toby switched the ice packs around and finished off the bottle of sports drink. A bottle of water appeared in front of him. He took it and opened the sport top on the water. “Thanks Val. I should start calling you Doctor Val. You could be the Brazilian Doctor Phil.” It felt good for Toby to laugh a little.

“No way. I’ve just been where Gavin is right now. Matty was a player before we got our shit together, I almost lost out on the best thing in my life because I didn’t want to get hurt. It took a long time for me to be sure he and I were solid enough to build on.”

“How’d you get past it?”

“Time, and Matty being willing to be a completely open book to me. I still get a little sideways if I think he’s hiding something from me. You should have let Gavin be there when you talked to your agent because I’m sure he expected Jerry’s first advice to be for you to break up with Gavin and run far, far away.”

“Shit.”

“Not the end of the world, but you have to understand that his insecurity is riding him. I refer you back to... you guys have to talk, even when you don’t want to. Anyway, Matty’s making grilled tacos for dinner. You guys should come over when Gavin gets back.”

“He should be here soon. I’m gonna go lie down in the air conditioning and wait for him. We’ll be over. Tell Matt... no cayenne in the pickled cabbage this time.” Last time the cabbage had enough heat to double as culinary napalm.

Val laughed. “I’ll remind him. Get some rest. I know it seems like the end of the world, but one day soon this will all be in the rearview mirror.”

“Thanks, Val. I seem to be saying that a lot lately. I am so sorry my family drama is going to screw life up for you.”

“Honestly, it’s not screwing anything up. We accepted we would inevitably get outed a long time ago. We’ve had plans in place since almost the beginning. This isn’t your fault and we don’t blame you for anything. Besides, it could still all work out the way we hope. It’s too soon to start the funeral march.” With a wave, Val took his leave and walked around to the front of his trailer.

Toby woke up on the sofa, cold with a roaring headache and a warm, squishy ice pack under his arm. A quiet groan rumbled from his chest as he sat up trying to discern why he was awake. He soon heard Gavin fumbling at the door. The events of the last couple days had Toby paranoid enough to lock the door before his nap. Even as crappy as he felt, Toby couldn’t help but smile as Gavin walked through the door. “Hey. How was the hospital?” The instant he asked the question he saw Gavin’s red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes matched the color of his pink on pink paisley shirt with the retro mother-of-pearl snaps. Gavin had gotten his big, soft heart bruised again.

“It was good, I guess. You’ve done hospital visits. I met some nice women fighting breast cancer. Some of them asked interesting questions about rodeo, a few even knew about my ride. A sweet old lady, who reminded me of Grandma Betty a little, flirted wildly and asked to try on my hat. It was cute. But it was the last woman I visited that got to me... Lisa’s a single mom with two kids. Joey is fourteen and Sarah is eleven.” Gavin started to tear up a little. “She told me the cancer was bad, a lot worse than originally thought but she hadn’t told anyone yet. She knew she was dying even if the doctors hadn’t made it official. Lisa’s terrified her kids are going to end up in the system. Her ex-husband is a good guy but he lives back east somewhere and her mother has it under control for now but she isn’t a permanent answer either.

“After a while, she asked me if I was ever afraid to get on the back of a bucking horse. I told her I was scared every time I rode, but part of the thrill was in overcoming the fear and doing it anyway. When she asked me how I did it, all I could tell her was fear is only paralyzing when you don’t have a plan, so I control the things I can and leave the rest to God. My answer seemed to comfort her a little, but it didn’t feel like enough especially when she hugged me hard and thanked me for coming to see her.

“In the van on the way back, I felt like such an asshole. I’m worried about losing my rodeo career when people like Lisa have real monsters under their bed. If rodeo goes poof today, I still have an amazing life. Running the farm

with my dad isn't any less of a dream than rodeo, it's just not that time sensitive. I can only ride broncs for so long at this level before my body betrays me either through injury or age. It was this huge reminder of how blessed we are and how little we have to lose by coming out. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to come out publicly, especially this way, but if it's gonna happen, my world isn't going to come to an end. It's harder for you, I get that, but we both know where our future lies after rodeo. My parents are leaving you a share of the farm in their wills for goodness sake. You're as tied to that land as I am."

"They are?"

"Yeah. My dad said something yesterday. He meant it when he said you'd always have a home at Hazy Hill. You can't be completely surprised."

"I didn't... They shouldn't do that, it's yours... and Piper's."

"Yeah well, my parents found a way to make sure you have some skin in the game for the long haul. And for the record, you don't get to shit on their gift. You're only answer when my dad talks to you about it will be 'thank you' or I'll kick your ass."

"Yes, sir." Toby smiled wickedly. He liked Gavin's bossy side.

Gavin laughed as he sat on the sofa beside Toby. "You look like crap. What happened or do I have to guess?"

"I'm fine, more or less. I ran too far, too fast in the heat. Val saw me stumble over here and got me cooled down and made me drink before I got in any real trouble. My head hurts so I'm guessing I'm still a little dehydrated, but I'll be right as rain after a shower and some more water. I'm happy you're home though." Toby rubbed his hands on his thighs, squared his shoulders and grabbed Gavin's hand. "I need to apologize. I should have waited for you to call Jerry. It wasn't right when all this affects you as much as me. I wasn't keeping secrets from you, I know how Jerry is and I wanted to protect you from his bullshit until he'd blown out all his bluster. I'm so sorry Gavin. I never meant to hurt you, I don't know how to do this yet and I'm gonna fuck it up sometimes. Just to ease your mind, he never once suggested we break-up. It wouldn't have mattered if he did. The only thing that could get me to leave you is for you to ask me to go and even then you'll have a hard time shaking me loose. I may have been late to the party, but I'm here now. I love you, Gavin Robert Hayes. You are my forever."

"As you are mine. There's a romantic hiding somewhere inside you." Gavin smirked before kissing Toby with enough heat to melt glass.

“News to me. I need to shower. We’re having tacos with Val, Matt and Pietro whenever we get over there. You think I can wear my pink plaid shirt to dinner without spilling anything on myself?”

“You’ll be fine. Go now or we’re going to be really, really late.” Gavin leaned in and kissed Toby again, slipping a hand under his shirt.

In the end, they were only a little bit late.

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Chapter 9

Gavin sat on the picnic table he was supposed to be folding up and putting away and thinking about the Labor Day weekend that was now behind them. He ended up getting bucked off in the finals so he had to be satisfied with the two good rides he'd managed in the earlier rounds. The cremello gelding, Vino Bianco, pitched a fit in the chute and almost bucked him off before he even rode. If it weren't for Toby spotting for him, he might have ended up under the horse in the chute. When he saw the day sheet, Gavin was optimistic; he'd ridden the bronc twice before with decent results, but on the fourth leap, Bianco surprised Gavin by dropping his shoulder and rolling to the left, dumping him into the dirt. In the end, Val won the all-around, Matt came in fourth in bareback, and Pietro, who didn't qualify for *Pulling Rank* came in fifth in the regular bull riding competition. Everyone made money so the rodeo was a resounding success even with the sword of Damocles hanging over all their necks.

There had been no contact from Marianne and Oscar since he and Toby walked out of their hotel room. Plans were moving ahead for coming out, but Gavin wasn't comfortable sitting on his hands and waiting. He wanted to be doing something, anything at this point, which is why he was supposed to be packing up and getting the fifth-wheel ready to pull out. But the late afternoon sun felt nice on his skin. He'd changed into shorts and a tank top after he showered the arena dirt off his back. It wouldn't be long before it was entirely too cold to be sitting out, but it was a nice way to celebrate the unofficial end of summer. He adjusted his baseball cap and leaned back on his elbows taking it all in.

They had convinced Val and Matt to spend a couple days at the farm before they all had to head over to Puyallup and then down to Pendleton before coming home. Pietro opted to travel with Franco, who was from Argentina, and Tyler, a third-generation rodeo cowboy from Texas. The rookies were both right around twenty years old and seemed to have a hard time staying out of trouble without adult supervision. Toby thought P might be recruiting for the rainbow rodeo coalition they were unofficially building, but Gavin didn't think so. Pietro always looked out for the new kids, especially the ones from Latin America. Although for all he knew, they could both be right.

Gavin was about to get back to work when Toby strolled up to him looking like a cowboy superstar wearing a snug PRCA T-shirt and jeans with his

fashion-over-function straw cowboy hat and sunglasses. It was hot and Gavin could feel his dick perk up with interest. The crooked smile Toby couldn't hide told Gavin that Toby knew what kind of effect he was having on Gavin.

"Hey, dude. Val get the horses loaded okay?"

"Yeah. Feller, Squeak and Clemens are easy, and without Dizzy flipping out every ten seconds, it went quick. Whenever I help Val out with the horses, I thank God I didn't become a roper. Traveling with horses two hundred days a year would get old in a hurry. Anyway, they're loaded. Val plans to hit the road soon. We should catch up with them in time for dinner."

"I talked to my mom. She'll have someone move our horses out of the closest corral and run a power cable and hose over to the trees between the garage and barn. That way they have easy access to the horses and your place. Dad offered the guest room, but I think they'd rather sleep in their own space. I'll ask, but you know, the trailer becomes home after a while." Gavin was glad they agreed to visit the farm; it didn't make sense for them to drive five hours home to Montana only to reverse the same trip plus another two hours to Puyallup two days from now. Besides, Matt and Val had both worked construction in the off season before they made enough money to bridge the gap from October to January. Gavin hoped they would be able to give an educated opinion of the Gorman homestead and how much it would cost to renovate. "Speaking of home... Have you given any more thought to the Gorman place? I was thinking..."

Their conversation interrupted by the sound of a car close by. They both turned and watched as a silver Tahoe pulled into the space where Val and Matt's trailer had been. As soon as he saw the SUV, he knew it was Oscar's. A confrontation in front of all the rodeo contestants packing up to go home was not on Gavin's list of desired activities for the day. Gavin couldn't hold back the sigh when he saw Marianne and Oscar get out of the truck. Oscar didn't approach them; he just stood sheepishly beside his SUV leaning on the passenger side door.

Marianne, on the other hand, marched right up with determined purpose. Toby stepped forward to greet her and at the same time, cut off her approach to Gavin. "Hi Mom. I didn't expect to see you this afternoon."

Gavin almost laughed at Toby's false chipperness at seeing his mother. Her coming to them gave him a glimmer of hope that maybe this could all be resolved without bloodshed, metaphorical or otherwise. If they pulled this off,

he had a bottle of Single Barrel Jack he won at a rodeo in Tennessee a couple years ago that was finally going to get cracked open. Knowing he was only there for moral support, Gavin hopped off the table and settled in to watch the byplay between mother and son.

"I needed to talk to you and you weren't about to come to me." Marianne's eyes darted around like she expected something to leap out of the shadows and attack.

"You're probably right. Come on over into the shade under the awning and, please, keep your voice down. This isn't the easiest place to keep things quiet in the best of circumstances."

"I don't want to fight, Toby, but somehow that's where we always end up. It's like we speak different languages, and without your father here to translate, stuff gets lost in between. I never meant for you to think I don't love you. I know I can be self-centered and bitchy, but I'm your mother and we're stuck with one another. Can we sit, please? There's some ancient history that might help you understand things better."

"Sure, but Gavin stays. Are you going to invite Oscar to sit with us?"

"No, he's heard this story and he's still in the doghouse so he can stand there and wait. This shouldn't take long." Awkwardly, they sat across from each other while Gavin hopped off the table.

"I'm gonna grab some water from inside. Anyone else want one?" Gavin waited and both Toby and his mother nodded. It didn't take long to grab the water bottles from the case and return to the picnic table. He and Toby hated relying on the bottled water, but reusable cups and bottles were not practical in rodeo life. Passing out the water, Gavin set an extra on the table. "I grabbed one for Oscar too." It was an olive branch, of sorts.

This wasn't easy for Marianne. She wasn't someone who shared much with the world, especially painful and emotional memories. "I came out of college a good-time girl. I worked as a waitress and then a bartender at a biker bar in Spokane where I got to party every night and get paid for it. I went through a long string of boyfriends, but had absolutely no interest in settling down. All in all, I was pretty happy. Then one night your dad comes into the bar... He'd just bought his first motorcycle, a gorgeous, vintage Harley, and the guy he bought it from told him my bar was the place to show it off, and it was. We got to talking about the bike and a lot of things. He seemed so out of place in a dive bar on the wrong side of town. Drew was a software engineer in a polo shirt

and khakis wearing his very new leather motorcycle jacket and boots. A couple of the regulars figured out that while green, he knew what he was talking about, and they helped Drew make some friends. Over the next month, Drew came in twice a week and sat at the bar chatting with me about nothing... and everything... After a while, he finally got around to asking me out and took me on a real date. You know where we went?"

"The big cat sanctuary out in Mead. I love that place. We went there all the time when we were living in Spokane. Dad told me the G-rated version of the story more than a few times."

"We dated casually for a couple months; I was still drinking and sleeping around some, but less than before. The longer I dated your dad, the less I was interested in any of my extracurricular activities and along the way, he made me want to be a better person, someone he could be proud to have on his arm. Much to the dismay of my employers, I stopped partying and got my life together. Two years later on a whim, we took off on the Harley and eloped in Las Vegas."

"I always wished he'd kept the bike. He used to let me ride with him sometimes once I got big enough. It was as close to flying as I could imagine."

"Unfortunately, it was one of the first things to go after he got laid off. I told him not to sell it, but he had it in his head that it was an extravagance when he wasn't working to support his family. Anyway, Drew always wanted a house full of kids and I was okay with the idea of having one or two in the future sometime, but I wasn't so keen on having to share Drew's time and attention. A couple years after we got married, I found myself pregnant. It wasn't unplanned exactly, but it wasn't planned either. It just sort of happened and your dad was thoroughly delighted. His happiness was everything to me so if having a baby accomplished that, I was happy too."

"But when you were born, it all changed. The term postpartum depression sounds so neat and clinical, but the reality is more of an evil blackness sucking the life out of everything in its path. Beginning the week you were born, I didn't eat or sleep. I didn't get out of bed unless I had to. I resented you for making me deal with something, anything, that wasn't the blackness pressing down on me like too much gravity. Drew took over almost all of your care but after two months, he had to go back to work, so Grandma Betty came to take care of us both. By then I knew I was in deep trouble. I was having thoughts of suicide and I was starting to worry I could hurt you, just to be left alone. The doctor prescribed antidepressants but they weren't helping enough."

“A few days after Mom arrived, Drew scooped me up out of bed, put me in the car and drove me to the ER. I was hospitalized in the psych unit for almost a week and as much as I hated it, the doctors there saved my life. For the next three months, I was so wrapped up in getting better, I wasn't capable of caring for you or anyone else and after Grandma Betty went home, I took a job as bar manager at one of the hotels so I could feel normal again and have a break from baby duty. I was so disconnected from you, I felt like I was your babysitter instead of mother. But, in time, it got better. My hormones and serotonin levels stabilized and I was able to wean off the antidepressants, but my doctors made it perfectly clear that having another child would be dangerous for me. Drew was crushed, but hid it well. He just threw himself into being the best dad in town.”

“He was the best dad. I miss him every day. I don't know what to say about the rest. I'm sorry my birth caused you so much suffering. It sounds like a nightmare.” Toby's eyes misted. Gavin stroked Toby's back for a second in support.

“Your dad loved you more than anything in this world. The day you were born was the best day of our lives. You were so beautiful and already so active and engaged with the world. I swear your dad and I spent three hours sitting there watching you sleep. It wasn't your fault I got depressed, it was purely a biological reaction, my brain just misfired. Anyway, once I got better, we did okay until your dad got laid off. I resented becoming the sole breadwinner. I hated having to work so much and still not being able to keep up with the bills. Your dad sold the bike and a lot of other stuff and took some day labor work to help, but it wasn't enough. Moving home to live with my parents felt like such a failure. Drew did his best and found the job at Gunderson a few months later, but at a much lower salary than before. I had to take an office job I hated to make up the difference. It felt like prison.”

“Mom, I watched it all happen right in front of me. Ask Gavin. I'd hear you fighting and worry you guys were going to get a divorce all through middle school. But what does any of this have to do with now?”

“I'm trying to show you that there were things going on in our lives you couldn't possibly understand as a child. Our relationship was handicapped from the start and not because I didn't love you. I'm not a huggy person, I never have been. Your dad was able to get around it somehow and I think you might have too if we'd had a normal beginning. By the time, I was ready to build that bond, you were already so independent and wanted nothing to do with holding still

and cuddling up to your mother. It wasn't anyone's fault, it's just the way it was."

"And after Dad died... what then? How was that not your responsibility?" Toby was getting frustrated with his mother playing the martyr.

"Your dad died so unexpectedly we were completely unprepared. There was so much credit card debt and not enough savings or life insurance to carry us. Trouble followed almost immediately. I had to pick up bartending shifts at night to keep our heads above water. I thought you would be happy I trusted you to take care of yourself, but in hindsight it backfired and forced you further and further away from me. I assumed you would come to me if you needed anything, like you did with your dad, but you never did. Not once.

"There is no excuse for me not noticing until it was already way too late, but I was so overwhelmed by my own grief and so tired all the time... I didn't see it. Once I got the job at the high school, we were like roommates more than parent and child. It took almost five years for me to pay off the debt. Every penny of the money you gave me over those years went to paying off the credit card companies. After that, I admit I got used to having money left over at the end of the month, but I actually put a lot of the extra cash into savings and my retirement fund plus I bought enough life insurance to pay off the mortgage on the townhouse. I can't let myself get back into the hole Drew left me in when he died. It wasn't all wasted on frivolous things. But that's not the point either."

"What is the point?" Toby seemed to genuinely want to understand.

"Your money is your own, I understand that. Doesn't take a genius to see you work hard for it and I have no claim on it whatsoever. But I still get scared that with one mistake I'm going to be back working two jobs just to survive never mind live, so I tried to cling to the cushion you provided. That's my baggage, not yours. I always wanted to shield you from how dire things were so you could grow up without worrying about whether we were going to end up homeless or not.

"As for Oscar, he's not going to cause you any trouble. I made him delete the photo from his phone and he knows what he did was wrong once I explained things to him, but... he knew I was upset by our last fight and saw blackmailing you as a misguided way to make me happy. Oscar is a good man. I love him with all my heart, but he's a little more brawn than brains if you know what I mean. He honestly didn't think he was really hurting you and never actually intended to out you. He assumed you'd pay up and we'd all go

back to normal. And for what it's worth, we're not having a big, fancy wedding; we've decided to have a small, quiet one sometime in the spring. We hope both of you will come and, Toby, I would be honored if you would consider walking me down the aisle... I understand it's too soon for you to decide. I wanted to put it out there. I'm trying to get back to being the better woman I became when I fell in love with your father. It isn't easy for me without him here to be an example for me to follow."

Toby remained silent, considering his mother's words, but there was obviously only minimal alignment between Marianne's actions and the things she was saying. Her story was definitely the part of the truth that made her look like a victim and not a villain. "Mom, I'm still not sure what to say. Thank you for getting Oscar to back off his threats, but if you're waiting for me to weep with gratitude, you are going to be bitterly disappointed. You said a lot of hurtful things to me and to Gavin. I haven't heard a single apology from you today, for anything. Don't worry. I'm not asking you to apologize now, so don't bother. We still have to talk about what I experienced over the years and how damaging it was for me. But that's for another day. I need to reiterate that I am Gavin's boyfriend or partner or whatever word we decide on until we are free to get married. Having a relationship with me, means having a relationship with him, same as Oscar. You can either accept that, or not."

"I will never understand why you're with Gavin when you have the option of being with a woman and having a real family. This thing with Oscar certainly shows how difficult your life is going to be while you're with him. I understand that being gay is an inborn predisposition, like being left-handed, and not a choice, but being bisexual, is all about choice. You could choose to have a relationship with a woman and yet you choose to be with this man. It's irrational."

Gavin always enjoyed the conversations where Marianne completely ignored the fact that he was in the room. As Toby's neck turned red in anger, Gavin shook his head and sighed. Toby turned to Gavin and put a hand on the back of his neck. "If loving you is a choice, then it's one I'd make every day of the week and twice on Sundays. I'm not with you because it's easy, I'm with you because you make me whole. Love you." Toby glanced around before he leaned over and very quickly kissed Gavin's temple.

The brief but heartfelt peck warmed Gavin's soul. "I feel the same. You're my forever, Tobes. Love you too." Gavin turned back to Marianne. "I'm willing to put the past behind us and start fresh if you are. Relationships aren't

built in a day and they certainly aren't fixed in a day. I would suggest you and Toby consider getting some family counseling to help sort out all the miscommunication and hurt feelings." He could feel Marianne bristle at his words, but Gavin didn't care. She needed to get over it.

A grateful smile crossed Toby's face. "We can talk about it. Couldn't hurt, might help... One last thing about my sexuality... it's not up for debate. There is no reason for us to ever discuss it again. You don't get to use it as a bludgeon against me."

"Fine. Your sex life isn't something I wanted to contemplate when I thought you were straight, never mind now. Gavin's been around long enough I don't question how important he is to you. Are we done?" She was anxious to have the uncomfortable conversation over with and Gavin couldn't blame her.

"For now. We'll talk to you in about three weeks when we get back after Pendleton. You know how to reach me if you or Grandma Betty need anything. I do love you, Mom."

"Okay, kid. I'll talk to you soon. Be safe." Marianne surprised everyone, including herself, by gently kissing Toby's cheek when she stood up to leave. All in all, Gavin thought it might be the start of a long overdue thaw between Toby and his mother, but it could also be the start of the next ice age. There was no way to tell.

Jesus, it felt good to be home. Turning onto the driveway and passing by the Hazy Hill Farm sign made Gavin smile as he reached across the console to put his hand on Toby's thigh. They were only going to be there for two days, but they were still home. Gavin and Toby managed to catch up with Val and Matt at their favorite barbeque place about forty minutes from the farm. The place was a dump with ugly linoleum floors and chipped Formica tables, but the food was so good no one dared complain about the décor. Dinner was quick because they were behind schedule and the horses needed to get turned out for the night.

Toby had called everyone while Gavin drove, letting them know the crisis had been averted. No one liked the fact that Oscar wasn't going to be punished for blackmailing them, but he'd take that trade to preserve their privacy. Jerry seemed resigned to the fact they would have to come out eventually. He was probably right. Once Toby went to the PBR there would be a lot of additional scrutiny by both the fan base and the media, eventually someone would figure out he and Toby were living together. Still, what he'd said to Lisa was right,

fear was only paralyzing when you didn't have a plan... He didn't want to come out publicly if he didn't have to, but if it happened, it wouldn't be the catastrophe he'd once anticipated.

Life wasn't going to stay this easy; it never did. There were challenges on the horizon. He and Toby were going to be separated a lot this coming year as Gavin took on a larger role at the farm and Toby switched rodeo venues. Angie's health was still a concern as was Grandma Betty's. Toby and Marianne had a lot of work to do if they wanted a better relationship. It was all going to be messy and difficult to navigate, but with Toby by his side and their friends and family supporting them, he liked their odds at finding their way.

They backed the trailer into its space in the garage and unhitched while Angie and Keith helped direct Val and Matt's huge rig into position with a complexity that could only be rivaled by docking an aircraft carrier or maybe the USS Enterprise. Gavin and Toby's fifth wheel was big, about thirty-five feet tip to tush, but Val and Matt's four-horse, gooseneck trailer was almost ten feet longer. With the larger size plus the weight of the horses, Val and Matty spent almost fifty percent more in gas than Gavin and Toby. It also meant Val always had to drive to wherever he was competing. More reasons Gavin was happy he didn't have to travel with horses to compete.

Once Val's horses were fed and settled into the corral, they all congregated in the backyard around the large fire pit and talked for a while, winding down from the rodeo and the relatively short drive home. Angie and Keith rocked gently in the glider while Matty sat in one of the Adirondack chairs with Val sitting on the ground between his legs. Gavin was surprised Val wasn't purring as Matt carded his fingers through his hair, he looked so content. When he planted himself on one of the two chaises, Gavin assumed Toby would take the other one. Toby clomped down the steps from his apartment and ambled over to the fire pit only to stand next to Gavin looking a little nervous. It took Gavin a second to realize Toby was asking permission to share the chaise with him. An irrepressible smile plastered itself on Gavin's face as he scooted over to make room. Toby sat in the space Gavin made and wiggled into the position Gavin was coming to think of as Toby's spot against his side with his head on Gavin's shoulder. Still a little unsure, Gavin looked over at his parents to gauge reaction to their obvious affection, and what he found were soft, knowing smiles and unconditional acceptance. A wave of relaxation swept over him as the conversation flowed around him. It was one of those amazing small moments he would remember for the rest of his life. Angie even managed to document the scene with her good camera. All four men would come to treasure those

photos more because of what they represented than the artistic merits of the pictures.

It wasn't terribly long before his parents headed into the house for some much needed sleep. They took a perverse thrill at reminding everyone that this was a working farm and breakfast was at six thirty a.m. They sat around talking and finishing their whiskey for another half hour or so.

Toby sat up on the edge of the chaise. "Alright, gentlemen... Time for us to shuffle off to bed. And because I am a controlling asshole... Tomorrow is a recovery day, so I'll see you all for morning yoga at five thirty in the gym... and don't be late. You won't like what happens when you're late. Will they, Gav?"

"Trust me. You don't want to give him an excuse to punish you." Gavin was serious. Toby could be sadistic when he decided to push you to the edge of your fitness level or endurance. Personal training by the Marquis de Sade.

"I didn't know you two were into the whole Dom/sub thing. It would explain some things." Matt laughed as Val smacked him on the arm.

"Hey, now... Everyone has their kink and this is a judgment-free zone." Gavin tried to smother his laugh and his friends erupted with their amusement.

With a roll of his eyes, Toby stood and grabbed the sand bucket to smother what was left of the fire. "Seriously, Val. I wanted to show you some yoga postures and exercises to strengthen your psoas and you both could use some lumbar and lower core work. Five thirty in the gym."

The gym space was one of Gavin's favorite places on the farm. South-facing windows and a couple skylights made it bright even on the grayest winter mornings. Gavin and Toby had converted the unused workshop into a yoga/fitness/home gym space when they were still in college. For Toby's birthday last year, Gavin gave him the four foot tall stone and copper water fountain that was bolted to the wall in there. It was good for the Feng Shui of the room at least according to Noreen, Toby's yoga instructor/mentor. Gavin thought the student had far exceeded the teacher at this point, but she was a good egg anyway.

"You guys sure you don't want to stay in the guestroom or use the pullout couch at Toby's? It's memory foam and surprisingly comfortable."

"No, we're good. The trailer is more like home than our ranch at this point. We will commandeer Toby's shower after he tortures us with his yoga voodoo.

I'm going to check the horses one last time before turning in. We'll see you bright and fucking early. Why did we come here again?"

"Because it saves you more than ten hours driving time, knucklehead."

Matt took Val's hand and pulled him off the ground. "In case Val has totally forgotten his manners... Thanks for the invite. It saved a lot of wear and tear on us and the horses. We'll be sure to say something to your folks in the morning. Come on, baby. I need some Zs." Hand in hand, Matt and Val headed towards the barn and corrals.

Staring up at the stars, Gavin paused to appreciate where he was. Hazy Hill was far enough away from civilization that there wasn't much light pollution to detract from the brilliance of an early-September night sky. He searched out the few touchstone constellations he knew and thought about his father, grandfather and great-grandfather looking at the same sky and wondering about their future and their place in it.

Toby slid behind him and wrapped his strong, muscled arms around Gavin's waist. "Find what you're looking for?"

"Yeah, I did, a long time ago in a middle school not so far away. It was his first day in a new school, Mr. Donohue introduced him in homeroom. He stood in front of the class wearing a red and blue striped rugby shirt and he had a Harley Davidson backpack on his shoulder. Later, I saw him sitting by himself at lunch, worried no one would sit with him and pretending he didn't care."

"I remember. You sat down across from me and smiled before you introduced yourself. You asked if I liked motorcycles, I was surprised anyone noticed my backpack. When I asked you if you'd ever ridden on one, you said no, but you rode horses all the time and it had to be the same, just quieter. We laughed until people started looking at us. You asked if I wanted to come over sometime and go horseback riding. When I told you I didn't know how to ride, you smiled so big and said I needed to spend the weekend at your house so you could teach me and you made it happen. Never understood why you wanted to be friends with the short, pudgy new kid, who couldn't even ride a horse."

"You were this cool kid from the city who knew about motorcycles and video games. I was a hick farm kid who didn't know much about anything outside this little town. I saw the look in your eyes when I talked about the horses and I knew I could get you to be my friend if I taught you to ride."

Toby kissed the side of Gavin's head. "It worked. By the end of the weekend, I was completely ensorcelled by you, your family, and this magical

place. I can't believe it took almost fifteen years to figure out what was right in front of me."

Breaking free of Toby's embrace, Gavin spun around and hugged Toby tightly. "Well, we're here now and we'll be here forever, I hope."

"You are my forever, Gavin. No matter where our careers or our destinies take us, wherever you are is my home. This place is just a bonus." Toby kissed him deeply with all the emotion passing back and forth between them. Eventually, like all good things, the kiss had to end. "We should get to bed. I have cowboys to torture before breakfast and we can't be late or I'll be the one who ends up tortured."

"Come on and I'll show you how much you like being tortured." As usual when Gavin made up his mind, that's exactly what happened. Gavin's erotic torture ended with the first wisps of sunrise on the horizon and Toby feeling blissfully sated. In the end, they were only a little late and were too happy to care about the teasing.

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Chapter 10

Early morning sun warmed Toby's face as he slowly woke up. He had only been home for about eight hours after being away from the farm for more than a month. Toby crept out of bed, trying not to wake Gavin. He knew Gavin needed the sleep. It took him a minute to slip his right arm into the shoulder-immobilizing sling and get the straps fastened without help. Pulling on the loose red sweats wasn't any easier. He'd go without a shirt until Gavin could help him later.

Being hurt sucked. Two days ago in Oklahoma, Toby'd gotten bucked off a bull named Hot Brown and in the process he'd separated his shoulder. No one in the arena could tell Toby'd fucked up his shoulder, but Gavin knew the second Toby rolled onto his feet after hitting the dirt. Over the year they'd been together and especially since Toby moved up to the premier tour of the PBR, Gavin had learned to deal with not being in the arena every time Toby rode, but it was still hard, especially when Toby got hurt. Luckily, he hadn't been injured much so far this season and this shoulder separation was the worst one yet.

In the kitchen, Toby banged his way around one handed, heating water in the electric kettle and making his tea. He grabbed the wool blanket from the arm of the sofa and made his way onto the porch wrapped around two sides of the house. The redwood swing they had put up the last time he was home was the perfect place to sit and enjoy his morning for a few minutes before the day started. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and took a sip of tea.

Being in the new house had been amazing. The renovations and the new barn had taken nearly six months to finish because of their crazy schedules, but it was all done now. The three-bedroom log house had a great layout and was structurally sound so most of the work was in replacing the windows and updating the kitchen and bathrooms. As you'd expect in a sixty-year-old house, they'd found a few plumbing and electrical issues along the way, but nothing major. It had surprised Toby how little they actually needed to buy. Between what Toby already had in his apartment and the unused furniture and household goods squirreled away around the farm, left over from a century of living, they were pretty well set after a single exhausting trip to the mall. Toby loved the end result. It was an eclectic, comfortable mix of old and new that fit the log cabin character of the house.

After sitting in the swing for a while, Toby grabbed his tea and wandered out to the brand-new barn to turn out the horses. He and Gavin bought two

gorgeous tobiano mares from one of Matt's friends in Montana. Marley, a big palomino paint, and Nickle, a stunning blue roan paint, were eager to get outside. Both horses had settled in to their new home and even got along with Whiz who spent almost as much time here as he did up at the Hazy Hill barn. Toby suspected the gelding would be a permanent resident before long. Toby stood at the fence and watched the two mares stretch their legs a little after being cooped up all night. Nickle was a bit of an attention whore and shortly stood in front of Toby looking for treats and affection.

He was so caught up in the horses he never heard Gavin walk up behind him. "I thought I might find you here when I woke up without you and there was no compensatory breakfast waiting for me. Not a great start to my day."

"Yeah, well... I thought you'd sleep a while longer and I wasn't so keen on cooking one-handed without my sous chef backing me up. Gimme a couple days to get used to the sling and I will be back to making your breakfast as usual, King Friday."

"Sorry... I was teasing. My brain is still in the house asleep under my pillow." Gavin kissed him before turning and watching the horses for a couple minutes. "I'm sorry you're hurt, but I'm glad to have you home. I've missed you so much. I know I got to see you in New Mexico, but it's not the same as having you here."

"I know, but we've got a month before I can even ask for a medical clearance to get back for the last few weeks of the season. We just have to make the most of it. I've been thinking about next year. What do you think about going to Brazil for a few weeks next summer? I could ride the Brazil PBR tour and we'd get to see Pietro..." They all missed Pietro quite a bit. They called and emailed periodically, but it wasn't the same. Early this summer, Pietro'd been forced to go back to Brazil and take over the family ranch after his father and older brother were killed in a carjacking on their way to a business meeting in São Paulo. According to Val, P was having a hard time coping with being back home, especially with his mother pushing him to settle down now that he was head of the family. It was a sad situation, and they all wished there was something they could do to help, but there just wasn't.

"I'm all for it, if the scheduling works. We need to start planning anyway."

"That's why I mentioned it now." Synchronizing a schedule between the farm, Gavin, and Toby that everyone could live with for this year took three Nobel Prize laureates, a brain surgeon and a Buddhist monk to figure out. In the end, nobody was completely happy, but it was a workable compromise. Gavin

took the time to create a color-coded master schedule that was set in concrete for the month ahead on the fifteenth of every month. The fixed schedule didn't allow for much spontaneity in their lives, but Gavin and Toby were each able to stay in the top twenty of their respective sports and Gavin was able to lighten the workload for both of his parents on the farm.

"Come on, dude. Let's skip breakfast and go back to bed for a couple hours. Mom and Dad told me to take the next two days off, so I don't have to be anywhere anytime soon."

"I need to go see Grandma Betty. I've already gotten two voicemails and five or six texts from her about my injury. What possessed you to get her a smart phone and teach her to text?"

"Relax. I talked to her last night while I was waiting for you at the airport. We're picking her up at her new place and taking her to dinner at Felice tomorrow night. I even made reservations."

"Excellent." Toby took Gavin's hand and lead him back to the house. "More sleep sounds like a plan."

Gavin laughed. "I said bed, not sleep, but I think we can work something out." They walked through the house and up the stairs to their master bedroom. Toby climbed onto the bed and leaned against the headboard watching Gavin. For a second, Gavin stood at the foot of the bed and stared at Toby like he was trying to make a decision and then walked over, opened a drawer in his dresser and pulled something out. Holding whatever it was tight in his hand, Gavin crawled up on the bed and stretched out on his side facing Toby. "I was going to wait for our anniversary at the end of the week, but I can't wait. I have you home in one piece, relatively speaking, and I want to celebrate now. I asked my dad for this a few weeks ago so I could give it to you. I didn't expect to be nervous about this. Shit. I'm just gonna say what I need to say..."

"Toby Prescott, I've loved you for as long as I've known you and you are my forever. This is a promise that one day when the stars align and we're free to be together openly, I will ask you to marry me. But until then, I thought you could wear this on a chain around your neck as a reminder." Gavin handed him a black velvet jeweler's bag. With shaking hands, Toby opened the drawstring and poured a man's wedding ring and a sturdy chain into his palm. "The chain is new, but that was my grandfather's wedding ring. They are rose gold and the patterns carved in the ring are apple blossoms. My grandmother picked them out to represent Hazy Hill... What do you think?"

Speechless, Toby slid the ring onto his left ring finger and kissed Gavin with so much love and earnestness it brought tears to both of them. "It's beautiful. I will be honored to wear your ring." Toby stared down at the ring on his finger and used his thumb to fiddle with it. "I never thought I would have this. I dated women and didn't understand why I couldn't connect with them anywhere outside the bedroom. From the beginning, you and I had this intense connection, but I couldn't risk ruining what we had by even considering it might be more than friendship. After you came out to me the second time, it was like a door opened and all this suppressed emotion came rushing in, filling all the gaps between us. In the instant I finally found the nerve to kiss you, everything changed. It took a few days before I knew beyond any uncertainty I was head over heels in love with you and had been for a long time. Gavin Hayes, you are my heart, my home and my forever. I cannot wait for the day when I can accept your marriage proposal, until then this is enough. I will wear it around my neck until you put it on my finger in front of our family and friends..." Toby rolled around on the bed like a one-flipped walrus trying to get into his nightstand without hurting his shoulder. He finally came back with a ring box of his own and handed it to Gavin. "My mother gave me all of my father's jewelry when he died and this is his wedding ring." Toby watched Gavin open the box and slip the simple gold band onto the ring finger of his left hand. "When I found it during the move, I set it aside so I could give it to you one day and I guess today is that day. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, I will put it on your finger permanently, but it already represents all of my commitment to you and our life together. I love you beyond reason."

With infinite gentleness, Gavin manipulated Toby onto his back and supported his injured shoulder with a pillow. Toby welcomed the warm and seductive kiss that followed. It allowed him to convey his love for this cheeky, sexy man through touch and tongue without any need for more words or romantic gestures. They would make love, nap and make love some more before starting their day. Eventually they would make their way over to Gavin's parents' house for dinner so Angie and Keith would stop worrying about his injury. Piper and Chad were coming with baby Hunter, who was already five months old, and maybe their nephew wouldn't quite understand his first lesson in love and commitment when he tried to chew on the shiny rings hanging around their necks, but he would grow up seeing it manifest in the men who would teach him to ride horses and grow healthy, wholesome things that feed people, body and soul, while still being good stewards of the land. And one

day, Hunter and his little sister, Katie, would have the privilege of watching their uncles exchange those rings at the center of a cherry orchard in full bloom surrounded by friends and family at the very top of Hazy Hill.

The End

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Author Bio

Jae Moran is a New England girl, born and bred. She has tried to live in other parts of the country but she always longs for home. Living in the Lakes Region of Maine with her partner-in-crime of more than twenty years and two crazy dogs, Jae spends her free time playing with the multitude of sexy men who live and love in her imagination. Jae's been writing since she learned to hold a pencil but it has taken her a while to share her stories with the world.

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Spring, Bax & Butterflies

Riina Y.T.

SPRING, BAX & BUTTERFLIES

By Riina Y.T.

Photo Description

The photograph shows us two blond teenage boys on a sunny day, in front of a stadium. Both are quite buff and wearing identical maroon-colored rugby jerseys. The taller boy has an arm around the other in a gentle embrace whilst pressing a soft kiss to his forehead. Both appear to be happy and not the least concerned about their public display of affection.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is the last day of our senior year of high school. It hasn't been an easy year for us, but we've made it. Please give us a story.

This picture of us can represent the beginning, or the end, of your story for us. How did we make it to this point or where are we going from here?

I love a contemporary, New Adult or Young Adult, romance. On-the-page sex (can be sweet & romantic or hot & steamy) is major a plus. Please no cheating, no vampires/shifters and no BDSM. I love me some angst but an HEA/HFN ending is a must.

Sincerely,

Justin2

Story Info

Genre: new adult, contemporary

Tags: high school, barely legal, first time, coming of age, sports, slow burn/UST, coming out

Word Count: 59,525

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Dedication

Justin, this is for you! :)

Acknowledgements

I'd like to send a big "*Thank You*" to all my friends who never fail to make me smile, the Goodreads (M/M Romance) community, the awesome Don't Read in the Closet team for making this wonderful event possible and of course everyone who encouraged me in one way or another—you know who you are! You're the best. x

SPRING, BAX & BUTTERFLIES

By Riina Y.T.

Chapter 1

January 14th, 2012

Jacob

The second week of January, Jacob looked out of his bedroom window, over the perfectly manicured lawn, from the recently paved sidewalk to their neighbors' weathered tree house, and realized everything was just as bright and peaceful as always. Alarminglly idyllic. It wasn't exactly surprising since, judging by the weather and sunshine, spring never was that much different from any other season here in southern California. You couldn't really tell when it started or ended, but he knew it would arrive soon. Jacob's eyes caught sight of two white and yellow butterflies dancing beautifully outside his window before they eventually disappeared into the bright sky. Like any other morning, he spotted the McKinley's skinny Siamese cat making her way across the empty street, toward her favorite corner on Jacob's front porch. Outside the Keller's house, a small group of kids, probably around the ages of nine and ten, seemed to be having a great time playing hopscotch and chasing each other down the street. Today appeared to be just like any other sun-kissed and rather uneventful day in suburbia, if it hadn't been for that unnerving feeling Jacob just couldn't shake. Another month, or so, and it would be that time of the year again. *Spring*. The time for love, birth and new beginnings, that whole '*trees bloom, flowers blossom, fruits ripen, vegetables grow and animals reproduce*' thing.

Spring may never be as evident in The Golden State, but it still happened. Spring was unavoidable, no matter how much Jacob tried to erase that season.

The only fond memories of spring were from those days he spent with his grandpa, long before he hit puberty. After the first rain falls in winter, his Grandpa Peter would take him out into the valleys in a rental Jeep to explore. With the beginning of March, you could see carpets of orange-hued California Poppies, pools of deep blue Wild Delphinium and blankets of bright yellow wildflowers. Out in the canyons of Death Valley, they would watch the flowers bloom and breathe moments of life into the dry desert. A few times, Jacob had caught glimpses of small groups of wild horses up on a faraway hill. Jacob looked back on those memories of their spring weekends with a bittersweet smile. Times where his grandpa would pick him up and take him out on real adventures were long gone, and since then not many good memories had followed.

Jacob wasn't sure what he expected to see when he scanned the neighborhood, or what he hoped not to see. All he knew was that spring had knocked on his door once again and changes were just around the corner. People say spring holds the promise of good things to come, but reality proved it wrong more often than not. The earliest memory of *spring gone bad* Jacob could recall was from when he was seven, and the morning when he woke up with a *thousand* red spots on his face. Jacob could still hear his mother fuss about his *magically* appeared measles. Being the outdoors kid Jacob had always been, it felt like the end of the world when he wasn't allowed outside for *days*. The unfortunate events continued that first week of spring the following year when he played in the backyard and Molly, Jacob's hamster, ran away. He was eight and heartbroken for months. *Who knew hamsters were that fast and wouldn't come back when you called their name?*

Jacob had no recollection of any tragic happenings from the age of nine, but when he was ten and his parents got divorced, the curse of spring lived on after all. Jacob and his family had all gathered in a nearby park for one of their infamous spring picnics, complete with painted Easter eggs and Grandma Clara's bunny-shaped carrot cake. It had been one of those rare occasions where everyone Jacob loved came together like a real *family*. He had thought of it as the best day of his life, up until that moment when his parents decided they couldn't live under the same roof anymore. What started with a disagreement over lunch ended with Jacob being left alone with Sarah, his nanny. The argument itself hadn't been surprising, because his parents seemed to constantly shout at each other whenever they were breathing the same air. Jacob knew something was wrong when his dad never came back home after that, and he only got to see him on odd-weekends, which eventually stopped altogether. They had never been really close, and after his parents separated, any relationship with his father was non-existent. It still hurt almost eight years later.

The following year, in early April, Jacob and his mother moved in with his Grandma Clara. She had been lonely since Grandpa Peter passed away so suddenly the year before, and Jacob's mother had struggled with paying the bills after his parents' separation. While they did not move out of California, leaving his friends and starting at a new school was scary. As it turned out, living with Grandma Clara hadn't been all that bad; in fact it had been a true blessing. Jacob had settled in quickly at his new school and made a bunch of good friends, but he would never forget how terrifying all those changes really were. The year when he turned twelve came and went almost too quietly—no

spring incidents, no lost hamsters or fathers. That year they had even planned a family vacation, and for the first time Jacob looked forward to spring again. It would have been his first real vacation, if Grandma Clara hadn't gotten sick so unexpectedly. Instead of a weekend at Disneyland, they had spent that spring and the rest of the year at the hospital, where his friends' parents would drop Jacob off after school. Since his mom was a doctor and spent most of her time there anyway, he refused to stay with some new nanny he didn't know. Jacob had had enough of that all through his childhood, and for once, he just wanted to be with his *family* and not be shut out.

When Jacob turned thirteen, his Grandma Clara died. He was devastated; she'd meant the world to Jacob. With Grandma Clara's exciting stories, silly games and art projects, her caring smiles, tight hugs and kisses, she'd made him feel safe and loved, like he was part of a real family again. He knew his mother loved and cared for him, but she always put her job before him.

That March, when Jacob was thirteen and the world came alive in the bloom of spring, they had laid Grandma Clara to rest.

Today the world appeared seemingly peaceful, but Jacob had a feeling that the changes of spring were just around the corner once again.

On his way downstairs to grab breakfast before heading out to rugby practice, Jacob nearly collided with his mother on the stairs—dressed in her work clothes, her long chestnut brown hair neatly pulled back in a tight pony tail, she was ready to leave for the hospital. Again. He had hardly seen her this week, and probably wouldn't catch her again today. Saturdays were one of her busiest days.

“Good, you're still home, honey. I have wonderful news.”

She looked really excited, Jacob noticed, a little tired but more excited than he had seen her in a while. Maybe she finally got that new position she had recently been telling him about. He didn't know much about it, since she kept most of the details to herself, but Jacob could tell that it had to be of great interest to her.

“They thought you were the best doctor they could have, didn't they?”

Jacob had to admit, he was curious what could be so special about this particular hospital. She had been changing positions a few times over the past years and never had he seen her so secretive and wired. He liked witnessing her excitement about something, whatever it was.

“Yes, isn’t that great? This is going to be a brilliant opportunity.” She smiled and offered him a hug, which he greedily took. There weren’t many hugs anymore these days, after all he was seventeen now, but he missed them nevertheless.

“There will be a lot to think about and not much time, Jacob. I wanted to surprise you. The Gold Coast Heart Centre I told you about, they’re located in Australia, where your Aunt Betty lives.”

Aunt Betty. He had heard a lot more about her in the last few weeks; it should have been a clue. Jacob wondered briefly why they were going to see her now, after all those years when he had never talked to her on the phone. He hadn’t even known his mother had a sister until a couple of years ago.

“We’re going to move to Australia, honey. Isn’t that fun? You might want to pack a suitcase with everything you think you’ll need right away, the rest will be boxed and shipped.”

Wait, what? *Australia? As in far-far-away-Australia?*

It sure was a surprise, and whether he liked it or not, Jacob didn’t know yet. Leaving his friends *now* didn’t sound very exciting, but moving out of the country? That was far from thrilling.

“*When* are we leaving?” By the look on his mother’s face, he was certain that she meant what she said about not having much time. He might not even have dinner at home tonight.

Why Australia? Why now?

“In a few days... There’s still a little time, sweetheart.”

Well, at least he would be able to play the game tomorrow, and say good-bye to his friends. Jacob tried not to be upset, because he could see that this must be a big deal for his mom, and he’d do anything to make her happy. He might be upset with her workaholic lifestyle more times than not, but he would never do anything to stand in her way. She was his mother after all, and he loved her.

But moving across the world overnight? So not cool.

“Don’t give me that look, Coby. If you want to stay and finish senior year with your friends, we might find a way, you know. We’ll talk about the possibilities tonight, honey. I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go now or else I’ll be late. You know how I don’t like to be late.”

“Sure. We’ll talk tonight.”

Jacob didn’t know much about Australia, he watched the occasional TV show, and yes, he knew they talked funny, at least some did, and that they had rugby. A lot more rugby. Oh wait, rugby!

The idea suddenly didn’t sound that bad anymore. Jacob wasn’t a fanatic, but playing rugby had been his *thing* for the past few years and going to a school where they played proper rugby sounded pretty thrilling.

He might get to see some real matches, championships even, with his favorite teams and all.

In a stadium. Yeah, he could do Australia.

February 6th, 2012

Baxter

Walking down the school corridor had never felt so nerve-racking in his life. Baxter’s heart hammered like crazy, and his palms were uncomfortably sweaty. On his way up the stairs, he nodded to classmates who were welcoming him back with cheerful smiles, but ignored them otherwise. Coach Connor was the only one he wanted to see and Baxter had to find him before his first period began. His nerves were going haywire and he wasn’t so sure how long he would be able to keep his breakfast in him. He couldn’t afford to be late, especially not today after he had missed the actual first day of school two weeks ago. The missed classes weren’t what bothered him, it was far worse than a few lost hours of maths and chemistry. Baxter had been on edge for the past five days since Matt texted him the terrible news. Coach had replaced him on the school’s rugby team. *Unbelievable*. Never would he have thought Coach Connor would bench *him*. He was his best prop. No, Baxter was his best player altogether.

Apparently, some thought that the new transfer student was better. Baxter shook his head. Could that even be possible? Not to sound vain or anything, but he was a bloody good player, especially for his eighteen years. His good reputation was well deserved, too. Practice had been Baxter’s life for as long as he could remember. He basically lived for footy, and he had promised himself that he would do anything to make his dreams become reality. He was going to become a pro player for the rugby league. Senior year wasn’t going to be easy and Baxter had to be part of it. He would make it too. There was no arguing it;

he needed *his* spot back and to play, for the sake of the school, his future, and most of all Baxter's sanity. If Coach would bench him for the entire season, he was certainly going to go insane. And how was he going to make the Schoolboys if he wasn't bloody playing?

A sudden collision with a solid body shook Baxter out of his thoughts.

"Watch where you're going, mate." A mumbled sorry came in response; anything else the guy might have said positively drowned in the loud chatter coming from the other students around them, laughing over shared stories from the weekend. How everyone could be so awake at this hour was a mystery to Baxter. He wasn't a morning person, and in a perfect world, mornings were for sleeping. In all this frenzy, Baxter didn't spare the guy he had just collided with, a second look. The panic over the rugby team was too overwhelming to be his usual, friendly self.

He pushed through the thickening crowd when he felt a sudden chill *zap* down his spine. Baxter threw a quick look over his shoulder, and caught a glimpse of an unfamiliar face. For a long heartbeat or two, the guy's dark, probably brown, eyes locked with his before he disappeared completely into the crowd of students. *Strange*. He couldn't pin down that odd feeling he had just experienced. With an inward shrug, Baxter turned and pushed his way through the crowded halls.

When he rounded the corner leading towards his biology class, he ran into another, more familiar but just as solid body. Bloody hell, he had to watch out better. An injury would be the last thing he needed.

"Hey, B! You're early." Baxter was glad to see Matt as cheerful as ever. Leave it to his best friend to hand out good vibes.

"I was hoping to find Coach C.; you haven't seen him by any chance?" He still had ten minutes or so if he caught him quickly. Matt shook his head and winked at him.

"Come on, I let you copy my notes from Friday. Mrs. Brown wasn't pleased with your absence, I'm sure she is going to be on your arse today." *Great*. Baxter bloody hated biology, and maths. How he was going to survive three *long* periods filled with macromolecules and juggling numbers, when all he could think of was that damned newbie who might take away his position, was anyone's guess.

“B-Man is back! Wooot!” Baxter couldn’t help but smile at the rest of his mates welcoming him back, as they waited for Coach Connor to arrive. He truly loved his friends, and there wasn’t anyone on the team he wouldn’t call a friend. They were his *brothers*, an awesome bunch, and everyone played with their heart and soul. The moment he looked over Matt’s broad, athletic shoulders across the field to see where all the commotion came from, Baxter’s eyes instantly settled on a new body amongst the group of his teammates. Alex, their fullback, was most likely telling jokes again, because that’s just what he did. He was a real dag. The new guy’s extremely bubbly laughter instantly reached Baxter’s ears and he thought it was irritating as hell. Baxter willed him to shut up, a sudden reaction that truly surprised him.

“Come on mate, you gotta meet Knight. Plays ball like a pro.” Matt threw his arm around Baxter’s shoulder, gave him a playful tug and led the way. *Knight? So that was the intruder’s name.* Baxter suddenly stopped in his tracks. Maybe he should gather more information before confronting the newbie.

“Where is he from?” Baxter was fairly certain the guy couldn’t be from around here if he seriously thought he could butt in like he belonged.

“Said something about California, I think.”

Cali-what? “A Yank? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Out of all the places, he’s got to be from overseas.

Grinning at Baxter, Matt nodded knowingly when he saw his friend’s alarmed expression. They once had an exchange student from Beverly Hills, and let’s just say it hadn’t gone well for him. Francis, the guy’s name was, had acted like he had come straight out of a bloody TV show—all sushi and champagne, kiss my arse and high standards. Mr. fancy-pants had lasted a total of two months. Baxter almost felt bad for the poor sucker. *Almost.* Luckily for him, he had his rich parents fly him straight back to his mansion in *Wonderland* on a private jet.

But that new guy right there looked nothing like their former exchange student, which seemed to unsettle Baxter even more. He might be here to stay. There was nothing that screamed glitter and champagne about that one. Even from afar, Baxter could tell he was quite tall and intimidating, probably a few inches shy of his own 1.90 m, which was still somewhat impressive. That fitting maroon and white training jersey did nothing to hide his extremely broad shoulders, and you couldn’t miss those biceps if you tried. The guy’s body screamed strength.

Baxter had to admit the guy looked capable, but that didn't mean he had any right to waltz into his school and take over his life just because Baxter had been ill. He had to find Coach Connor or Mr. A. as soon as possible. Matt snickered beside him, and he could feel his breakfast make its way back up. The real problem was that there wouldn't be a regular position for both of them. It was either newbie-boy or him. Now, Baxter was not a violent person, and he would rather avoid conflicts than be the cause for one, but the moment he saw the guy's innocent smile when their eyes met, Baxter's irritation bubbled over. Without thinking, he marched toward his teammates with every intention of fighting for his position. He wouldn't give it up to anyone, and definitely not to this newbie Yank.

Within the blink of an eye, Baxter crowded Knight and invaded his personal space like he owned it. He didn't know what overcame him just then, but without a second thought, Baxter punched him right in the centre of his muscled chest, gazing down into Knight's slightly flushed face as he wobbled on the spot.

"Think you can come dancing in here from your fancy place in Hollywood and take what's mine? Think again, mate. That's not how it works over here."

For a heartbeat or two, they just stared at each other. Baxter realised that he was the guy he had seen this morning in the school corridor when he'd felt that weird *sensation*. Now, the tension was almost palpable, and when the guy looked nervously into his eyes, Baxter was sure his heart lost its rhythm for a moment too long. The feel of the guy's body heat so close to his own, and the sight of those flushed cheeks on his rather fair skin, made his head spin. For a second, he almost had rather inappropriate thoughts make their way into his brain. *Wow, no way Baxter, back off.*

"Excuse me?"

The guy eventually spoke but still gaped at Baxter, all flustered and in shock. And damn the sun for lighting his innocent, brown eyes and nearly taking Baxter's breath away. They were the bright kind, the kind that reflected beautifully in the sunshine—the kind that could do some serious damage if you let them. Those warm caramelly eyes didn't match the guy's powerfully built body. Despite being a few centimetres shorter, he had quite a domineering stance. God knew why, but Baxter had never felt such a strong pull towards anyone, and it totally threw him.

Get a grip, Bates. This is the guy who wants to take over your life. Exaggeration or not, Baxter had never felt that threatened before, and he didn't know what to do with the sudden overload of anger and irritation.

“Excuse me, my arse. I’m this team’s number one prop, not you or anyone else for that matter, got that? Great. Now, get out of my sight before this becomes bloody unpleasant. Yank.”

Those eyes. It took all the strength Baxter could muster to break his gaze and stomp off. That unexpected fury coming alive inside of him freaked Baxter the hell out. Matt quickly came up beside him, and a heartbeat later, he felt a hard smack right into his shoulder.

“Chill the fuck out, B-Man, will you? Don’t freak out like a girl who got her make-up stolen. That’s weak, mate. Especially for you.” Matt was right, he didn’t do shit like that.

“But Coach is going to dump me. For him! He can’t do that, Matt.”

He wondered how he’d get out of this mess, if Knight really was that good...

...no he couldn’t even finish that thought.

Jacob

Frustration was becoming an all too familiar feeling to Jacob. Wasn’t it enough that his mom had dragged him across the ocean in a hurry, and then dropped him off at his aunt and uncle’s house like a puppy she’d bought on a whim and realized she wouldn’t have the time for? Jacob didn’t like to think his mother wouldn’t want him around, but sometimes he just hated that she worked day and night. Jacob hadn’t seen much of her since they arrived in Australia, and with this new job position, she was going to be a lot busier than before. It hurt.

Jacob thought Aunt Betty was nice enough, and Uncle Eric seemed all right too. So far they hadn’t had much time for any bonding to happen, and he had to spend his free time by himself. New house, new city and nothing to do, looked like his new *family* was going to be just as busy with work and their own lives. It was times like these when he truly missed his Grandma Clara the most. She would have known how to make him feel better, wanted and welcomed, with just a smile and a hug. The new school made an extremely positive first impression; it almost seemed surreal, his teachers and classmates were all very friendly and welcoming. Yeah, except for that encounter just now.

Seriously? What the hell? What was wrong with that guy?

Jacob watched his teammate, who had just gone batshit on him, walk across the field. There was definitely trouble in the air. The guy's friends, Matt and Jai, Jacob thought their names were, quickly crowded the jerk's space and escorted him toward Coach Connor, who chose that moment to come out of the gym. It all just added up to Jacob's frustration, this morning. At least, he would have his books and video games to keep him company until he made proper friends. Jacob had seen a game store down the street, as they passed a strip of shops this morning. He couldn't wait to check it out, and hopefully get the new Nintendo game he'd had his eyes on for a while. There was also a comic book store somewhere close, his aunt promised. Jacob was definitely going to check that one out as well. One could never have enough to read and play. But Jacob also *needed* to play ball, and he had been *so* thrilled when Coach Connor made him prop of their team. Prop! For some reason, he just seemed to enjoy being prop the most.

Now, with that Bates guy throwing a hissy fit and accusing him of stealing his position, Jacob felt frustrated all over again. He didn't want to get benched or have to quit, the team had been fun so far. The guys all seemed pretty decent, and if Jacob loved something more than his comics and video games, it was rugby. Jacob wasn't quite as tall and scary, but it didn't mean he would let that jerk push him around like this. If Coach Connor wanted him to be prop, Jacob was going to fucking be prop.

When Jacob was six years old, his Grandpa Peter gave him his first baseball glove, ball and bat and taught him how to play. From the age of ten, he had spent most of his time chasing soccer balls across the field with his friends. He fell in love with football the moment his neighbors, Tim and Jessie, tossed him a brown egg-shaped ball, and he knew rugby was going to be *his* thing when he got into eighth grade, back when they lived with Grandma Clara in Grossmont. Graig, one of his closest friends at Grossmont Junior High School, talked him into joining the San Diego Aztec Rugby Club, which, so far, had been Jacob's most thrilling experience. It had been real rugby! Maybe they hadn't played as hard or as much as Australians did, but it had been great. He already missed his guys from back home, but he knew pining over it wouldn't help him now. Jacob had been sure that the friends he had made back in Grossmont would be friends for a lifetime. *Guess you shouldn't take anything for granted.* Jacob had to move on, be strong.

But why do I have to go through all this again my last year of high school?

Jacob knew it wasn't a punishment, and there were worse things than changing schools, but sometimes it just wasn't easy or particularly fun. Like

right now. When Coach Connor had asked him on his first day here at Keebra Park, what position Jacob could play, and whether he thought he could handle prop, Jacob thought it was a sign, and he wouldn't let it slip away now. Without having to think twice, Jacob told him he would be the best prop he ever had. Coach Connor seemed rather pleased with that, and in fact Jacob had played a mean prop for the past three years at Grossmont High School, especially the last year when he had been at his best. He didn't think he would disappoint his new coach.

Every position has set specialties that are crucial to the performance of the entire team, and some may say that prop is the toughest position. It didn't mean much to Jacob because playing ball in any position came quite naturally to him. If he had any say though, he'd really like to continue playing prop.

"Coach! He is *not* going to replace me."

Out of the blue, the guy was in his face again and damn was he tall. Jacob stood quite an impressive height himself but Bates had at least three inches on him. No, he wouldn't let that scare him. Impress maybe, but not scare.

"Why not? Obviously, I am the better prop." *Ha! Take that, Bates.*

The guy gaped at him; he probably didn't think Jacob would dare to open his mouth after that weak first attempt earlier. Truthfully, it surprised Jacob too, since he wasn't naturally mean and didn't carry himself like a king as he'd seen some of the guys do. Something about that Bates guy provoked him to the bone, and he would stand his ground the best he could.

"Coach, please. You can't do this!"

To everyone's surprise, Bates seemed to lose it and actually *cried out* with desperation. The guy had either had a pretty rough day or was testy. Coach Connor seemed taken aback for a moment, and Jacob thought it must've been a bad day for him, and he felt almost sympathetic. He wondered briefly whether the guy would start stomping on the spot like a toddler too, but all Jacob got was a death glare. Jacob let out a sigh he hadn't noticed he was holding.

"Knight, Bates. Go grab a burger tonight. I want you two to work out those issues before tomorrow, you hear me?"

Jacob's first impression of Coach Connor had been incredibly cool. He seemed like a good coach, approachable and supportive. But, the fire in those eyes told Jacob he could probably become quite unpleasant if his team wouldn't behave. Jacob had no interest in challenging his patience.

"Yes, sir," both answered in unison.

“Good. Because I won’t have my two best players go at each other like girls a second time.” They exchanged quick looks, and one thing was clear—neither of them had any idea how to solve this issue.

“But Coach, what are we supposed to do?!” Bates complained his voice deep and rough but barely a whisper when he turned to Jacob. “I’m not going to be benched all season, you hear me?”

Was he threatening him? Jacob shrugged and gritted his teeth. “Loud and clear.”

Damn that guy and his intimidating height. It didn’t help that he had the greenest eyes Jacob had ever seen. They appeared to shimmer in some shade of gold in the sun, which was ridiculous, if not impossible.

“You go figure it out, boys. For now, you’ll behave like the proper guys you are and get your arses on the field. Push-ups in five!”

Bates shot him one of his intense death glares he seemed to have been practicing before he stomped off toward the open field. Jacob watched his new teammates as they all claimed their familiar positions. He tried to shrug off that tingling sensation he felt in his stomach. *Dammit*. Jacob had to admit one thing, Bates was dangerously gorgeous.

This was going to be anything but an easy task. Working out important issues over dinner with a guy that pushed all his buttons?

Please, someone shoot me now.

Baxter

How could he prove to Coach that he was the better player? Was he even the better player? Baxter was afraid to find out. During practice, they had done a lot of tossing the ball, tackling and running and shit. From that alone, Baxter couldn’t tell how good Knight’s game really was. If he was *that* legendary, there would be nothing Baxter could do. He had been proving his *talent* for the past few years, and nobody had ever had a reason to doubt him. His heart was in the game, and he couldn’t lose this over anything, not now. This season was going to be the toughest yet, and he couldn’t afford to be driven away by some newbie. His future as a pro player was at stake here.

“Morton is going to quit the team.”

And just like that Matt dropped the bomb. The call came while Baxter drove to the restaurant where he was supposed to *grab burgers with Knight*.

“What? How’d you know?”

Tom Morton was leaving the team? And, obviously, Matt had known it all along, hadn’t he?

“He told me. First day of school. His parents had been on his arse for a while now.”

That was right. Baxter remembered Tom complaining about his parents telling him to quit footy, quite frequently. “Dropping grades, huh?”

Tom had always been a good player; he had the physique, the technique and the love for the game. Nobody believed he would have to quit because of his grades. Apparently, his parents didn’t want him to go pro, at all. Baxter had always felt bad for him and was all the more happy that his own parents were rather thrilled about his high ambitions. He wouldn’t know what he’d do if he had to quit.

“Why hasn’t Coach said anything? He was all like ‘*You figure it out boys*’ and shit.”

Matt chuckled. That bastard.

“He enjoyed playing mind games with you?”

Damn that guy. The nerve he had, to get his kicks out of a situation like this. Baxter wasn’t done with him yet, that was for sure.

“You could have said something to me, you know? I’m your best mate!”

But of course, the Matt he knew would enjoy this little game just as much.

No real surprise there.

“Listen...” Jacob looked nervously around the family restaurant where they’d met twenty minutes ago, chewing on a crispy fry. “Baxter,” he offered with a shrug before taking a bite of his double cheeseburger.

They hadn’t officially done introductions yet, but back at school Baxter had overheard his friends addressing the guy by his first name. His friends never called Baxter by his real name, it was always just *B* or *B-Man*. For whatever reason, those nicknames had simply stuck with him ever since and he had never bothered to find out why.

“That’s a cool name. Wish my parents had thought of something cooler, too. Like Hercules or Caesar.”

For the first time, Baxter saw a real, genuine smile on the guy's face. He noticed how his teeth were all perfectly straight and the tiniest dimples appeared on both his cheeks.

"Why do you want to have such a bloody weird name?" For a brief moment, he wondered why he even cared, it wasn't like wanted to become best friends forever with the guy.

"It's not weird. I think it would be cool to be named after a *divine hero*."

That honest smile and those deep brown eyes did something surprisingly irritating to his stomach, something unfamiliar and strange. *For crying out loud. This isn't the right moment or person to get funny feelings for.* Baxter desperately willed his body to listen.

"Are you all right? Is your food bad? You look a little... green?"

Crap. A sudden chill made its way down his neck, and Baxter felt unexpectedly nervous. *Focus.* Could he trust his voice or expression to not make him come across as *weird* right now?

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. You were saying?" He had to get this conversation over with and be gone as fast as possible, before god knew what those eyes would do to him.

"Right. I just wanted to apologize. I had no idea I would be taking away anyone's position, honestly." Jacob looked away for a brief moment and took a drink before their eyes locked again. "When Coach told me I could play prop it felt like a sign, like a promise that this was going to be a good year after all. You know, I didn't want to move across the ocean just to start over. I was already partly through with senior year and then, *this*. I'm still not exactly thrilled." Jacob shrugged defeatedly.

"I only knew everything would be easier if I could at least continue with rugby, you guys seem to know what you're doing, you know?" Jacob chuckled. "But taking away your position doesn't sit right with me. You must've earned it, and Coach choosing me to play this season doesn't seem fair, so I understand why you're upset with me."

Baxter didn't quite understand, the guy would just give up the prop position for his sake and be benched? Didn't he transfer to Keebra on a scholarship? Didn't he want to become a pro player? There must be something he was missing. And why were those damn eyes bothering him so much?

"Wait, what exactly are you saying?"

Baxter watched Jacob relax into the seat and take a bite of his burger, chewing carefully, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before speaking again. "I mean I would be happy to play any position I was given. Prop or whatever was available. I just need to play, whatever position is fine."

Baxter raised an eyebrow, unable to resist the teasing. He knew he must be smirking and he enjoyed it.

"So, you're basically saying you are bloody awesome in *whatever* position?"

Blinking once, twice—Jacob coughed and nearly spilled his juice. Baxter joined the laughter that followed and thought he might just be able to like the guy after all. When their eyes met across the table, Jacob grinned almost wickedly.

"Maybe. Something like that."

They shared another long look, and Baxter felt himself return the grin equally wide. He didn't know why, but it felt like this might actually turn out to be fun.

Jacob reached for his drink and sighed, their eyes locking again, and this time Baxter didn't like the expression they held. "I would ask if you think whether there would be a chance for me to be on the team without being benched all season, but I guess it isn't a real option since we are already packed with players." Baxter hated seeing Jacob's smile dying as the realisation sank in.

"I have to tell you something."

He probably should come clean about now as it wouldn't be fair to put Jacob through more when he was obviously worried about their *little* disaster just as much. It surprised Baxter, he had to admit, but it made the new guy less threatening and a lot more likeable, and maybe they could actually be real friends now that they would get their issue out of the way.

"You have met Tom Morton, right?" Jacob nodded, chewing on his burger, so Baxter continued. "He is going to quit the team." At that, Jacob's jaw literally dropped and the guy gaped at him like he had seen *Santa*.

"I know, right? Coach played us. He knew all along that it wouldn't be necessary for either of us to be benched." Baxter could just imagine what might be running through Jacob's mind right now. He'd felt at a total loss himself when Matt had told him the same thing.

“I don’t even know what to say to that.” Jacob suddenly began to laugh then, and damn if it wasn’t contagious.

While they carried on with their chat and ate their meals, Baxter felt himself relax immensely. Their casual conversation about music, rugby players, matches they were going to watch on TV this weekend and random topics alike turned out to be quite fun. He genuinely enjoyed Jacob’s company; the guy knew how to tell a fun story. The more time passed, the more intriguing Jacob became. In sharp contrast to his powerfully built athlete’s body, there was something almost *naïve* about him, which Baxter really liked. Those shy, and sometimes almost sad, smiles he caught glimpses of made Baxter want to reach out and lift all the troubles of the world from his shoulders.

“So tell me, did you live in a fancy mansion in Beverly Hills? With a butler and chauffeur? A maid? Oh! You probably had your own chef too, didn’t you?”

Jacob burst out in that bubbly laughter that Baxter was starting to become quite familiar with. For the ninth time his heart beat twice as fast when Jacob beamed at him with that trademark, eye-crinkling smile from across the table. His body’s reaction still freaked him out, but less each time.

Was it really a good idea to develop a crush on his new teammate? A very *male* teammate at that?

“Are you serious? Man, I’ve never stepped foot in a mansion! Can you imagine? That would have been so awesome. I would *not* have left the country if I owned a mansion, with butler and all.”

And darn is he gorgeous, was all Baxter could think, unable to tear his eyes away for the life of him. Gorgeous, his arse. He had never called a guy gorgeous, and he wouldn’t start now.

Or would he? Not aloud, he wouldn’t.

Baxter was well aware of the flush on his face because it was bloody burning, but he watched Jacob finish his burger with one last, big bite. Those lush lips drew him in, playing tricks on his mind that he couldn’t seem to stop.

Are they as velvety as they look?

What would they feel like underneath his fingertips?

Would they fit perfectly against his?

This time Baxter didn’t fight the grin or the thoughts that crept into his mind when Jacob spoke again with his mouth full. It was almost cute. “No really, I

didn't live anywhere near Hollywood, if that's what you are implying. California is large, you know. And besides, we couldn't have afforded a butler if we wanted to."

It made sense, and Baxter found himself nodding in response. Truthfully, he hadn't given it much thought before, but he knew he shouldn't judge people like that. Stereotyping was so not cool, and he had learned from experience how hurtful it could be.

Baxter couldn't believe how fast the time in Jacob's company passed. While they had a lot of fun just talking and getting to know each other a little, he realised Jacob wasn't such a bad guy after all. He was quite funny, easy to talk to and absolutely *chill*. Almost adorably shy too, despite all those muscles and strength he obviously had in him. And those tingling sensations, he discovered he got from looking at Jacob, intrigued him like nothing else. Could he seriously be attracted to a guy?

There were times when he had wondered what it would be like being with a guy, and in theory it didn't sound so bad, so eventually he admitted to himself it might just be okay if it happened. He always thought some guys were quite hot, and he could appreciate both genders as far as he was concerned. Since Baxter had never felt an attraction towards any guy though, he had dismissed the possibilities of actually being with a guy, and blamed it on curiosity or sexual confusion, *maybe*?

Hell, I'm not planning on falling in love with the guy. Friends though, that he could do.

Now that nothing stood between them anymore, it felt stupid to fuss about their initial disagreement. If they would have met under different circumstances, they would have gotten along pretty well right from the start, wouldn't they?

"Guess I should apologise too."

It would be stupid to miss out on a friendship and hold an unreasonable grudge. Plus, they had to get along anyway, if they were going to be on the same team after all.

"About what?" Jacob gave him a confused look, and the only thought Baxter had was, *cute*.

"I might have overreacted a little when we first met. That's not my usual temperament." Baxter tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, and Jacob smiled understandingly.

Baxter knew from that moment that there was no doubt, they would get along well. He also knew he was in over his head here; something about the guy might just be the death of him.

With a single look his head began to spin, his palms became sweaty and his throat clogged up, leaving him just a little breathless and brought him close to dizziness. *This shit is crazy.*

And yet, for another long moment Baxter couldn't unlock his gaze from those eyes in front of him. Even in the dark of the poorly lit restaurant, they seemed to sparkle with life and humour. They were the most intense shade of golden brown.

Unnerving and irritating as hell.

Jacob

Outside the restaurant, they stood in front of Baxter's white Ford Mustang. It was one of those old models that could tell you a hundred stories—all those places the car had seen and people it had met. Was it from the early sixties, maybe? It had obviously been well used, but also excellently taken care of. Jacob thought it was the coolest thing he'd ever seen. Cars had never interested him that much, he preferred action figures over collecting little automobiles, but he could appreciate beauty when he saw it.

"You should come and *actually* try out for Morton's position then, or at least impress Mr. A. I don't know how exactly you got to play prop, but I am sure *he* won't make it that easy for you."

Holy G, that accent. It had been the first thing Jacob noticed this morning, how deep and rich his voice sounded, and it was challenging to focus on anything but how he spoke. For the first time, he thought it didn't seem so *funny* how everyone here talked. Well, at least it sounded pretty hot on Baxter; he could probably fall in love with his Australian accent alone.

"Mr. Who?" Jacob couldn't remember any Mr. A. He had met quite a lot of teachers and everyone involved in their rugby team, or so he thought.

"Coach Anderson. Ah that's right, Matt told me he was still out of the country last week to look at possible scholarship candidates. I honestly don't know why nobody has fully informed you about how things work here, but I know from experience our teachers and especially the coaches love to mess with us. They're a cheeky bunch."

"So, there is a lot more that I need to know? Any warnings?"

“Maybe. You might have already realised that we take our footy here serious and everyone expects us to work our arses off, but that shouldn’t be a problem when you really want to play. I’ve learned a lot since I’ve been at Keebra, and it’s become my second home. You saw how awesome everyone here is, and being out on the field together, literally every day, is what keeps us going. You’re welcome to join the extra hours of training and working out at the gym with me and some of the guys whenever you want.” Baxter winked at him playfully, and Jacob felt his stomach flip.

Does he know his smile is insanely beautiful?

Leaning against the white car, Baxter looked stunningly good in his red leather jacket and those tight fitting dark jeans. But then, he probably looked good in anything.

“Saturdays or Sundays are usually match days, and we often go away for the weekend or on random weekdays. You’ll see fast just how much we really play here.”

Jacob could only smile and nod. This sounded amazing. Playing ball all the time, whenever he wanted to? Weekends away? He couldn’t wish for anything better. Jacob might actually have a great school year after all.

“Basically...” Baxter visibly held his breath before he continued once their eyes met. “We get to spend time playing ball until we burst and shit stars.”

They shared a few more laughs before Baxter offered him a ride home, which Jacob was grateful for. Not only did he want to test-drive that awesome car, but he also didn’t want to take a bus. Nobody had had any time to truly show him how to get around yet, and the last thing he needed was to get lost and be attacked by a kangaroo. Were there even wild kangaroos around here? Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen any, except on the occasional road signs. He would have to ask Baxter about it some time.

As for transportation, so far, either his aunt or uncle drove him to school in the mornings when one of them headed to work. Usually, it would be Aunt Betty since she was an English teacher at their school. How convenient, huh? Apparently, she also had some influence on his transfer, so he guessed he should be more grateful. The timing had been perfect though, what with the school year here beginning in February. While getting to school wouldn’t be a problem, he still needed to figure out the whole *getting home* part, without having to wait for his aunt all the time. He probably had to get used to the bus system soon, or get a bike.

“Meet me in the parking lot tomorrow after class?”

The ride to his aunt's house went by in a blur, and that gravelly voice coming from the driver's seat startled him.

“Umm, sure?” When had they made plans to hang out? How could *that* have slipped by him?

“For your tryout? You know to impress Mr. A? He wouldn't want to miss out on a star player like you, huh?”

Oh. Right. Jacob felt his cheeks heat a little. The teasing in Baxter's voice was clearly evident and set off a series of shivers, starting at his neck and going all the long way down Jacob's spine. He had almost gotten used to it; after all, it happened *a lot* over dinner tonight. *Almost.* It still felt foreign and unnerving, and whenever their eyes met, he thought he could almost taste the static electricity in the air surrounding them.

What is all that about? From the moment he had seen Baxter, he had felt the attraction, but now it seemed almost as if Baxter felt it too. The way his eyes would linger and his voice would drop so low, until it was barely a whisper sometimes. But that couldn't be, could it? A guy like Baxter couldn't be interested in him.

“Um, right. Yeah, I'll see you then. After class,” he managed with a nervous smile as they exchanged phone numbers, just in case.

While Jacob had been well aware of the fact that he *liked* boys, it was all still very new for him. Looking the way he did, all beefy and butch, he'd never felt comfortable enough to approach a guy. Being in high school also meant there hadn't been that many opportunities to find a boyfriend in the first place. And being outed at the age of fifteen? Being a jock on top of all that? He certainly would have never heard the end of it. Therefore, staying in the closet, as everyone seems to enjoy saying, felt rather safe. Lonely, but safe. Jacob wished he could find a real boyfriend someday. Maybe by the time he went to college, or university, he would get a chance at living his life properly. Maybe then people wouldn't give him shit and accept him the way he was.

When he got home, the house was dark and quiet. His aunt and uncle were probably already in bed, and he was quite positive his mom was still at the hospital. She was always on call. Once he was through with his nightly routine, Aunt Betty appeared in his bedroom door.

“Did you have a good time?”

She gave him a caring smile and held out a stack of what appeared to be fresh towels and the body wash he had asked her to pick up for him. There was this vanilla and coconut wash he just loved. Jacob smiled; he couldn't wait for his shower in the morning.

"Yes, it was fun. I went out with someone from the team."

Accepting the towels with a *thank you*, he turned to put them on the sink. He never had his own bathroom, and Jacob thought that was pretty cool. A far cry from a mansion and butler, but still cool.

"It's great that you are already making friends, Jacob. Your mother will be very happy."

Maybe. If she remembers she still has a son, Jacob thought bitterly. Well, he couldn't blame her, could he? After all, she did save lives, and many at that. Who knew how many people wouldn't have made it if his mom had never become who she was now?

Jacob kept telling himself that it was for the best the way things were, and anyway, he had gotten used to it over the years, he just wasn't fully convinced yet that the whole *moving to the other side of the world* thing would work out. But things appeared to take a positive turn, and his mom was offered a great position, as well as the chance to reconnect with her long lost sister. He would be happy for her at least, and maybe they would get to be a happy family after all. So far, he felt quite comfortable here; everyone seemed nice and caring enough.

His aunt and uncle's house was also big enough for the four of them and with the adults gone most of the time Jacob had a lot of space and freedom to do whatever he liked. Not that he particularly needed the entire house to himself, he preferred to be in someone's company a bit more than being all alone all day, but maybe he would find the answers to that in new friends. Maybe he could find a close friend in Baxter—they had gotten along well tonight after all. Jacob smiled, remembering just how chaotic today had been and how interestingly it had ended. He really liked Baxter.

"All right, you better get some sleep. It's already late. I'll see you in the morning."

Oh yes, sleep sounded good after a day like *this*. Jacob still couldn't believe everything that had just happened, really had happened. And how could one day be so exhausting?

"Okay. Thanks for the body wash and everything."

“You’re welcome, Jacob. If you need anything at all, just tell me.”

“Thanks, Aunt Betty. I will. Goodnight.” She then left with a smile and *goodnight*.

Jacob let himself fall onto his bed and stared at the ceiling, recalling today’s events just one last time before settling to sleep. He was looking forward to tomorrow, Jacob wanted to join the team properly and get their issues out of the way. And wouldn’t that be a great start? Maybe spring this year wouldn’t turn out as terrible as it had started. He would get over the move to a completely different country and living with total strangers for god knew how long, depending on his future plans. Honestly, Jacob had no idea how this new school would work out. He had always been an excellent student, and despite the many hours he spent at practice, for whatever sport he played at the moment, his grades had never suffered. But what if his previous grades weren’t good enough to get him into the university he wanted in Australia?

Jacob knew he had to work harder to catch up on things he’d missed out on, and he also needed to check the possibilities for college soon.

Jacob was aware of his goals—one of them not being the rugby league—but he liked new challenges. The ironic part was that it was practically spring back in his home country, and fall in Australia was still a month away.

This year, Jacob would have to get through spring not once, but twice.

He had never anticipated that.

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Chapter 2

February 10th, 2012

Jacob

“Good game, Knight.”

Matt gave Jacob a brotherly slap on the shoulder. *Yuck*. His shirt already clung to his back and chest while warm sweat trickled down his neck. Showers in this kind of weather were officially useless, but Jacob felt *amazing*. Today's rugby practice had been a blast, Coach Anderson seemed to *love* him, his new friends were fun, and there was a lot more rugby and some surfing on this weekend's agenda. It couldn't get any better than this.

“Are you ready for your first real game on Sunday?”

Jacob turned to see Matt grinning from ear to ear. He quickly learned the guy was one of those people who could laugh and smile all day no matter what, and it was rather contagious.

“Sure!” Maybe. “Piece of cake.” Hopefully. Jacob tried for his best *we'll-definitely-kick-ass* smile, and hoped he had succeeded in covering up his uncertainty.

Jacob had only been playing with the team for a very short time, and honestly he was nervous about his first actual match. Really nervous. *First times* always made him feel a bit anxious, and he hadn't settled into their routine well enough yet. The high hopes everyone seemed to have regarding his ability to play ball also didn't help much to reduce his nervousness, but Jacob was looking forward to the game and playing alongside Baxter more than anything. Bax had been evidently pleased with Jacob's fast acceptance by Coach Anderson and the rest of the team. To be honest, Jacob was a little surprised to take over Morton's position just like that. While he knew he wasn't a bad player at all, he still hadn't expected to be accepted so well and so fast. Coach Anderson must have been impressed with him. It was kinda silly, but he felt a bit proud and happy about it. Since he'd had a father who would never show any pride in whatever he did, and then wasn't around at all anymore, it was nice to be acknowledged once in a while.

Going to a brand new school in a different country, playing his favorite sport and hanging out with great guys was all very exciting, and Jacob had to

admit he felt especially flattered with one particular person's unexpected praise and apparent interest. Bax had been admiring his moves on the field and had complimented him on his weight lifting last night, when he'd invited Jacob to go with him to the gym. He basically wouldn't stop asking Jacob to join him until he finally gave in, which was rather sweet. Bax showed him all his favorite workouts and gave away a few of his tips and tricks. Bax said he spent a lot of nights working out, especially before a new season, and he planned on putting some extra hours into his routine this year. *Apparently, he was aiming really high.*

Jacob admired his willpower and devotion. Playing rugby had always been just a hobby to him, one that he loved like nothing else, but it was still simply something to pass the time and get exercise while having fun. He truly loved to play, but not with the same goal most of the guys had. It was quite obvious that pretty much everyone attending Keebra Park was very serious about it, especially the boys who wanted to become pro players. Some of his class mates were here on scholarships, hoping for the best rugby and academic education. He learned that Archie came all the way from England, and as expected, was an incredibly good player with a lot of motivation.

Everyone in their team worked their asses off from early in the morning until late at night; it was like nothing he had ever seen. The school year had only just started and Jacob already felt exhausted at times, and despite his very good stamina and willpower, he quickly learned just how tough it was going to be. A few of his teammates had felt threatened by him because they thought he would eventually take away their spot in the limelight. Jacob had no such intentions, and he hoped he could show Baxter that he would never be a threat to his career. That he would rather they played alongside each other like a real team. The season would be over too quickly and Jacob promised himself he would give his best. It might just be the last real chance he would get to play to his heart's content, and he would make the most of it.

Bax came up beside him and pushed Matt out of earshot, before he whispered close to Jacob's ear. "I hope you like Matt, because he is going to be on your arse now that you've made the team with such ease."

"Shut up, Bates." Matt shoved their friend playfully, apparently having heard every word after all. "I'm only going to be on your arse, mate."

Jacob had wondered briefly what the guy's deal was, he had only seen them together what, three days? And they already appeared to be glued together by

the hip. Would he get to spend more time alone with Bax? Jacob tried not to be jealous of his new friend. He liked Matt a lot. There was absolutely no reason for him to be jealous. Right? They were all just going to be friends. Jacob wished like hell that didn't feel so disappointing.

"No surprise, you're always on my arse." Baxter chuckled and threw one arm over Matt's shoulder, squeezing him tight as they walked down the street to where they had parked earlier. As soon as they reached Bax's Mustang, Matt grabbed his school bag from the back seat and put on his white baseball cap.

"Sorry boys, but I've got places to be today. See you tomorrow at practice!" Matt winked at Jacob, fist-bumped Bax, and then left for the bus stop. Jacob also wished he didn't feel so excited to finally be alone with Bax.

Damn heart, you traitor.

Inside Baxter's car, Jacob felt nervous just sitting in such close proximity to his friend. It had been okay the first couple of times, well close to okay, but the thought of being driven around daily was getting to him, which he thought was a bit strange. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't he be feeling more and more comfortable with Bax by now? Instead, Jacob had sweaty hands, and his heart beat twice as fast. It always did whenever he was close to Bax.

Jacob was grateful, though, that Bax decided to take him along wherever they went, and then drive him home. He also liked calling him Bax. Yesterday, he'd told him once again just how cool he thought his name was, and asked if he would mind if Jacob called him Bax because, obviously, that was the coolest nickname you could get. Jacob loved how it sounded on his tongue and wanted to say it aloud as many times as possible.

"Sure, whatever makes you happy, Jazz."

He answered with that deadly smile and a twinkling wink that made Jacob weak in the knees. It appeared that Bax had come up with a pet name himself. Payback? Jacob didn't mind, he thought it was fun to have a pet name for Bax, and he liked being called something that unusual in return. Nobody, besides his mother, had ever given him a nickname before, they all just called him Jacob, which he thought was way boring. The fact that Bax had bothered enough to come up with one made him feel special somehow, and Jacob knew how silly that was.

"Hey, Bax, do you have any plans for tonight?"

“Um, the usual workout? Nothing that couldn’t be cancelled, why?” Bax beamed him yet another blinding smile from the driver’s seat and started the car. “What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing exciting. I guess I just wondered if you would mind going to the comic book store with me?”

Baxter raised his left eyebrow the way he so often did. “The comic book store?” The surprise was clearly visible on his face.

Jacob shrugged. “Yeah, and maybe go for a movie later.”

Now I sound like I am asking him out on a date. Shit. Why do I have to be so weird sometimes? We’re friends. Guys. No movies. No dates. And definitely no kisses.

Jacob groaned inwardly, he had to stop thinking about Bax *that* way. He knew it couldn’t be *that* way. They couldn’t be *that* way.

“I mean if there is a theater close by... Or not. We don’t have to watch anything. The comic book store is fine. I mean, if you have time at all.” *Smooth, Jacob, very smooth.*

Baxter chuckled, apparently amused at Jacob’s terrible social skills. *Way to go.*

“Anything you want, Jazz.” Baxter smiled at him fleetingly before fully concentrating on backing the car out of the parking lot. Jacob felt relieved at not being the center of his attention for a moment to regain his cool. Maybe his heart would stop pounding so fast too.

“Great. Thanks. My aunt didn’t have time to show me where it is and I’d rather not get lost again today. You’d be my hero.” *What the hell? Brain, please come back, nap time is over.*

“No problem really, it’s quite close actually. Wait, you have family here?”

Oh right, they hadn’t quite gotten to that part yet. While they talked about a lot of things and Jacob had heard the occasional story about Bax’s family, he avoided talking about his where he could. Not that there were any real secrets, but Jacob preferred not to talk about family stuff, and he usually wouldn’t bring it up unless someone asked something in particular.

“Yeah. I would like to say *it’s a long story* but it really isn’t, and it’s not very interesting.”

“Try me,” Baxter offered with that dangerously sexy smile he had going so very often.

Being that attractive doesn't help those irritating thoughts of wanting to kiss Bax to go away.

At all.

“So your aunt is your mum's sister, and she's originally from Maine, just like your mum, obviously. She got married to an Australian police officer from Queensland, is an English teacher at our school and has never been home since then?”

“Yep, that's them.”

“And you've never met either of them before last month?”

“Aunt Betty and Mom hadn't seen each other since they each got married, which was only shortly after I was born. There hadn't been many opportunities.” And as far as Jacob knew, there had also been a few misunderstandings and things that had made them lose touch.

“Because they left the States,” Bax said matter-of-factly. “And now you and your mum moved to Southport because she was offered a position at The Gold Coast Heart Centre that she just couldn't turn down.”

Jacob continued to nod away as Baxter clearly enjoyed recapping their entire conversation, he even made a game out of guessing his aunt's name and finding out what classes she taught. Bax seemed to be curious about everything and wanted to know every little detail. Jacob didn't mind so much if it meant spending more time together.

“Yep, she's a good doctor. I think she'd wanted to move here for a few years, wanting to reconnect with her sister, you know? With my grandmother's passing, all of our relatives in the States are now literally gone, so when the time was right, there would have been nothing to keep her from moving to Australia.”

Jacob was past his initial irritation with their move by now. He just wanted to make the best of it, and he would. Jacob had a lot of fears and weaknesses—he was human after all—but giving up wasn't one of them.

“Couldn't you have stayed with someone until graduation? You must have left a lot of friends behind.”

That was probably true. Jacob had made a lot of great friends and he had looked forward to graduating with them, then going to the college he had already picked out and working hard for his dreams. A slight change of plans didn't mean he would miss out on anything; he had learned that early on from his mother, who had always been a great role model in that respect. It was just easy to lose focus sometimes, but Jacob promised he wouldn't now.

"Mom is all the family I have. No graduation or friends were worth staying behind, and really, after graduation I would have lost a lot of friends anyway. I am sure everyone will choose to go different ways, you know?"

"Mh, yeah, I guess I get that." Baxter seemed to concentrate on the traffic ahead of them and it took him a few minutes to speak again. "What about your dad?"

The one topic he absolutely dreaded. It had to come up sooner or later. Jacob was a little surprised it took until now, people usually brought up the *What's your dad do?* question right away.

"I'd rather we not talk about him, ever." *Please?*

"Mhh, okay." The unreadable look Bax gave him unexpectedly tugged at his heart, and Jacob suddenly missed his father, whom he hadn't thought about in a long time. The sadness quickly turned to anger, and he wished he could erase every single memory and thought of the man.

Jacob looked out the window and, with surprise, realized they were still on the road. Had they gotten that engrossed in Jacob's *little* storytelling?

"Bax? Why are we still driving? I thought you said it was close."

"Uh, yeah it really is." Baxter suddenly brought the car to a halt at the curb in front of what looked like a very expensive hotel. One Jacob was sure he would never be able to afford. Jacob turned to look at his friend, when their eyes locked he wondered briefly why Bax always seemed to smile at him like he ate spoonfuls of sunshine with his cereal. His cheerful expression could be a bit unsettling at times, or maybe Jacob just wasn't used to the butterflies in his stomach.

"I guess we drove around in circles for a while." Bax beamed him yet another of his bright, confident smiles and unbuckled his seat belt. Watching his friend from up close didn't make it easy to mirror the simple action.

"Did you get lost or something?"

“No, I enjoyed listening to you talk, Jazz.” He grinned and punched Jacob’s arm playfully. “We are here now, so let’s go.”

That accent still gave Jacob the shivers, and combined with that grin, it was almost too much.

Get a grip Jacob, for crying out loud.

Baxter

The comic book store, huh?

Well, if that wasn’t a surprise. Baxter had honestly thought Jacob was kidding, at first, but then his expression changed into something close to actual embarrassment, and he knew he wasn’t kidding. But really, the bloody comic book store?

Baxter tried his best to keep a straight face all the way to the small corner shop. He remembered passing it a few times with his mates before but had never gone inside. Not that he had a problem with comic books or anything; he just couldn’t see the appeal. And to be completely honest, he would have never pegged Jacob to be into something that geeky; he didn’t seem to fit in with the crowd any more than Bax himself.

The moment they entered the store Baxter found himself wondering if anyone would give them shit for coming in, and whether he had to actually follow Jacob through the entire store, maybe even talk about comics. It made him feel a little nervous. There was no way to impress Jazz here, since he knew nothing about these kinda things. Maybe he could take him bowling or something later, any place where he felt more at ease. When Matt had left them alone earlier, Baxter had hoped he could invite Jazz out and show him around the area, but one thing was for certain, the comic book store hadn’t been on his list of things to do.

“Seriously? This place is called Dark Moan Creations? Who’d think of something like that?”

The question left his lips before he realised he had voiced the words. It wasn’t like he had any interest in finding out the answer or meeting the owner. That thought made him shiver.

“I take it you don’t come here often?”

Baxter laughed, “No. It’s my first time, to be honest.”

“Not much of a reader then?”

Jacob gave him a challenging look, and Baxter found himself quickly getting lost in those big brown eyes. *Stop it. Look away.* And he did. But the guys in their colourful tights and with their big weapons on all the walls around him felt somehow intimidating enough for him to avert his eyes again to something less dizzying. Which Jazz's eyes weren't. *Well, crap.*

“Do you honestly consider comic books *real* books? Aren't they just ninety percent pictures?”

“Ohhh, listen to you. That's a bit harsh, man. They are graphic *novels*, and it may be applied broadly, but they all tell stories in written words, so yeah I'd say they count as *real* books.”

“With more pictures than words, sounds like cheating to me, mate.” Baxter was trying to be funny, not offensive, but the look Jacob gave him told him he failed big time. *Crap.*

“Seriously? You're going to diss my comic books? In a comic book store? You are on dangerous ground here, Bax. Are you that suicidal?”

“Hm. You do have a point. I better shut up before Batman attacks me.” Baxter winked at Jacob, trying to lighten the mood a little. He hadn't intended on saying those things, that was pretty dense, but sometimes his mouth was faster than his brain.

“Good plan.” Jacob rolled his eyes at him and Baxter thought it might just have been the cutest thing he'd ever seen. Well, if that wasn't worth the whole trip already.

“Lead on then.”

When he wasn't looking where he was going, he bumped right into Jacob, who literally squawked in surprise. *Oops.* He had been a little blinded by the countless colourful magazines and posters to his right and left, and basically all around him. There were half naked men and barely dressed women, drawn of course, monsters and spaceships, glass boxes full of very expensive merchandising and *toys* literally everywhere. It was almost frightening.

“You can wait outside if you want.”

The uncertainty in Jazz's voice and the nervous smile he gave Baxter made him wonder if he had been a little too mean earlier, and hope he hadn't hurt his friend's feelings with his bullshitting. Maybe Jacob just felt sorry for him. Just how much could he sense about how out of place and intimidated Baxter felt?

“Excuse me? I can handle a comic book store all right.” *Great, I’m such a loser. I don’t even sound convincing to my own ears.* He didn’t know what his problem was, it wasn’t like anyone would attack him for his cluelessness and the monsters certainly wouldn’t come alive and chase him to hell.

I have to get a fucking grip.

“Come on then. As long as you don’t diss anymore superheroes and keep your hands to yourself, I think you are going to be just fine.”

Oh crap, I just hope he doesn’t ever want me to go to conventions and shit.

A comic book store he could manage, probably. Hopefully. But a real life convention?

Baxter wasn’t so sure if he wanted to find out what that would be like. Although, with those arms and that chest, Jazz would probably look bloody good in a costume. Yeah, he’d make a dangerously hot Superman. Or Spiderman. Hell, he would even look good as that blue, furry Beast. Nobody looked good as a blue, furry Beast.

Baxter wasn’t sure if they all dressed up at conventions now, but he’d seen a lot of guys in costumes on TV and the Internet. He smiled to himself. Baxter would suggest a good one for Jacob if it ever came to that. And, then, stay the hell away from this scene.

“So, what are we looking for exactly?” *Please don’t talk comic books to me, please don’t think I know shit, please, please, please.*

“Um, let me go find someone who works here. We can grab the issues I need to catch up on and then leave. I’ll be quick.” *Thank god.*

Jacob gave him an apologetic smile, and Baxter wondered if it really was such a big deal to him, those comics. If it was, hell, Baxter would be the last one to ruin it. He’d play along however long he needed to. He would, at least, try. There is nothing wrong with being in a comic book store.

“It’s okay, really. Take your time.” *I’ll just follow you around like a puppy.*

Which wasn’t all that bad, Jacob had quite an attractive behind. Baxter swallowed hard. The moment he realised the meaning of those thoughts, he felt his cheeks burn feverishly. *Fuck.* It happened again, Baxter was thinking about his mate’s arse in *that* way. Like it was something bloody beautiful, something forbidden and tempting, asking to be touched. Begging him to do the touching.

He had seen Jacob's arse in the showers, just briefly, really, he hadn't been staring. It was one beautiful arse though, he had seen that much. And whatever shorts he wore did nothing to hide it. That dark green and orange pair he wore now did certainly nothing to hide its beauty.

It was difficult to ignore the tingling underneath his skin as the itch to touch Jazz's arse, naked preferably, was becoming stronger.

Somehow, he just couldn't bring himself to feel ashamed enough to look away.

February 17th, 2012

Jacob

Being followed by Bax all the way through the comic book store, last week, had been a lot more awkward than he would have expected; he re-played that day in his head every night before bed. *Geez, he must think I am a total weirdo already.* Clearly, Bax had no interest whatsoever in comic books and he probably didn't like video games or sci-fi movies either. And god bless him if he knew what Manga and Anime were. Well, that wasn't so bad now, was it?

Just because I'm into geeky stuff doesn't mean he will like me any less, right?

Even though their excursion to the comic book store had been somewhat awkward, Bax didn't seem to mind or treat him any different just yet. After Jacob paid for all the comics he so desperately wanted, they took the short walk down to the shopping mall, grabbed pizza and went to see one of the movies Bax had been going on about ever since Jacob had mentioned the cinema. It had been quite a fun night, and it was probably just him who felt awkward, which had a lot to do with Bax buying dinner and insisting on paying for the movie. It felt a lot like a real date, which of course it wasn't.

They were just friends, and friends go grab food and watch movies all the time. And sometimes they paid for each other too. He would just have to invite Bax next time. No big deal.

Bax might not be interested in certain subjects that Jacob was, but they never seemed to run out of places to go, things to do and topics to talk about. Bax even took him bowling and playing darts the other day, which had been absolutely awesome. Jacob was good at the whole roll the ball down the lane and kill the pins thing, but he still had to learn a bit about throwing darts. At least, it appeared to amuse Bax that he almost threw one out the window that

night. The easiness between them made Jacob wish all the more they could go on a real date someday, do all those couple-y things everyone except him did. With Bax, he wanted to try them.

Like that's ever going to happen. Well, a guy could dream, right?

"I like your poster."

Bax's gravelly voice drew him back into the here and now, and Jacob turned to find his friend pointing at the huge framed Hercules on the wall right above his bed. Bax wore his trademark grin, the one that lifted his lip slightly on one side. The one that made Jacob's head spin and his knees weak.

Just why did I have to frame that damn poster?

Jacob started to feel a bit dizzy, and already regretted inviting Bax to study at his place today. The week had gone by in a blur with all the rugby practice, studying to keep up with his upcoming English assignment and trips to the gym and beach with Bax, Matt and some of their friends. For the first time in a while, he had Bax all to himself for the day, and night, which was a real first time altogether. It made Jacob just a little nervous. After studying for Chemistry, they planned on staying in watching movies, resting and recharging for tomorrow's practice and trip to the beach with the entire team. Today was Saturday, a day that had become Jacob's favorite day of the week. Apparently, Matt always had secret plans he wouldn't talk about on Saturdays, which was perfectly fine with Jacob.

Jacob assumed that Bax already knew he liked comics quite a lot, so he hoped it wouldn't throw him off completely now that he had seen his room. He always dreaded that first time someone saw that side of him, the other side, not the butch football player or rugby wannabe, which, honestly, he wasn't. People just always assumed he was one of those apparently air-headed sport fanatics, one of the jocks who couldn't read for the life of them, or whatever stereotypes they had in their minds. Jacob knew everyone had their stereotypes, it was quite inevitable, but despite what everybody thought, Jacob was a geek through and through. He might not look it, but his heart was in it. Like it was in sports.

He collected comic books and action figures, he had piles of gaming magazines in boxes under his bed and shelves filled to the brim with books and comics, especially Manga, Anime DVD's and all his favorite sci-fi and vintage cartoon series. He also owned all of his favorite vintage video games and a bunch of walk-throughs. Jacob still had his SNES plugged in, and would give good old Zelda a run for its money whenever he could find the time. Time was

a problem. Wasn't it always? But whenever he could, Jacob would squeeze in time to catch up on his geek boards online and update his *geek*.

"So this wasn't just a one off now, was it? You really are into those things."

It was more a statement than a question, and yes, it made Jacob feel as self-conscious as every other time someone had discovered his love for comic books and superheroes.

"The comic books?" he offered nervously, hoping Bax wouldn't notice that he wanted to sink into the ground right now, or maybe vanish into thin air. He'd be fine with either.

"Yeah, and all that other stuff. Look at all those tiny figures, wow. You've got like a million here."

Bax ran his finger along the wooden shelf which held half of his collection of figurines, the rest were packed away neatly in boxes, most of which were still mint in package and hopefully would stay that way.

"Not quite a million yet, but yeah, I do have a lot." Jacob hated feeling like Bax was judging him for the first time and might consider him too weird to hang out with anymore. And if that wouldn't totally ruin his mood, and life.

"No kidding. But hey, I don't see any I know. Don't you have Batman or Spiderman?"

Jacob chuckled at Bax's confused expression. He guessed he wouldn't know any of those in front of him. Truthfully, most were Anime characters, his Marvel figurines hadn't been on display for quite a while.

"I do, but they're packed away. I put those I like the most on display. The others are wrapped up in boxes." Jacob shrugged and tried to play it cool, which wasn't working. He felt sweaty and just a little more dizzy. *Great.*

"You have more than those? Seriously?" Bax beamed him a wide-eyed look, and Jacob could only shrug some more in response. "Guilty as charged."

God, please don't let him think I am a complete freak.

Baxter

"You think I am a complete freak, don't you?"

Baxter looked up from his papers and was instantly met by Jazz's beautiful brown eyes. They held something close to worry in them, and Baxter didn't like it.

“What? No. Why would I think that?”

When he moved, his knees bumped slightly against Jazz's underneath the table. Sitting across from him in such close proximity had made that happen quite a few times today. Baxter liked it. If it were up to him, they would study like that every time. Jacob had moved his desk by its wheels into the centre of his room so they could sit on either side while they worked on their assignment.

“You keep staring at Hercules, like all the time, and then giving me that *that* look.”

Huh? Had he been staring that much?

“What look?”

Baxter wasn't sure how to respond to that, because yeah, he had been looking, apparently a bit too obviously, but he had no clue how to explain why he watched Jacob write when he should have been concentrating on his own assignment. Hell, he didn't know why he found Jazz writing more interesting in the first place. Well, he *might* have an idea...

“I don't know, just that look, like... like you think I am a complete freak.”

Oh. Oh, Jazz, I wasn't giving you that look, it was a completely different kind of look.

“I still don't know why I would think that, Jazz. What would make you a freak?”

“Maybe because I have Hercules on my wall? And I am basically drowning in geek... *stuff*.”

Darn, how could he explain that he had been staring at Hercules because he was pretty hot?

He couldn't. And he wouldn't try to explain, but he didn't like that Jazz thought he had any problem with his geeky stuff. True, he wasn't into it; thinking of Hercules as hot was a far cry from liking comics, in fact he still dreaded another visit to the comic book store, which hopefully wouldn't come any time soon, but he didn't think of Jazz as a freak. He thought Jazz was brilliant with school stuff, fantastic at footy, funny and gorgeous, and the one person he wanted to spend all his free time with. But he couldn't tell him any of those things either, could he?

“Maybe I like Hercules?” He offered with what hopefully looked like an apologetic smile. “He's cool. And I don't think you are a freak, Jazz. If you like

all this stuff you are drowning in, that's cool with me." *Please just don't ask me anything about Hercules because I have no frigging clue.*

"Really? You're not just saying that?"

"Why would I do that?"

Jazz shrugged and Baxter wondered why it would matter so much what he thought, and even more so why it would matter to Baxter what Jacob liked. Honestly, he didn't care if the guy liked Madonna and had her posters up on his walls. Although, Hercules surely was a lot more yummy to look at.

"Seriously, Jazz, I might not understand it, but it doesn't bother me and, of course, I don't think of you as a freak or anything based on what you like or don't like."

The relief on Jazz's face was clearly visible, and Baxter felt relieved himself; he hoped they wouldn't bring it up again, because he didn't have any problem with it. Hercules and those little *crazy ass* monsters and colourful heroes weren't all that bad.

"So what else is there I don't know about you, Jazz?" He beamed him a smile in the hope of receiving one in return. "Care to share?"

"What?" Jacob laughed nervously, looking absolutely gorgeous. "I don't know, Bax."

It was fun making Jazz nervous, somehow. He tended to blush easily and a lot more often lately, Baxter had noticed. It made it all the more fun to see his friend's expressions and catalogue each and every one of them.

"Okay, well, let's leave that for later then." Baxter grinned and closed the books before him. "I think we are quite finished here. So, show me your movie collection? We need to get started on our marathon before it gets dark out."

Baxter followed Jacob through the empty house like a well-bred puppy, which reminded him of the day they were at the comic book store, and that reminded him of their movie date, which hadn't really been a date but absolutely fun and the *best movie date* he had ever had. Movie theatres always gave him the idea of a romantic date—the darkness, the big screen, the smell of popcorn and the obvious and unavoidable closeness. He guessed that those thoughts and the fact that Jacob had been sitting by his side, in the dark, for two hours had brought on that terrible case of butterflies in his stomach.

And that scent, darn that addictive, sweet vanilla that always seemed to linger around Jazz.

It drove him insane.

Now, looking through a shelf full of DVD's with Jazz close to him, he got a good whiff of that irritating scent that sometimes even haunted his dreams. Of course, that was rather crazy, he knew that, but Baxter could swear he smelled vanilla in some of those dreams where he remembered nothing but that scent.

He'd bet his life on it.

Jacob had a great assortment of horror movies, cartoons which partly seemed classic and partly just plain weird and spacey. There were also a few sitcoms and musicals. *Musicals, really?*

And he had a bigger selection of vintage films than their nearby library. Most of them appeared to be black and white and well, *really* old. He picked one up and inspected its cover, and back, and wondered just *how* old it was.

"They do have sound, right?"

"Sound? You mean if the actors talk?" Jazz grinned at him with that smug smile he had started to resent. *Cocky bastard.*

"Yes, Jazz. Do the actors talk? I mean, those movies look way older than my grandmother."

"No." Jacob laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "They're silent movies. Just moving pictures. No talking."

Why the hell anyone would want to watch movies where nobody talked was beyond him. Not to mention the obvious lack of action; explosives and anything along those lines. Baxter didn't see the appeal of black and white when he could have colour, high-definition and lots of *noise*.

"Okay, so no silent ones please. Don't you have a James Bond or something?"

"Something with fast cars and big guns? That's more your thing, Bax?"

Baxter growled at that but he couldn't deny that it was true. It wasn't his fault he liked action. And cars, preferably fast. "Your collection is weak, mate. Yeah I need something more action filled, or else I will fall asleep and we wouldn't want that, would we?" Baxter gave him a wink, which made Jacob roll his eyes.

“Well, my friend, I love horror movies, especially Japanese and vintage. If that’s not your thing, I’m sorry. Oh, and yes, I do like to watch silent films every now and then as well, guess you have to deal with that. It doesn’t mean we have to watch them together, though, so you can relax.” Jacob winked at him in return, and he fought hard not to roll his eyes back at him. “My uncle has got a lot of DVDs that should be more to your taste, let me get them.”

Thank god, they settled on a few action movies that had a lot of guns and fast cars. Jacob was right, that was more his thing, and as it turned out Jacob had just as much fun watching those. In between DVDs, they talked a lot, and during a few scenes they just ended up chatting about this and that and commenting on what was happening on screen. One time, they hadn’t even realised the movie had ended by the time they finished their discussion. Jazz rewound that one to the part they both remembered stopping at, which took a while to figure out since both remembered different scenes. They settled on somewhere in between.

By the time they finished their third movie, it was already very late and neither Jazz’s uncle nor mum had shown up yet. His aunt had been home for a few hours though, and Baxter thought she seemed nice. They all chatted for a few minutes before she disappeared fast and let them continue watching movies in private, which surprised Baxter quite a bit since it was already getting close to midnight and his family wouldn’t go out of their way just so he could watch DVDs all night with a friend they didn’t know. They were a lot stricter than Jazz’s folks appeared to be. Baxter felt a bit jealous, he never enjoyed having friends over, and he hoped he could hang out a lot more often here in the future instead.

During their last movie, Baxter noticed that he had been comparing the guys on TV with Jacob and made a mental list of what *could* turn him on and what he was sure wouldn’t. He hadn’t kept track on the score since it quickly became obvious the pro’s on Jazz’s side outweighed pretty much everyone else’s. *Hm*. Baxter hadn’t often fantasied about actors *that* way, and never before had he thought of a guy his age like that, sexual and intimate.

He had turned eighteen in January and like most of his friends had had the occasional girlfriend. After meeting Jacob, he had realised quickly that nobody had ever been as hypnotising as him. Some of the girls he knew were quite intriguing, yes, and he did care about Amanda when they had dated last year. They had met through a mutual friend and gotten along quite well. Baxter thought she was a pretty nice girl, sweet and bubbly and did all those girly

things that ought to drive him crazy, but he always felt like something was missing. It had never been enough for him to lose his sleep over. Jacob somehow managed to rattle his world and now Baxter was introduced to something, or rather someone, he could lose his sleep over, and he often did.

Before Jacob came along, he had never given the whole *thing* that much thought to be honest, he had been sure that he just wasn't as sexual as others. Wasn't everyone different?

Okay, so he had the occasional hard-on in the locker room but who didn't?

Could you really blame a guy? With all those wet, naked bodies in the shower you'd have to be impotent to not sport any wood, and hells, they were all a bunch of hormone-crazed teenagers. Baxter had to admit that sometimes he might have let his eyes linger a moment or two longer than he should have. But did he feel guilty for his ogling? Not really, because what harm did it do? Besides the obvious, being caught and outed as gay, when he wasn't even sure he was. Gay.

He never understood why it would bother anyone else if he were gay. He wouldn't mind if half the school were gay. What made someone gay anyway? Were there rules somewhere? Lines you had to cross? Baxter had only *looked* and maybe fantasied a night or two, but he never acted on it. Would it make him gay if he wanted men but never acted it out? It wasn't like there had been anyone Baxter had been attracted to, anyway. Nobody he wanted to get up close and naked with. He had thought about some hot movie star maybe, or one of them sexy rock stars in their tight pants and ripped shirts, getting all excited and sweaty on stage. Didn't everyone have those moments?

As for guys his age, it had always been a safe zone. There had never been anyone in his school that he found attractive—never met a friend of a friend who would give him butterflies in his stomach. Baxter thought maybe he was only into older guys, like those movie stars and rock singers he felt a little intrigued by. His team was definitely off limits. They were all his friends, and Baxter never wanted to mix friendship and sex. He just couldn't see himself with any of his friends.

Well, a little too late for that now, mate.

Maybe there were first times for everything, even those you thought would definitely never happen. He knew he had to give up and forget his *no sex with friends* policy, not that he had in mind talking Jacob into having sex as soon as possible; hells, first of all he had to admit that he had a serious thing for Jazz. *Admitted. Big time. I am totally crushing on Jazz.*

Baxter couldn't lie to himself if he tried. He was attracted like hell to the guy. For now he could accept that, admitting it to himself wasn't the real problem, but he was far from trying to admit it to anyone else that he liked Jazz, and that he might be gay. Or that he at least was into Jazz. He was far from acting on it as well, it was too difficult to judge whether Jacob wouldn't just rip his head off if he tried something like kissing him. The thought of kissing him made Baxter's head spin, like on an endless roller coaster ride with just a few loops too many.

Was he ready to kiss a guy? Even someone as gorgeous and exciting as Jacob?

Baxter was insanely attracted to the guy, yes, but would that be enough?

He should just give up on it already before he got in too deep, because he was forgetting something very important here. Baxter couldn't do this whole dating shit with Jazz, he couldn't be *gay* when he wanted to become a pro player. He just couldn't, there was no doubt about that.

"Are you up for one more?"

Jazz's cheerful voice reached his ears with a light purr, pulling him right out of his thoughts. Baxter caught himself smiling as he opened his eyes, finding Jazz's bright, brown orbs gazing right at him. Whenever Jazz smiled, he smiled. It was ridiculous.

What a bloody mess.

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Chapter 3

March 24th, 2012

Baxter

What really bothered him were those hypnotising eyes. All warm hazel with glitter like honey and gold in the sunlight, framed by thick, black lashes and very masculine features. Jacob wasn't pretty in a girlish way, not with all those well-defined muscles and that hard body. Yet, it did nothing but make him all the more intriguing. Being in close proximity to Jacob proved to be barely manageable at times and, at best, was difficult. Baxter sometimes wanted to avoid time alone with him, like family dinners on Sunday... he just couldn't. Time with Jacob had become essential to his day, like footy and sleep.

"Sorry, what?"

He thought he heard something that sounded a lot like Jacob's voice, but he couldn't be sure because he had probably spaced out again. It'd actually happened once or twice before that he thought he heard him speak, when in fact he wasn't anywhere to be seen. *I might just be going completely crazy.*

"I asked if you wanted to play volley with us? Some of the guys brought their friends along, and they are *dying* to play a few games."

Concentration could be a bitch, especially when Baxter came eye level with Jazz's upper body. He had to tear his eyes away from those beautifully defined muscles, outlined by just a thin, pale blue T-shirt that clung almost desperately to bulging biceps and a really, really firm chest.

"Think I'll pass on this one, and grab some refreshments first. Come and get me for the next round?" *Or not at all?* He thought bitterly, he hadn't felt that exhausted in quite a while.

Jacob pulled his T-shirt over his head and let it drop onto Baxter's towel, on which he was already sprawled out, ready to sunbathe and relax for as long as possible today. The last few games had seriously worn him out, and practice never was any less exhausting. He deserved the afternoon to rest for a change; who knew when he would get to do just that again with all the games coming up next week, and the following week and so on. He bloody loved his footy, but lately he wanted to spend more quality time with his friends. Or at least with Jazz.

“Sure thing. Catch ya later, then.” Jacob beamed him his trademark, eye-crinkling smile that never failed to make him weak in the knees, before he turned and bounced down the beach towards their group of friends.

Yep, he is officially going to be the death of me.

Baxter groaned inwardly and let himself fall onto his back. He would have to get up to grab those *refreshments* in a bit, but he didn't want to move more than was necessary right now. There were days when he dealt just fine with his attraction towards his friend, mostly, especially when they were busy on the field. Then there were others, like today, that made Baxter want to crawl under a big stone and die.

Slowly and painfully.

It just wasn't right to be so desperate to hang out with Jacob, anticipating every moment they could have together, even ditching Matt's invitations to hang out more often than not. In fact, he had hardly spent any alone time with his other friends since he'd met Jacob, and somehow he always found excuses to go places with him instead. He knew that wasn't any more right than that he bloody loved the way Jazz's eyes crinkled and his dimples showed when he smiled. It also wasn't right to call him after they had just hung out just to hear his voice, sometimes making up excuses to do that, and hoping Jazz wouldn't notice that there wasn't any reason for him to call.

He probably bloody noticed the first time.

And it wasn't right to anticipate the tingling on his skin when their bodies accidentally brushed, and even less to initiate those *accidents* more and more often. Yep, lately there hadn't been many things right with him, if he just knew how to make it all stop and go away, he would. Maybe.

Baxter couldn't deny that they had grown quite close over the past month, and sometimes he wondered if anyone else had noticed as well. If they did, at least, nobody had given them shit about it just yet. Maybe the other guys thought they were best friends forever or something, but not even Matt seemed to take it the wrong way, now that he wasn't his number one anymore.

After their extra hours of training with the team, he and Jazz and some of the guys would either go down to the beach or to work out at the gym. Of course, they also spent time studying, and when the time allowed, the two of them would just hang out with movies and a lot of food.

Jazz turned out to be quite a decent cook, and every now and then, he would make something for them to munch on while they took apart his uncle's DVD collection or studied. Or at least attempted to.

Jazz blamed it on his mother's busy schedule and having to learn how to survive on his own early on, but Baxter could tell he really, really enjoyed it. Once he actually caught him baking, which had surprised him a little, but then again, a lot about Jazz surprised him.

Baxter wouldn't have thought the shy, beefy wannabe footy star he had met on the sports field that first day of school was in fact a shy, total and complete geek, who carried at least one book and his Nintendo DS with him wherever he went, and who also knew how to make homemade macaroni and cheese and caramel tarts with pecans for dessert. But that wasn't all, Baxter learned that silent movies and anything vintage, especially horror, meant a big deal to Jazz. His favourite actress was Marilyn Monroe, he loved white chocolate, peach-flavoured candy, and he was literally obsessed with Rocky Road ice cream, vegetable lasagna and potato chips with chocolate sauce.

Besides fooling around with a ball, of any sort, or lifting weights at the gym, going surfing had fast become their favourite pastime. After a long day of practice in the sun, a late afternoon by the water was just what he needed to relax and recharge before tomorrow's game. So here he was, watching Jacob join in on a game of volleyball with their friends, observing teasing muscles and sweat-covered, shiny skin. Even the afternoons were hot everywhere, the beach was no exception. A bright blue, cloudless sky and hot sun shining down on them. One of the guys Baxter didn't know by name threw the volleyball too high, making it impossible for Jacob to do anything but watch as it flew all the way into the water. With a sprint, he ran after it and basically *jumped* right into the water, *saving the day*. Baxter watched his friend's strong, wet and nearly naked body emerge from the ocean, volleyball in hand and a cheerful smile on his full lips.

With every step he made, Jacob's muscles flexed and jumped as he moved gracefully, showing off his strong abs and broad shoulders. *And damn those beautifully defined muscles*. His caramel-coloured skin glittered from the afternoon sun catching the water droplets covering his body. Surrounded by clean, white sand, the intense turquoise sea and the bluest sky, he looked like that divine god Jacob longed to be by name. In Baxter's eyes, he was already perfect as he was.

That gentle smile on his lips that showed off his dimples just slightly and crinkled his eyes only faintly, always made Baxter's heart rate speed up. Every so often he wished he was a girl, so that he had all the right in the world to just get up from his towel in the sand, throw his arms around his friend's amazing body and kiss the life out of him. But he wasn't, and he couldn't. It sucked.

"From where I stand... you are beautiful."

Baxter couldn't remember where he heard that line, maybe on TV or in a song, maybe he saw it online while browsing Tumblr or some other random site he rarely went on. That bloody line had been stuck in his brain for days now and popped up at the weirdest moments. Yesterday for example, when they were running their arses off on the field, sweating and cursing, and he saw Jazz kick the ball into a corner by the end of the game, annoyed and worn out. His face was flushed bright red from exhaustion, his hair stuck out in every direction, wet and mussed, and all Baxter could think was *"From where I stand... you are beautiful."*

Yes, he'd been quoting that bloody line over and over and it was always directed at Jazz, of course. The guy drove him crazy, more and more each day. Lately Baxter thought everything Jazz did was bloody beautiful.

If he told anyone they would probably send him to see a doctor.

Not that he wanted it to go away, but it couldn't be healthy.

Jacob

He knew that things between them wouldn't work out the first time he saw Bax in his swim trunks. Jacob had never seen anything like it, and there was just something incredibly sexy about that tall, strong body, something that turned him on and made him blush with just one look. Bax was already insanely good looking in their boring blue school uniform and extremely sexy in their maroon rugby jerseys, but in just swim trunks? Yep, Bax was simply stunning from head to toe.

It wasn't just his body; Jacob also had a thing for his short, blond surfer hair, the way it would stick up on the front, just long enough to stay in place and buzzed short on the sides and back. It would probably tickle his fingertips if he ran his hands through it, something he thought about doing so many times, but of course, he couldn't. When it came to his *body*, Jacob had a *serious* thing for Bax's broad chest, with those tight muscles in all the right places. Watching them flex and relax was torturous. He had seen himself do that a million times in the mirror, but, of course, that was nothing compared to when Bax moved those arms and shoulders. And that sexy, tanned skin was also a bonus, not to mention that ass, and those strong thighs were to die for.

Jacob enjoyed and treasured their friendship a great deal. Bax had quickly become his closest friend, the one person he looked forward to seeing every

morning at school and would call for anything, knowing he'd be there for Jacob no matter what the time or place. Jacob knew it just *had* to work out because he wouldn't let anything come between them. Bax was too important to lose over some stupid craving to kiss the guy. Or touch him. If he assaulted him like a crazed teenager, it could mean the end of their friendship, and Jacob couldn't bear the thought of that.

But, he also knew that this just wouldn't go away. There were those moments when he watched his friend all exposed and tempting, with his gorgeous, half-naked body playing in the water or sunbathing right next to him, that drove Jacob wild inside. For the first time in his life, he was confronted by so many new sensations up close and personal that he sometimes couldn't tell up from down and left from right.

Most of the time, it took only that dazzling smile that showed Baxter's perfect, white teeth and his body became hot all over.

Just like now, returning from their quick swim, as Bax plopped down onto the towel next to him with his body all wet and sparkling in the sunlight. As usual, Bax squeezed two big dollops of sunscreen onto his palms and literally painted his cheeks and nose in an attempt to be funny. Silly would be the better word, Jacob thought. Bax would always do something *silly* just to make him laugh, which, oddly enough, worked every time. After tickling another laugh out of him, his friend stretched out in the sand, covered in thick white *war paint* and sunglasses, ready to sunbathe until one of them would get hungry, which would usually be him. It wasn't Jacob's fault that his body seemed to burn food a lot faster, and being out in the sun and close to the water always made him hungry.

With Bax close enough that he could smell his sunscreen, it filled his mind with other thoughts than food. What he would give to just lightly brush his fingers down his friend's neck and across his chest. The constant urge to reach out and touch his friend, even just to pat him on the shoulder, had become so strong it was nearly impossible to resist at times. It was nice though, being in each other's company, just if it was just lying in the sand and doing nothing for a while. Other than training and working out, going surfing together had become one of *their things*, and he and Bax had grown quite close, something Jacob loved and dreaded at the same time. It was ridiculous, because he had never had that much fun with any of his other friends. Of course Jacob had great times with Andreas, Graig and Libby, and they still kept in touch via e-mail and texts, but that never felt the same and their contact was already becoming less each week.

Jacob knew it had something to do with the incredible attraction he had toward his new friend, and that made whatever situation more intense and just different. He remembered their first movie night and how much fun they had watching movies that Jacob wouldn't have picked out for himself. It had been a little awkward at first, showing Bax his room and all, but to his relief, Bax didn't appear to mind that Jacob liked to surround himself with weird, geeky stuff. He hadn't made jokes like most of his former friends, who always liked to tease him, especially about his *toys*. Bax, on the other hand, was cool about it. Jacob was glad that Bax also enjoyed their movie marathon, and they had even repeated it a couple of times since.

The whole sleeping over thing, though, was still not comfortable for him, and he wondered if Bax could actually sleep on his floor. Of course he had a mattress, one that you could blow up and looked comfy enough, but whenever Jacob woke up during the night, he found Bax lying awake. They never spoke about it and just pretended they hadn't noticed each other's restlessness, but that didn't help Jacob falling back asleep, he almost never could. The first time he woke in the middle of the night, Jacob had been scared shitless that Bax might have heard him say something weird in his sleep, or noticed he had a nightmare. Those were a real pain, Jacob had had them since he could remember, and they never made any sense. He would just wake up feeling scared and lonely, sometimes desperate to just get out of bed and somewhere safe, as if his room were suddenly dangerous and the last place on earth he wanted to be. He never knew what triggered them or when to expect them, they just came and went as they pleased. And recently, they had seemed to come back a lot more often, Jacob hated to think that Bax might have heard something, but if he did, he never mentioned it.

Besides the occasional awkwardness, there were just too many times when they had so much fun that he sometimes thought he might just burst from excitement. The main reason he liked Bax so much was probably that he was fun and always in the mood to mess around. Not in the way that had filled Jacob's mind lately, but they had shared some epic moments on the field, at the beach and basically wherever they went. Bax never failed to make him laugh and turn a boring day into the most exciting. Jacob remembered one time in particular that was yet to be outdone.

"Baaaax. Are you going to take me to see real koalas?"

Jacob asked one afternoon, as they sat next to each other at a local coffee shop, which was close to Surfer's Paradise. It was a nice place where the staff

always seemed to be in a good mood, and their drink selection turned out to be Jacob's favorite. Their vanilla latte was simply *to die for*. It was also right down the street from where they would usually hang out and close to home.

"Koalas? Really? That's pretty cliché, don't you think? Did you drag your pretty arse from your fancy place in California all the way here just to go koala watching?"

Jacob enjoyed it greatly when he was on the end of Bax's teasing, and even though he could be shy, it was always challenging to find out just how much of Bax's attention he could earn. Jacob wasn't particularly jealous of their other friends anymore, but it always felt the best to have one hundred percent of his attention on him.

"So? I am allowed to be all touristy once in a while. I have been in Australia for *weeeeks* now and haven't once seen a koala. Are they even real? Or are you guys only pretending to have those sweet bears that sleep in trees to be more cool?"

He might have exaggerated a little with his *need* to see koalas, but the other day he tuned into a TV show about koalas where they advertised certain facilities to see them, and Jacob had the sudden idea that it would just be the perfect lure to talk Bax into yet another activity they could do together. Seeing fuzzy little animals was also a bonus he wouldn't say no to.

"Seriously Jazz? Koalas are not bears. In fact, they're not even that closely related."

"Duh, I know that."

Well, to be honest he hadn't given it much thought; they looked like teddies after all so why should he question their species? Okay, maybe that wasn't smart, but he hadn't thought about whether they were bears or not.

"Are you sure?" Bax poked him in the chest, and Jacob grinned. "I was just trying to see whether you knew?"

Bax's raised eyebrow and frown indicated that he probably didn't believe him, but Jacob hardly minded. He would willingly look a bit more stupid in front of Bax because he knew it wouldn't matter to him, and he always enjoyed their banter.

"You little shit." Bax laughed and shoved him playfully, almost spilling his iced coffee in an attempt to smack his head, which he failed royally because Jacob was just a little too quick and moved out of range in time.

"I'm not little," Jacob protested with a grin, because he just couldn't be offended by anything Bax said, he knew it wasn't meant to insult.

"But you *are* littler than me, and a shithead." Bax gave him that *Now what will you do about it?* look, and Jacob thought he couldn't be any more attractive if he tried.

"You like me anyway, don't you?" Jacob didn't know why he asked that, he hadn't meant to, it had just slipped off his tongue.

"That I do."

When Bax gave him that warm but somewhat melancholy smile, Jacob wanted to reach out and brush his fingers down his friend's cheek, comfort him, feel his skin. Jacob wanted to finally take a chance and ask him just how much he *really* liked him, if he maybe felt the same, but he didn't. Instead, he took the much safer road and focused on getting Bax to show him real, live koalas. Jacob wondered for a long time if it had been the right decision, or if he should have taken that chance.

Would he ever manage to find out? And would the answer hurt?

"So, when are you taking me koala watching?" Jacob asked with a grin that almost hurt his cheeks. He knew just how much Bax liked it, even though he pretended not to care. It would always earn him a grin in return, one that told him more than words ever could. And maybe he just had to be happy with what he got.

Jacob could always count on Bax. Despite their tight schedule and upcoming tournaments, a few days later, Bax surprised him with an evening outing to the Daisy Hill Koala Center, and as it turned out, there were actual koalas in Queensland after all. They met Celest, Faith and Elsa—the cutest little koalas you could imagine. Besides learning the signs and symptoms of a sick or injured koala, Jacob also watched various films about them and other threatened species. He didn't care just how touristy he was, because being with Bax and seeing koalas had been so much fun that he wanted to stay there for as long as possible. They also climbed the observation tower where the tour guide told them they would *get a koala's eye view of the world* and maybe spot more koalas, which they hadn't. But that was fine with Jacob. It had already been one of the best days in his life. Besides seeing koalas for the first time, something else happened for the first time.

They were just heading back from the observation tower, which was surrounded by a lot of trees and bushes but besides the occasional tourist,

located on a very empty road. Jacob still wouldn't be able to explain what really happened, but at one point, something brushed his arm, then something bumped into his shoulder and when he looked down he saw Bax's fingers wrapped tightly around his. Without any further comment, they continued to walk like nothing happened for about a minute or so, until he finally realized that they were holding hands.

Oh. My. Fucking. Geesecake.

Feeling Bax's hand in his, made his head spin just a little too fast, and Jacob suddenly felt a panic rise up inside of him so strong he couldn't keep it under control. For some odd and very stupid reason, he pulled his hand away and said he needed the bathroom. Seeing that confused and hurt expression on Bax's face made him want to throw up. Without another word, he ran off to find the toilet.

Gee, he had been so pathetic, he almost didn't come back out of the bathroom, but eventually he had to because he couldn't hide inside forever.

Outside the public bathroom, Baxter waited for him with a bottle of mango iced tea and a cheerful smile like nothing happened. He also acted like he hadn't just held Jacob's hand a few moments ago. Jacob felt relieved when Bax obviously ignored his immature behavior, but he felt a lot more crushed that he seemed to ignore having wanted to hold his hand as well.

Until now, Jacob couldn't wrap his brain around what all that meant. The incident, as he liked to call it, hadn't changed anything. Bax still acted like it never happened. Jacob knew he should feel upset and embarrassed about pulling away and freaking out, he really did, but somehow the thought alone that Bax had wanted to hold his hand, for whatever reason, still felt incredibly good. He just had to learn how to be bold enough to repeat it. Plus, figure out a way not to freak out immaturity beforehand. He couldn't mess it up twice. Jacob knew it was now up to him whether he would get a second chance or not. He doubted Baxter would try anything again so soon, if ever. He had to be humiliated and confused. Jacob was quite confused too, to be honest.

Did Bax like him in the same way? The fact that Bax actually tried something should be proof enough that he might not be alone in this after all. It was just so hard to believe.

Besides his ups and downs regarding his incurable attraction toward Baxter, his life, for once, was going well. He still hadn't seen much of his mom, but the fact that she made time for the occasional dinner out together was an

improvement overall. School was easy enough at the moment, but still kept Jacob busy. And playing on the team with Coach Anderson and Coach Connor was simply awesome. There were many people involved and they all gave shit about everyone on the team, taking how they played very serious. The times the whole team went away for trips always proved to be an adventure in itself, and when there wasn't an actual match, they would still quite often go to Brisbane and practice from early morning until dinner. It was tough altogether; he had never practiced any sport that much in his life, but Jacob enjoyed it. He was absolutely thrilled that he seemed to have settled in extremely well with the team and played his best game yet. Their recent away matches had been simply insane. If he said so himself, they absolutely kicked ass.

Jacob learned that they'd had some of the most important people attend their past few matches. It was a good thing they always won by quite a high margin. Jacob hadn't remembered any names in particular, as the scouts weren't what he was after. Those faces he took notice of were all but a blur by now. Bax, on the other hand, went batshit about it, for days. Jacob had to listen to him go on about it literally nonstop, to a point where it was almost becoming annoying. During those times, Jacob would turn on his automatic nod, accompanied with an honest smile, or so he hoped, and stare away. Bax probably didn't realize just how gorgeous he was, and that Jacob could stare for hours at that handsome face, those broad shoulders, and strong arms. With that sun-kissed tan, his skin always appeared like light macchiato ice cream, soft and creamy and just the right shade of brown. Bax always looked good enough to eat.

There were times when he just wanted to run away and hide, because he knew he had been caught staring, and instead of being offended, Bax always gave him that insanely gorgeous, flustered smile and rolled his eyes before he began a completely random conversation. Jacob was thankful for that, but he didn't know what to make of it. Because, a guy like Baxter couldn't be into a guy like him. Even after Bax's attempt to hold hands, and the many times Jacob tried to talk himself into repeating the action, he simply couldn't wrap his brain around the possibility that he might actually have a chance at *love* here. If he could overcome his pathetic shyness first, of course. And if love between two guys like them was even possible.

If Bax ever thought of guys the same way he did, Jacob was fairly certain it wouldn't be him he really wanted. Bax would probably be into someone more delicate and pretty. Jacob thought if Bax were into guys, he would probably be into someone *adorable* and a lot more *twinkie* than Jacob was. Perhaps, he

might go for a feminine guy, with long curly hair and a petite behind. There was just no way he could be attracted to someone as bulky and clumsy as him. And wouldn't they just look ridiculous together? Jacob was a far cry from adorable or *twinkie* and his ass was anything but petite. That thought almost made him chuckle.

Jacob wondered if he had never started working out and picked up ballet and dancing instead of football, soccer and rugby—would he have turned out to be more Bax's type?

Jacob couldn't picture himself as anything but bulky and full of muscles. He had looked like that pretty much since he was fifteen. It wasn't like he wanted to look all butch, he just enjoyed working out. A lot. Maybe if he didn't, he might make a pretty, boy next door. He could even let his hair grow and all.

Now, that thought actually made him snort out loud, and he regretted letting his thoughts wander like that. Not his smoothest move. Jacob dared to look up his friend's body and he wasn't surprised to find Baxter's bright green eyes on him.

"What's so funny?"

Bax grinned and pushed himself up so he could settle in a more comfortable sitting position next to him. His sunscreen painted cheeks and nose were still a great deal whiter than the rest of his face, somehow it never fully melted away. Jacob liked that, he looked absolutely edible that way. Like he had been sprinkled with cream cheese or—*Fuck. I've got to stop doing that.*

"Tell me, Jazz. I want to laugh with you."

Bax winked, his face all flushed from the sun and a playful twinkling in his eyes. Jacob realized, horrified, that he had been caught daydreaming while staring at Bax sunbathing again, hadn't he?

Fainting from dehydration sounded good right about now.

Baxter

Jazz had the cutest, tiny belly button.

Baxter had no idea where that thought came from but he longed to dip his tongue inside and have a taste, along with a great number of other parts on his friend's body. Relaxing into the foldout chair, he closed his eyes, and, like so very often lately, he let his mind wander and his thoughts drift to that place that

he had gone every night over the course of the past weeks. And just like every night when he laid in his bed, he pictured Jazz in those strawberry red boardies, his body still wet from their swim in the ocean.

He imagined what a single touch of his friend's chest would feel like. Would his skin feel soft underneath his fingers? How different to his own skin would it be? He wondered just how firm those well-defined muscles were that adorned his strong body. And what it would feel like to run his fingers down Jazz's shoulders, along his firm arms and hold him close enough to hear his heart beat against his.

He imagined what his sun-kissed skin would taste like, how salty it would be after a hard workout or a few hours on the field. Would he taste like the vanilla and coconut scent that always seemed to linger around him? The thought of Jazz's salty, sweat-slicked skin on his lips and tongue turned him on like nothing else. In his mind, he planted kisses along the sweaty inside of his friend's throat, licked along the underside of his chin and then nipped at his collarbone. He wondered if Jazz would like it if he pressed his lips against his throat—hard—and sucked long enough to leave little marks. Baxter thought little red marks would look incredibly sexy on Jazz.

Bloody hell, how badly he wanted this.

Baxter slowly opened his eyes to see what his friend was up to. Quickly, he spotted him just a few meters in front of the seashore, still engrossed in building a sandcastle with a few of the kids he had recently befriended. A gentle breeze brushed his skin, and he shivered. Baxter shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he watched the scene before him, admiring Jazz's beautiful and only lightly tanned backside. Baxter let out a low groan. His fantasy hadn't even reached the point where he imagined the feel of Jazz's thighs on his hips or the scent of his arousal, and he was already bloody hard and ready to explode. He had to stop those thoughts right now, before Jazz could come back and discover he had blown his load in his swim trunks. That would go down well.

What drove Baxter *really* crazy, were those mixed signals Jazz was still giving him. At first, he hadn't been sure whether Jazz would actually accept his advances, which he had been fighting hard at first, as well. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to fight it forever, he eventually took a chance. But when he did and grabbed Jazz's hand on their walk back from the koala park, the guy freaked out and ran off to the bathroom, possibly throwing up. At least, he looked pale enough that he might have been sick to his stomach. Baxter did his

best to cover up his disappointment, and obviously pretending that nothing happened seemed like the best idea. If only it wouldn't feel so upsetting.

Despite the obvious rejection, Jazz still gave him all those lingering looks and bright smiles and seemed like he wouldn't back off and avoid Baxter or anything. It was like the whole awkward hand holding incident never happened. Baxter should be relieved about it, happy that their friendship wouldn't falter because of something stupid like that, but in reality he was crushed. Of course he felt disappointed, and confused, because if Jazz didn't want to be anything but friends, why would he continue to look at him like he wanted to rip his clothes off and eat him alive? Baxter often caught Jazz staring when he thought he wasn't watching, and when Bax wasn't watching, he still knew that Jazz was.

A silly part of him felt quite flattered by it. It drove him crazy because Baxter still wanted more, wanted all of Jazz. All the bloody time.

So of course, Jazz's almost obvious interest and mixed signals did nothing to push those thoughts and confusing feelings out of his brain. Just what should he do? Was there even something he could do that would be anything but weird and awkward?

Baxter didn't want to live through yet another *pulling away incident* from Jazz. He might risk their friendship for real because who knows just how open Jazz was to all of this. He might not even be ready to accept his own feelings.

That would definitely make a lot of sense, wouldn't it?

Maybe he could just bring it up and they'd talk about it, openly and all.

That made Baxter laugh; like *that* would go down well.

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Chapter 4

March 31st, 2012

Jacob

Jacob gazed out the front window of Bax's car, admiring the incredible scenery that lay before them. It was a gorgeous morning, neither too early nor too hot, and the mellow country tune on the radio gave it a surreal feeling. With the windows on both sides down, the warm breeze tickled his skin gently as they drove along the clean, golden beach where the sun never stopped shining and the sky appeared endless. It was beautiful. It was also his birthday, just how much better could it get?

Jacob wished he could go on never-ending drives up and down the beach with Bax every day. With the start of a two-week break from school, they had decided to go camping together. It was only going to be for two nights though, since they had a championship starting in a few days, which would take up most of their *off* time. Two nights were better than none. Jacob was beyond excited.

Baxter had insisted on going away at least for the short time, since they basically went surfing every day, and he wanted to do something a bit more exciting than sitting around at the usual places on Jacob's birthday. Jacob thought it was sweet of him and gladly accepted the invitation to spend a couple of nights at a campsite. He had never been one for wild parties and things like that, and it wasn't like his mother would have anything exciting planned. She would be working, as usual.

Baxter eventually found a destination he was happy with, one that promised *a change of scenery and activities*. Jacob was thrilled by just how serious Bax took his *campsite search assignment* even though it had taken him until last night to finally settle on one. Jacob thought they might end up by their usual spot at the beach after all. From the website Bax had shown him this morning, the spot appeared to be a lot quieter and laid back than some of the places Jacob had suggested when he thought Bax would never be able to make a decision. At first, he found it rather funny that he would choose what looked a lot like a destination for the odd family vacation rather than a crowded touristy spot full of teenagers and parties. But then again, Bax never seemed to be into that kinda thing as much as their other friends, which was fine with Jacob. They spent a lot of their free time in Surfer's Paradise, which was exactly what he didn't

mind avoiding for a change. Jacob was looking forward to a couple of relaxing days with his friend.

Jacob knew he was being silly, but it was fun going on that short vehicle ferry trip over the Noosa River before arriving at the campground. Somehow, it added to the holiday adventure he'd never had. Now that they had parked their car and unloaded some of their drinks, food, and other essentials, he was ready to explore their new campsite and preferably get physical one way or the other.

"So, Mr. Adventure Planner, what's up first? What's our schedule?"

Jacob dropped his backpack on one of the two lime green fold-out chairs they'd brought with them. He hoped like hell Bax wouldn't be sleepy from the drive, which for him had been way too relaxing. He wanted to get up and do something fun now.

"How about we start with setting up a tent?" Bax took a long swig of his water before tossing him a small yellow package what appeared to be part of their portable lodge. *Setting up the tent?* That didn't sound too exciting.

"Fine. Let's be quick, we can set up everything else tonight, can't we?"

Jacob *really* wanted to go somewhere, do something and be active until his energy hit bottom and he could fall into the sand and relax. Maybe take a nap. Jacob always felt like he had to burn a lot of energy first, the whole relaxing part was so much more enjoyable when you were worn out. Bax, on the other hand, could be the laziest person he had ever known when he wanted to be. It was ridiculous. Jacob sometimes wondered just how much he would like to be spoiled and pampered. *Mhh*. He wouldn't mind being the one doing all the spoiling and pampering.

"I don't know Jazzy, I'd prefer if we could get everything ready before heading anywhere."

You're kidding, right?

"Well, if we have to." Jacob unzipped a small, plastic bag, which looked like it belonged to the tent. He'd never set up one by himself, he hoped Bax wasn't expecting him to know what he was doing.

"What do I get if I am good at this?" Which he wasn't, but he wondered if it would make Bax want to take over just to show him how it's *really* done. *A guy could hope, right?*

"Then, you may choose between fishing, walking along the beach or some bushwalking."

“Bushwalking, seriously?” Jacob didn’t mind a stroll through nature but it sounded just a little odd and boring to walk around aimlessly. Jacob threw a quick look around his shoulder and briefly wondered just what they could see out there, besides a lot of *bush*, obviously, trees, water, sand and a bunch of creepy crawlers.

“Why not?” Bax chuckled. “You said you wanted an adventure. We take our compass, a map and who knows what we might find.” He winked at him playfully.

“Pirates?” Jacob was joking, obviously. He knew it was silly, and not to mention quite impossible to run in to actual pirates, but maybe they could pretend? Maybe not. But, perhaps, a stroll through the shrubs could turn out to be interesting after all. Even if there weren’t any pirates lurking in the bushes, like Bax said, who knew what they might see?

“If we are lucky.” Baxter laughed and threw him a cold bottled water from the cooler. “You can wear an eye patch and pretend to be one, but I hope we won’t get attacked by anyone or anything.”

You will not comment on this. You will not comment. There was no way Bax could have read his mind. He had to stop having those weird ideas in the future, just in case.

“It’s the best place for some hiking, or so I was told. It might be fun.” Bax looked at him with that blinding smile and everything that came with it. *Oh. Hiking?* Well, that was that then. With a smile like that, Jazz would follow the guy to the end of the world and back if he had to.

When Jacob put the drink into his backpack, unopened, Baxter scolded him with his growly trademark “*take a drink, Jazz*”, which had been kinda cute at first, but sort of got pretty annoying after the fiftieth time.

“You can stop reminding me already Bax, I’m not a child, and I know just how frigging hot it is.”

At first, he found it a little weird that Bax always had water or mango iced tea with him, and later one for Jacob as well. Since it was damn hot all the time, Jacob would always welcome the drink from his friend, but when he would bug him to drink more, like all the time, it was just too much.

“Then why don’t you bloody drink more?” Jacob noticed how Bax raised his voice a little, just like he did when he felt irritated by something. “Then I won’t have to keep reminding you. Your choice.”

“Seriously, Bax. I drink when I am thirsty.” He knew Bax only had good intentions but he could take care of himself, and he had told him so often enough. *Why won't he let it go already?*

“Yes, but you have to drink even when you are not, the sun is bloody grilling you, and you know it.” Baxter rolled his eyes and eventually turned to gather his lunch and backpack.

“I know.”

And of course he did, he just hated drinking gallons of water when he wasn't thirsty.

End of story.

After they had efficiently set up their tent, together because there was no way to trick Bax, he knew right away Jacob had no clue what to do with all those tools. And, of course, he made Jacob help, and took the time to explain every little detail to him. Next time, Jacob might just know how to do it himself. Well, at least, he would be better the second time around. Once their lodge appeared to be steady enough, they made quick work of getting everything else sorted out.

Their bushwalking tour turned out to be fun, especially in Bax's company, and Jacob actually enjoyed it quite a lot. There hadn't been any pirates, obviously, and luckily no other dangerous incidents or creatures trying to attack or kidnap them. He was glad, though, that Bax agreed to not go far in case they got lost, as dying in the outback was definitely not on his to-do list this weekend. Since their little bushwalking excursion proved to be quite relaxing in itself, Jacob dug out their beach ball the very moment they reached the campsite, and challenged Bax to some rounds of ball.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. They hired a couple of trail bikes and later went for a swim while the sun was still out. Now they were going to have dinner in the form of a picnic by the beach with a few things Jacob's mom had prepared. To his surprise, she'd even made him birthday cupcakes with small rugby balls on top. They were pretty silly, but he felt happy that she'd found the time to do something like that for him.

It was already the most wonderful birthday he'd ever had, and only a kiss from Bax would make it perfect. If only.

Baxter

“So, what did you think about your birthday adventure? Exciting enough?”

Baxter asked, before finishing his iced tea with one long gulp. He thought he had done quite well, the campsite was quiet and clean and their biking had been pretty fun. He hoped tomorrow's plans to go four-wheel driving would turn out to be just as exciting. With Jazz by his side, he thought that, at least for him, it would be awesome as shit.

“Mmmh, it was real awesome, Bax.” Jazz beamed him that drop-dead gorgeous smile that showed all his perfectly straight teeth and made his dimples appear on both his lightly flushed cheeks. Gosh, he looked adorable today. “Yep, I'd say you did quite well. It was *almost* perfect.”

Was Jazz bloody winking at him? Like drop-dead gorgeously winking? And those deep brown eyes bloody sparkled with something other than their usual excitement. *What in the...*

Baxter noticed how the sun was just setting above the endless ocean behind Jazz, and the beauty of that moment made his head spin just a little. The fresh ocean scent, the peace and quiet around them just added to that whole bloody romantic experience Baxter dreaded. Not because he didn't like it, but exactly because he had an embarrassing *thing* for everything romantic, and he needed to avoid those moments with Jazz.

But, now they were having a bloody picnic!

At sunset, by the ocean. Just how much *worse* could it get? Despite all his worries and fears, this somehow felt like a sign from above. It was now or never. Would he dare? Oh, hells yes, maybe. Yeah. He just might go for it. A try couldn't possibly hurt that much.

“Only almost? What would it take to make your day absolutely perfect, Jazzy?”

Baxter knew he was in over his head when he thought that Jazz was making a move on him, but for once he honestly couldn't read his expression, and it did something weird to his stomach.

“I've only got one wish.”

“What's that?”

“Mh, I would say *Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas is a kiss from Bax.*” Jazz blushed deeply, and Baxter watched his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed. “But I don't think I can wait until Christmas.”

"Bloody hell, Jazz." He knew he groaned, and it sounded embarrassing to his own ears. He was probably blushing too.

"You asked." Jazz chuckled. "Since Christmas is so far away... will you kiss me tonight, Bax?" Jazz moved a little closer, his cheeks a deep red, his brown eyes sparkling and locked on his.

The low, muffled sound of clothes shuffling and sand crunching underneath the blanket made Baxter suddenly really, *really* nervous. He could hardly breathe, not to mention move. Bloody hell, this was happening.

"Well, it's your eighteenth birthday," he somehow managed. "So, of course I will."

He hoped like hell he didn't sound as nervous as he felt, because this was a bad idea, a bad idea. Nevertheless, Baxter wanted it. And right now he desperately wanted to reach out and touch Jazz's cheek with his palm. Wanted to run his fingers down his neck and then brush them over his just recently clean-shaved face ever so slowly. He wondered what that honey-coloured hair would feel like under his fingers.

Would he have permission to touch him as well? Or just to kiss him? Never mind that, his nerves overcame him, and he held back, refraining from crossing that line that had yet to be crossed. Jazz looked unsure himself, like he was fighting the same demons Baxter was fighting, even though *he* was the one asking for a bloody kiss.

With a low chuckle, Jazz broke the silence, only his hypnotising gaze still held Baxter captive. Those brown eyes were hard to fight, and right now, he lost all his will to do just that. He was done fighting. If only he knew how to do this right. He didn't want to mess up their first kiss.

"Um. If we are going to do this, Bax, one of us has to move eventually."

Baxter loved how Jazz's cheeks turned an even sexier shade of red with the obvious embarrassment. Right. He could do this. He could kiss his Jazz. Baxter had wanted to kiss him ever since he noticed just how delicious those lips of his looked.

Without further thinking, Baxter leaned in, effectively crossing the point of no return, and Jazz met him in the middle. The gentle feel of Jazz's fingers unexpectedly touching his cheek startled him, but then their lips met, warm and soft, and it left no room for second thoughts. The kiss was soft and chaste, Jazz's lips parting just slightly. It was overwhelming. Kissing Jazz was

different from kissing a girl, and knowing it was Jazz he was kissing was exciting beyond his wildest dreams. He was kissing a guy. Kissing his Jazz. How could he have ever doubted *this*?

Hesitantly Jazz deepened the kiss; his fingers now firm against the back of his neck. The taste of him combined with his vanilla scent was enough to make Baxter forget his own name.

"Jazz," Baxter whispered, pulling away just enough to speak. "Are you really okay with this?"

"With you kissing me?"

Baxter nodded. "Yes, with me kissing you, and with you kissing me."

"I am pretty okay with that." Jazz smiled shyly, and without asking for permission this time, Baxter dived right in to kiss Jazz firmly on the mouth. Bloody hell, this was good. *So good*. Resisting tasting those lips had been the most difficult challenge he had ever gone through. But now that he felt Jazz's warm, damp lips move in a gentle kiss against his own, he was in bloody heaven. *Finally*. Jazz kissed him back so leisurely, tenderly and lovingly, that it felt like they had been doing just that all their lives.

"You know, um, you are my first, Bax."

After long moments of kissing and enjoying each other's closeness, Jazz eventually broke the silence while they were lying on a blanket spread out on the sand.

"First kiss?" Baxter asked sleepily, wiggling into a more comfortable position. Somehow their fun day in the sun had worn him out almost as much as their usual rugby practice. Darn, he was getting old.

"First... well everything."

You little shit.

But wait, was he implying... no bloody way!

"Who says we are going to do *everything*?" Baxter raised his eyebrow and offered it in a teasing voice. His eyes slowly wandered from Jazz's sand covered toes, up his slightly hairy legs, and over his floral printed boardies until they settled on his deep brown eyes. Yep, that was *home*.

"We aren't?" Jazz asked in mock-surprise with his hand pressed against his clothed chest, his cheeks colouring a bright shade of red. Baxter loved how the

thin fabric of his white Tee clung to his shoulders, hugging his muscles just right in every place.

“Mmh.” Baxter considered him for a moment, “Am I really your first kiss?” He couldn’t quite believe that nobody would have tried to kiss Jazz. There must have been someone. But Jazz nodded, and he knew he would believe anything that came out of that mouth. And, anyway, he had no reason to lie about those things.

“Was I any good?” Baxter couldn’t resist it.

“I’d say the best, but I wouldn’t want you to feel too cocky.” Jazz grinned. “And anyway, I have nothing to compare it to.”

“Mind if I ask why?” They both sat up and exchanged looks. Jazz’s gaze on him somehow made him want to squirm. He had been bloody aroused for too long already, this wasn’t helping.

“Why I haven’t kissed anyone? Well, for one thing, I never had the nerve to actually ask a guy out.”

“Mh yeah, I can understand. That isn’t something you do every day.” Just look how long it took them to get anywhere, and they were basically inseparable already. Yep, that definitely takes some nerves.

“No kidding.” Jazz rolled his eyes and let himself drop onto the blanket again, now gazing up into the darkening sky. “And I don’t just go around kissing strangers.”

Yeah, probably not.

“You said guys, but what about girls?” Baxter asked carefully.

“Uh, to be honest, I somehow never thought I wanted to kiss a girl.” Yeah, Jazz didn’t look like he’d enjoy that much, if the disgust on his flushed face was anything to go by.

“Well, I have. I mean, kissed a girl, you know.”

He had to say it just so Jazz knew, since that wasn’t anything they talked about before he wasn’t sure what Jazz knew or thought. Baxter hoped it didn’t bother him, because the thought of Jazz kissing anyone else, even in the past, made him feel ill somehow. *Great, Baxter, that’s very mature...*

“Guess I figured that much.” Jazz laughed his bubbly laugh, which made Bax’s stomach drop. Jazz turned and rolled onto his stomach, gazing right into his eyes. “No offense, but I mean, just look at you.”

“Right. Just because I play sports and all you immediately assume I’m popular with the ladies. Aren’t you very judgemental?” Baxter shoved him playfully. He knew just how everyone always assumed those kinda things.

“Well, aren’t you? Popular with the ladies?” Jazz raised his eyebrow, giving him a knowing look.

“Maybe. I don’t know, I mean I *did* have a girlfriend before, but that doesn’t mean shit now, does it?”

Well, he hoped it wouldn’t. Jazz had to believe that what he felt for him was as real as it could get, and whatever was in the past lay in the past. And besides, he couldn’t remember the last time he looked at a girl, or guys for that matter.

“I guess not, but that’s just what everyone assumes. You are incredibly good looking, you’re fit and all, people will always judge you by your appearance.” Jazz took a deep breath before he continued, “Just like I never thought you might be interested in someone like me.”

“What do you mean, someone like you?” *Doesn’t he know he is the most gorgeous guy alive?*

“You have looked at me, right?” Jazz moved into a sitting position, pulled his shirt over his head and threw it onto the sand, posing with his bare chest. Baxter laughed; of course he had looked at him. What a silly question. Without thinking, he slowly reached out and touched the top of Jazz’s arm. The tingles he felt all over his body with one simple touch were a bit unsettling. *Crap*. Was he ready for this?

“I do like the way you look, Jazz.” Baxter crawled forward. “I love those muscles. Your strong shoulders and chest. You have an incredible body, and you are extremely gorgeous to me, Jazz.” Baxter leaned in and tugged him close for another kiss. When their mouths met, their lips were half parted and Baxter couldn’t quite contain the small shudder of pleasure as Jazz’s tongue slid inside and touched his.

He thought he knew what Jazz was referring to, they were both tall and bulky, played footy and just weren’t what you’d call most compatible based on their appearance alone. But that meant absolutely nothing to him.

They were bloody compatible in at least a hundred and fifty nine other ways.

Ways that were more important than looks.

Baxter woke to the sound of someone crying. He couldn't make out shit in the darkness of the tent, but he felt Jazz move next to him on the mattress. When his bare leg brushed alongside his, goose bumps slowly rose all over his body, and it wasn't from the cold. Baxter had been well aware of his friend sleeping next to him for a couple of hours, before sleep eventually caught up with him as well. Having Jazz lie only centimetres away from him was embarrassingly arousing and sleep just wouldn't come. Baxter never fell asleep easily, but with Jazz next to him, sleeping seemed nearly impossible. Those few times he stayed over at Jazz's house had proved that.

Tonight, after their unexpected and absolutely insane rounds of kissing, being close enough to touch without being allowed to, literally drove him nuts. How Jazz had managed to fall asleep shortly after settling for the night was beyond him. Baxter had been way too wired to relax. Going to bed had been a little awkward tonight, after all those kisses they shared it was sort of weird to just lie down and sleep. Not to mention that they'd both been obviously aroused. It was impossible to hide *that*.

It didn't help that neither of them seemed to know what they could do about it. Not that he was *that* clueless, thank you very much, or hadn't tried to move things further. It just wasn't the right timing, he guessed, because at one point, when Jazz began to pull back little by little, he knew that this wasn't happening. It wasn't like he had planned on seducing him anyway.

And then, Jazz gave him that adorable, apologising and somewhat embarrassed look that had Baxter suggesting they go to sleep and well, that was that. He didn't mind if it helped Jazz to come to terms with the thought of being with a guy, hells, Baxter himself had no bloody idea what he was doing here. But there was no reason to rush into anything. Wherever this was going, everything would be perfect if it was with Jazz.

There was another sob, and with more movement, Jazz's leg rubbed against his a second time. The shuffling of fabric told him, even without seeing, that what was going on was that Jazz had most likely covered himself more with the doona they shared. When Baxter moved too, just because lying still and being absolutely quiet on command had never been his strength, Jazz froze. The quiet sobs stopped. Baxter didn't know what to do, pretending that he hadn't heard anything might work for Jazz, and he might eventually fall back asleep. But Baxter knew he wouldn't be able to just lie there in the darkness, waiting for sleep, knowing Jazz had been crying. No, that was definitely not an option.

A heartbeat later, he just had to say something, anything. The silence was painful.

“Jazz?” Baxter held his breath and counted to five, then to ten, and then fifteen, but there still wasn’t the slightest reaction from Jazz. It worried him.

“Jazzy? Are you all right?” Darn, Baxter knew it was a stupid thing to ask, but it was all he could think of right now. He just wanted to hear Jazz’s voice and make sure he would feel better about whatever was bothering him.

“They still surprise me,” Jazz whispered, and after a long pause added, “The nightmares. I’m sorry if I woke you.”

Baxter shook his head as if to say *don’t worry about that*, but he knew Jazz wouldn’t see a thing, with his head under the doona and his back to him.

“I’m sorry you have them.”

He felt Jazz wiggle out from under the doona and he probably stared into the darkness for a while, because that was all Baxter managed to do himself, and it drove him crazy.

Then there was more shuffling, and Jazz whispered, “Bax?”

“Mh?” He voiced as carefully as he could, he wanted to comfort Jazz, but didn’t know how, it was frustrating. Baxter had never been in a situation that called for hugs and cuddles, or something along that line anyway.

Jazz’s voice was small and quiet, barely a whisper when he asked, “Can you hold me tonight?” And Baxter felt his heart skip a beat or more, because that request most definitely caught him by surprise. Could he do it? Could he hold Jazz? Comfort him as a friend? Holding him would mean their bodies would be close, very close. Half-naked in just their boxers. *Touching*.

Baxter swallowed hard. Without waiting for an answer, which Baxter wasn’t sure he could manage anyway, Jazz reached around his body for his hand and gently, carefully wrapped his fingers around Baxter’s wrist.

Jazz’s warm palm made his skin tingle where they touched. It felt good, comforting. And again, that simple touch, combined with the faint scent of vanilla caused his body to react in the weirdest ways. Baxter hoped he could ignore the way his stomach felt, how his skin tingled and how badly he wanted to lean forward over Jazz and kiss him. Long and hard, and—*Crap*—he had to focus on something else. But all he could feel there and then was Jazz pulling his hand around his body, towards himself until his palm rested flat against Jazz’s bare stomach.

Okay, that doesn’t help.

He wanted to ask what Jazz was doing, but his voice just wouldn't cooperate. When he slid Baxter's hand higher and higher, his fingers brushing along that heated skin, he was unable to think any further than that. Jazz continued to drag his hand slowly over his naked stomach, the skin there was smooth and unfamiliar, the erotic sensation made Baxter's head spin and his groin stir.

Bloody hell, I'm touching Jazz.

He didn't have time for the realisation to fully sink in, because a heartbeat passed and his fingers brushed something small, round and taut. His nipple. *Holy shit. Jazz is making me touch his nipple.* And not in the most subtle way, totally on purpose and *with* a purpose apparently.

Jazz, who was with his back now snugly pressed against Baxter's stomach, hummed encouragingly. He couldn't say who moved towards whom and what happened to the doona; hardly anything registered with Baxter. *Bloody hell.* His mind was spinning from the intensity of caressing Jazz's nipples, his stomach and the possibility of all the other places he could touch. The feeling of his warm skin underneath his fingers felt more arousing than anything he had ever experienced before.

He was faintly aware of Jazz guiding his hand to rub over his nipple in small circles, when his thumb moved on its own accord, carefully, teasingly rubbing the taut nub. He hadn't meant to, but darn that felt good in all the right places. Baxter gasped, trying to sort the thousand thoughts running through his mind.

Is this a smart idea? It probably wasn't, but he wanted to explore Jazz's body for so long, it was impossible to hold back when Jazz apparently didn't seem to mind if he did exactly that.

But then, Jazz suddenly froze, as if it just sunk in what they were doing, that they crossed a line that wouldn't be so easy to return from. *Fuck.*

"Does that... Uh, freak you out?" Jazz's voice was barely a whisper, and he sounded... ashamed?

Not wanting to stop, and with all intention of comforting Jazz, Baxter dipped his head and hesitantly nuzzled the side of his neck, hoping like hell he was allowed to. Breathing in the intoxicatingly sweet vanilla scent made his cock twitch. His lips touched the nape of Jazz's neck, carefully, just a soft brush of lips, while he caressed his chest, now without the guidance of Jazz's

hand. Pressing a careful, lingering kiss against Jazz's skin he whispered, "Does that freak *you* out?"

Baxter felt Jazz shake his head softly, the careful action bringing his nose in chaste contact with the buzzed short hair at Jazz's nape. *Mmmh*, that felt good. Still, Baxter wasn't fully convinced that this was the right thing to do. They might have kissed earlier, a lot, but that was definitely something else, a big step towards new territory, and he didn't want to freak Jazz out, or worse, complicate things further between them. They had to be on the same page, and maybe, just maybe, they should have talked about it before after all.

With a gentle caress, Baxter brought his hand up to Jazz's clavicle and brushed his thumb up and around the rigid bone in an attempt to soothe and explore his body. Jazz's skin was smooth and warm and every second they were connected, skin against skin, felt like touching a piece of heaven. Baxter had had many sleepless nights where he wished he could do all those things, holding Jazz, caressing his skin, mapping his body millimetre by millimetre, and it felt better than he could have imagined.

He kissed Jazz's neck again, hard then soft and lingering, pulling him closer against his own body. Bloody hell, his chest felt like it would burst in two if he ever let go of him. Jazz's careful touch, as he wrapped his fingers around Baxter's hand, startled him. "Bax, you're hard."

No kidding.

It was definitely a statement that he couldn't deny if he wanted to. It was bloody embarrassing. Baxter felt a little ashamed now that it was out in the open. Not that he should want to hide it, and for crying out loud, they were in bed together, half-naked, touching; of course he'd be aroused. And shouldn't that be what they both wanted?

"Um..." Baxter wiggled back enough that his cock wasn't pressed flush against Jazz's arse anymore. Taking his hand tightly in his, Jazz gave it a squeeze and moved it down his warm, naked chest, over his belly button until his fingers brushed the hem of his boxers. Baxter's heart sped up, and a long heartbeat later, his fingers brushed a lot more than just a piece of fabric.

Fuck, Jazz is hard like a rock.

Should he be surprised? Probably not, but feeling his hardness was definitely a reminder that it wasn't just him who was effected by what they were doing. Jazz's cock was hard and hot, wrapped in thin fabric of black boxers. He bit his lip, trying hard to stop himself from groaning out loud.

Baxter pressed his face close against Jazz's neck, nuzzling into him as deep as he could, inhaling his scent. *Mhh*. That, and the feel of Jazz's erection, encouraged his heart to lose its rhythm again and again.

"Does *that* freak you out?" Jazz whispered and slowly dragged Baxter's hand over his hard-on. Up and down and up again.

"Maybe? A little." He swallowed a lump in his throat, wishing badly he could kiss Jazz *right fucking now*. He wasn't exactly freaked out, just a little nervous. He was touching another guy's dick, for crying out loud. Surprisingly, and very gladly, he was also turned on as hell. And he liked Jazz, *a lot*, he wanted to touch him in every way possible.

Feeling Jazz nod and loosening the hold he had on Baxter, he knew he needed to reassure him that he wanted it, too. Baxter didn't want him to feel bad about it, or anything else but turned on. Challenge accepted.

Adjusting slightly, Baxter kissed the outside of Jazz's throat softly, ghosting his lips higher up his neck until he brushed against and over his clean-shaved face. "You feel good, Jazz, so hot." He squeezed his erection through the thin fabric of his boxers and immediately felt Jazz's cock jump under his touch. Now, *that* was hot. Baxter would have never thought another guy's erection could feel so bloody *awesome*. And he hadn't even gotten to the *good* part yet.

"You smell good, too, so addictive." Baxter inhaled deeply and kissed the back of Jazz's neck just like he had always wanted. *Mhhh, just so good*. Jazz shuddered in his hold and pressed himself up against Baxter's chest, invitingly, teasingly. His own cock was painfully hard too, nudging against Jazz's soft arse cheeks, and it was the hottest feeling, ever.

When he found the opening of Jazz's boxers and the tip of Baxter's fingers brushed the head of his bare cock, a soft moan escaped Jazz. *Damn*. The feeling of Jazz's warm, smooth and damp erection against his palm startled him, but then Jazz moved just slightly, enough that his cock moved in his hand and Baxter wrapped his fingers around his shaft, squeezing experimentally. A rush of heat overcame him and all worries and uncertainty fled his brain.

He couldn't think, couldn't speak.

He could only feel.

Smooth, velvety hotness underneath his fingers, moving at *his* rhythm now—gently, slowly down, up and down again, over the insanely hard, almost steel-like cock. Jazz's cock.

I'm stroking Jazz's cock.

Baxter wished he wasn't so inexperienced in giving pleasure to another guy and that he knew what he was doing, because he didn't have a clue. He simply touched Jazz the way he would touch himself, tugging and pulling, a little awkwardly maybe, given their position. Thank god, Baxter quickly found a rhythm and angle he was happy with, and jerked Jazz off effectively. At least, he hoped like hell it was good enough for Jazz, because he felt his own body go crazy, and slowly, but surely, come undone.

Jazz moaned and writhed within his hold, and it felt amazing. He clearly struggled not to make a lot of noise and maybe even hold back. Baxter wished he wouldn't, wished they could both let go and enjoy each other. Everything drove him crazy, the closeness, the feel of Jazz's arse against his throbbing erection, his sweet scent, the soft noises and low moans filling the tent.

His fingers were already slick and bloody sticky with Jazz's pre-cum. Wondering what *that* would taste like, he almost lost it. He sped up his movements, rutted against Jazz's arse, unable to hold back, a deep, gravelly moan escaped him. He had never thought he could make those kinds of noises.

Then in a heartbeat, Jazz fell apart, his own world turned dark, and time simply stopped. Never had he felt more amazing than that moment, and he was sure nothing would ever surpass *this* feeling. He squeezed Jazz's cock until the last drop of cum, a good amount of which covered his fingers. His own release already began to dry inside his boxers, which started to feel slightly disgusting.

He hated wet boxers. But right now, even that wasn't enough to encourage him to move a millimetre. Baxter caressed Jazz's slowly softening cock and dragged his hand through the pool of cum that must have rained down on his stomach, squeezing him tight against his heaving chest.

Gosh, that felt good—breathing heavily, almost in synch, holding Jazz close like nothing else mattered, like the world was theirs and nobody would give a damn if they stayed like this forever. Because if they could, he'd make sure they wouldn't move ever again. But then Jazz did, and he turned within Baxter's now loosened embrace. Even now in the dark with only the faint moonlight shining through from somewhere in the back of the tent, Jazz's intense brown eyes glowed dangerously. Baxter's chest tightened, and he wasn't ready to break their spell just yet. He so wasn't ready to face the aftermath of what they just did.

"Bax?" Jazz moved his head closer and gazed up at him with a look he couldn't read. *Please don't let him regret anything.* Baxter couldn't stand it if

he did. He wanted to say something but words wouldn't leave his lips for the life of him.

"There's something, eh, a little sticky on my ass. Do you know anything about that?"

"Bloody hell, Jazz."

Embarrassed, Baxter wrapped his arm around Jazz and pulled him close enough to feel his heart beat against his. Jazz buried his face in Baxter's chest and chuckled, "I'm glad my ass is sticky, Bax."

Jazz lifted his head enough to look at Baxter again, this time worry and uncertainty were clearly visible on his face. "Did you, uh, like it too?" Jazz blushed, and Baxter thought he seemed to get cuter just when he thought he couldn't.

"Very much so? It's a little hard to deny that I *really* like you, Jazz."

"True, the stickiness on my ass speaks for itself."

Seriously? Just how sticky could it be? They were both wearing boxers, last time he checked. It didn't matter, he would go along even if Jazz were just messing with him.

"Does it turn you on thinking about my cum on your arse?" Baxter asked with a raised eyebrow. But, sometimes Jazz just had no shame. The way he could be so endearingly shy one moment, and then say something *that* bold, was what drove him so crazy about Jazz. Well, that and a lot of other things, he stopped keeping track a long time ago.

Jazz chuckled. "Maybe?" and then grinned sheepishly, his eyes sparkling with excitement and maybe happiness?

"So, uh, are we good?"

Baxter wondered about that briefly, were they good? He'd say of course they were bloody *good*, but were they also on the same page? What exactly did Jazz think, and want from and with him?

"Of course we're good, Jazz."

Well, they had time to find out, hadn't they?

For now they were good.

Really good.

Jacob

Jacob sat on a small wooden dock by the river with his feet dangling in the water, and the bright sun shining down on him. Just like any other day it was hot as hell, and sweat trickled down Jacob's spine without moving a muscle. The clear, blue water before him appeared to be just as clear and blue and probably just as refreshing as on any other day. Gazing up, he noted how the cloudless blue sky looked the same as yesterday, and Jacob could almost say for certain it wouldn't look any different by the time tomorrow came around. Nothing out here appeared to have changed overnight, nothing major at least. For Jacob on the other hand, a lot had changed with one single night. Just what had they been thinking? Today Jacob felt *a lot* more restless than ever. He just couldn't stop his thoughts from spinning back to last night.

The morning started out almost fine. Jacob had been the first to wake and immediately made a run for the toilet and a well-needed, refreshing shower down by their campsite facilities. When he returned, Jacob literally bumped into a rather furious Bax who then scolded him for running off without any warning. Jacob promised he wouldn't do it again, he probably would have freaked out himself if Bax had disappeared in his sleep. Instead of sitting down with a mug of nice, hot and freshly brewed coffee, enjoying the morning sun and everything, they both ended up grumbling in front of a mug of cold instant coffee. Yuck, that was just the wrong kind of coffee to drink first thing in the morning. In order to get something hot and preferably far more delicious, they went on a drive to the next city.

The drinks they got at that coffee shop were *amazing*, especially compared to that cold instant soup, and exploring the neighborhood had been fun. It was the whole being with Bax *thing* that sort of threw him. Jacob still got butterflies when he looked at him, but after last night they were all sorts of weird and wrong and kind of drove him crazy. Bax, on the other hand, seemed to be doing just fine and had been all smiles and funny jokes and his usual good-natured self, especially after that good coffee. Jacob couldn't blame Bax for that, it tasted delicious. Ever since he'd gotten to Australia, Jacob had fast developed a thing for the hot beverage, and he enjoyed having their cup together whenever they could. Before he met Bax, Jacob hadn't been all that into it, but here, coffee shops meant Bax's company, and that just totally did it for him. It was quite difficult to beat a large cup of white chocolate latte and Bax, together. *Yum.*

Maybe today just wasn't his day. Everyone deserved at least one day to feel off, right?

No, Jacob couldn't deny he quite well knew what was bothering him; he was fairly certain that last night was to blame for his nerves going into overdrive. It was frustrating. Jacob had been looking forward to this trip for a while now, and so far it had been a blast, so why did he have to make such a mess out of it. Those damned hormones. Jacob probably couldn't blame his body, it was his heart that decided not to listen. Maybe his body too, last night proved it. He was just so head over heels for Bax that it wasn't healthy anymore.

Today, he'd actually began to distance himself from Bax.

Chickenshit.

He knew he wasn't doing anyone any favors by behaving like this. It was all just so confusing.

After they returned from that weird-ass mud crab tasting thing at a nearby restaurant that Bax had talked him into, Jacob had been running up and down the entire campsite in an attempt to jog off his lunch. And avoid Bax. Jacob just couldn't face him for a long time without getting aroused, big time, and feeling embarrassed as hell. Memories of last night haunted him, teased him, drove him crazy. And the way Bax's eyes glowed and his confident smile taunted him didn't help in the slightest to stay focused on anything but what he tried not to think of.

Jacob knew they were good, at least he hoped they were. Jacob *felt* extremely good, that was for certain. And when Bax said they were good, then they had to be. But what in the world had come over him to be so bold? He had absolutely no clue. And why did he have to feel so embarrassed about it today?

The pat on his shoulder startled him. Jacob turned around and looked up into Bax's bright green eyes. He felt like melting, and it wasn't so much from the sun this time.

"You okay, Jazz?"

Jacob nodded. Bax held out his hand and helped Jacob to stand up. Once both his feet were steady on the ground, Jacob grabbed Bax by both his shoulders and pulled him into a tight hug. He needed this right now, needed reassurance that they were good. Jacob needed to know that he was making a fuss out of nothing. He wasn't sure just how he would *know*, but he hoped Bax would show him in his own way. He was ready, he hoped. Jacob needed to face Bax and find out just where they stood. Jacob cared about Bax so much it made

his head spin and his heart ache. He didn't want to jeopardize their friendship with their stupid fooling around.

He wanted more though, more of Bax, all the damn time.

Jacob wanted all of Bax, and it scared the life out of him. By looking at his parents, he saw how *love gone wrong* could destroy so much, and he feared that whatever they would do or become in the future might tear them apart at some point. Jacob didn't want that. But then again, he wanted what they had last night, and a lot more. He wanted more of his friend's warm skin against his, those kisses and just everything.

Geez, why does this have to be so fucking difficult?

It doesn't have to be difficult, you just have to risk something. *Great, that's not helping at all.* Jacob wanted safe, wanted home and happy endings. He wasn't a gambler and he didn't want to risk losing Bax over this or anything else.

And as if he could read his mind Baxter whispered against his ear, his voice low and gentle and reassuring as hell, "It's going to be fine, Jazz. We'll figure this out. You and me, together." He then hugged him closer and held him just like that for a few very long and comforting moments.

"Yeah?" Jacob eventually asked, just a little breathless because these emotions he felt were so overwhelming.

"Of course, we will." Baxter nodded and broke their embrace, those beautiful, golden-green eyes gazing down at him, with something like hope and adoration, felt wonderful and sent those butterflies dancing and fluttering again.

"Okay, Bax. I trust you."

And he did. He'd promise to put his stupid fears and insecurities aside and trust Bax. They will figure this out, like he said, together. Together sounded good. They could do that. Hopefully.

"Good."

"So, what are we going to do now?"

"Now? I am going to kiss you breathless, and then I'll drag you back to our tent and have my way with you." Bax smiled at him in that dazzling, arousing, and yet, reassuring way.

Yep, he trusted Bax.

One hot and heady kiss followed another, while hands tugged at clothing and feet tried to stay steady. It proved to be quite the challenge inside their narrow tent, especially with Bax all over him like a starving hyena. With every breathless kiss, electrical heat swept down Jacob's body like liquid fire, leaving him hard and throbbing and just one step closer to insanity.

He felt Bax's wet tongue close to his ear when finally, the last piece of fabric hit the floor, and warm skin touched warm skin. Soft kisses rained down on Jacob the very moment he hit the mattress with his bare ass. *Gosh, this feels good.* Bax fast devoured every inch of his body with warm hands and wet tongue, soft lips and gentle fingers. Even teeth seemed to be everywhere. Jacob thought his head was spinning, but he couldn't tell, maybe the tent was moving?

And just when had breathing become so difficult?

Bax gently pressed him into the soft mattress "So hot, Jazz." His warm breath tickled his neck as Bax kissed his way up, making Jacob squirm underneath him. "Are you okay with this?"

Their eyes locked and Jacob nodded. "Uh-huh." Then their lips met in a long, sugary kiss.

The weight of Bax's body on him felt absolutely amazing. When his hands found Bax's bare ass, he instinctively enveloped a double handful of firm flesh, literally for the first time in his life, and it was beyond amazing. Pulling Bax's warm body closer, he moaned in satisfaction when his body responded to him, the same way that he was responding to Bax. He thought it couldn't get any better than *this*.

But then Bax pulled away, gently untangled himself from Jacob. *Oh no.* By the time he opened his eyes, and long before he could ask whether something was wrong, he felt a hand on his groin, fingers brush along his balls and a hot and rather wet tongue experimentally poke at his throbbing erection. *Oh wow.* Then those fingers joined the poking, then caressed and oh, something equally hot to that tongue nipped at his shaft, up the underside of his cock and sucked him in. Almost balls deep.

Oh double wow. Warm, wet heat surrounded every nerve ending he never knew existed, with firm lips pressed together tightly as Bax moved on him. Holy G, he was going to die. He knew it. There was no way to survive *this*.

The intense pleasure he got from Bax's mouth on him, sucking and licking, and then those sneaky fingers tugging and tickling his balls, was just too good. Jacob couldn't hold back the moan that escaped him when his hip moved,

instinctively, bucking up a couple of times, pushing himself into slippery heat. *Oh fuck.* He hadn't meant to, but damn that felt good. Bax continued to suck, slowly, careful and experimentally, tongue swirling and all. Jacob opened his eyes in time to see Bax slow down, pull back and lick at the tip of his cock while he looked up at him.

Holy hell, he was going to lose it. He was already so close to insanity, he wondered briefly if he could actually faint from pleasure alone.

"How you feeling up there, Jazzy?" Bax purred more than anything else, and it was by far the sexiest sound he'd ever heard anyone make.

"Yeah." Jacob nodded, feeling dazed and just a little breathless. "Perfect." He quaked. Bax grinned, his green eyes sparkling with something Jacob couldn't categorize yet, but he was eager to find out just what it promised.

Baxter chuckled and slowly crawled up his body, forcing him to lie back until his head gently nestled into the soft pillow. *Mhhh*, he felt so good it was hard to believe this was real and not just a mind-killing dream. A warm hand ghosted across his chest until it found a nipple, fingers brushed it teasingly. Another hand cupped one of his balls, gently, carefully caressing and tugging at the sensitive skin there. Hot, lingering kisses traveled up the side of his throat, across his cheek and then finally, warm and wet lips settled on his. He gasped when Bax kissed him deeply, longingly and pushed his lips apart with his hot, wet tongue. Yes, he was going to lose his fucking mind if Bax kept that up. Jacob was already dizzy, his heart hammering dangerously against his ribcage, tiptoeing around the edge, if the sticky fluid that leaked onto his belly was anything to go by.

Heaven was close enough to touch; he could already taste the never-ending happiness that would welcome him there.

With a final kiss and nip on his lower lip, Baxter leaned back enough for their eyes to lock, and Jacob thought he was going to lose it that very moment, when his own met those dangerously sexy green eyes. "Bax?" He asked breathlessly, what for exactly he had no idea, as he probably couldn't even remember his own name right now.

"Just let go, Jazz. It's fine."

Those words of reassurance made him feel all warm and fuzzy inside, adding to the already crazy, dizzying sensations and addicting feelings and emotions he was going through. With one hand cupping his ass cheek, Bax lifted him just slightly off the mattress, and with another, warm and gentle hand he began stroking his throbbing cock. To Jacob's regret, it didn't take more

than mere seconds for him to literally fall right over the edge. Big drops of wet come rained down on his tingling belly and heaving chest, and with an orgasm so intense he thought he might just never come down from this high. He wondered briefly if that would be so bad.

When he eventually did, and his mind caught up with everything, he was already tucked in, a warm blanket covering him and Bax, who held him close in his arms, lazily kissing his shoulder blade. A sudden chill rushed through his body, and he snuggled closer into his friend's embrace. He had a faint memory of Bax cleaning up the mess he'd made with one of their underwear—good thing he'd brought a couple too many.

"You okay?" It was Jacob who eventually broke the silence, just because he wanted to hear Bax's voice. He cursed himself for not having anything better to say. Bax squeezed him hard and lovingly against his warm body. "Never better." He nuzzled into Jacob's neck and pressed a tingling kiss against his throat. "You?"

"Same here." It was true, and yet seemed like the understatement of the year. Bax hummed in further agreement.

"Bax?" Jacob took a deep breath and gathered all the courage he had left to ask for what still felt somehow too embarrassing to voice, or do without being asked to. Just why did he have to be so shy at times? He hated himself for that more than anyone would ever know.

"Hm?" He felt Bax's hot breath ghost over his shoulder, followed by a chaste kiss.

"Um... I want to touch you. Can I?"

He felt his cheek heat and his throat clog up, he might just faint from embarrassment, if not from pleasure, after all. He couldn't deny that it felt absolutely amazing to fully and completely have Bax worship him and his body the way he did, but that was only half the fun, wasn't it? Well, he was sure there were a ton of other things he felt like doing right now, and Bax must have felt the same. Bax untangled himself from Jacob and nudged him to the side a little. He made enough space for Bax to brace himself on his elbows and gaze down at him.

"Anything you want, Jazz," he whispered with a blinding smile. Damn those butterflies in his stomach. Great. Just what he needed to feel uncertain again.

“Do you, eh, want it too?” he asked, knowing just how *dumb* he must sound. He was a guy, a man, a big and bulky, and damned strong man, why couldn't he ask for something as simple as that without sounding like the coward he felt he was? Girls could probably ask for what they wanted, even if it was touching someone's cock and having sex.

“I'd love it if you did.” Bax gave him an *I'm all yours* smile and leaned down to kiss his cheek softly. “But no pressure, whenever you're ready. And whatever *you* want, Jazz.”

Now he felt like a real chickenshit. A very dumb one. Great. He knew Bax only meant to be considerate and all that, but he could do it, it wasn't like he wasn't ready. He wanted it, badly.

He just felt a little embarrassed to do it, especially when it felt like he was expected to do *something*. Not that Bax had made him feel that way, but it wasn't like every day he touched another guy, especially not in places he wanted to. Now that he actually asked he couldn't just say, *Okay, but no thank you*.

“*I am* ready. I want to.”

Well there was nothing wrong with just a little more reassurance. Baxter smiled and closed the gap between them, kissing him fully on the lips with a light smack. What started out soft and gentle and reassuring quickly became firmer and hotter with each exchange of lips, tongue and a lot of saliva. Jacob reached for Bax, and his fingers quickly found his firm chest.

Hot damn, that body.

And with that, he couldn't hold back anymore. A wave of heat overcame him, and the need to be closer, much closer, and somehow connected was overwhelming. Jacob tangled his legs over and around Bax's lower body, and pulled him as close as he could. His hand roamed Bax's shoulder, caressed his stomach and along his ribs in exploration. His nose brushed Bax's cheek, and his fingers finally found his nipples, which by the way, felt absolutely insane. When he experimentally rubbed the small, round nub Bax chuckled, then inhaled sharply and kissed him lightly, teasingly, leaving him wanting more.

With his leg pushing against Bax's bare ass, he pulled and tugged him flush against his body, as close as he possibly could. Feeling his hot and very hard cock nudge against his made him gasp. Bax moaned and tugged at his shoulder, then their mouths crushed together in a deep and most passionate kiss.

Mhhh, with Bax's soft lips, his warm skin, those sexy noises and that almost suffocating heat, it was insane just how fast he felt hot all over again. When he pushed Bax onto his back, he also got rid of the thick blanket, which stuck to his sweaty body and was getting in his way. Somehow, he managed to roll them over and ended up on top of Bax, which was the most incredible feeling altogether. Looking down on him, with his cheeks flushed and lips parted was, by far, the hottest thing he had ever seen. That look in his eyes and those tingling sensations inside drove him crazy. Jacob dipped his head and caught that sexy mouth in a hot, messy, and needy kiss. Jacob learned fast that Bax would murmur a lot of "*Soo good*" and "*Mmhh Jazz*" in between kisses, which, he had to admit, turned him on like nothing else.

He will never know for sure what overcame him when he reached down between their bodies, teasingly brushed along Bax's stomach, before wrapping his fingers around his friend's cock. Bax was so insanely hot and hard in his hand that he actually shivered, and for one fleeting moment, he wondered if he could do it. But then Bax's tongue nudged his, those soft lips kissed him sweetly before his teeth nipped at his lower lip, tugged and pulled. Jacob inhaled sharply, dropped his head onto Bax's shoulder, kissed the skin he felt against his mouth and moved. Moved his body, his hips, his hands and everything that felt like it wanted to move.

He shuddered when Bax's lips tickled his neck, kissing him teasingly, wet and with a lot of tongue, before sucking every inch of his throat he could reach. Jacob already felt those tell-tale sensations humming through his entire body, indicating he was *fucking close*, but just how embarrassing would it be to shoot his load while pleasuring his friend? He couldn't help it, this was just too hot. Bax was too hot. He was going to lose it any time now.

Before Jacob could panic from trying to hold back his release, Bax gently nudged his shoulder and forced Jacob to look at him. With glowing, reassuring green eyes he whispered, "Move. A little." And when Bax reached for both their throbbing erections, pressed them flush against each other, Jacob thought he might just faint for real. That feeling. Wow, there was simply nothing like a hot and hard cock against your own. Bax gasped and encouraged Jacob to follow his lead, which he gladly did.

And just like that they stroked, tugged and pulled themselves to completion. Together.

It was the most intense and incredible thing he had ever done. Jacob wondered briefly just how many more times he would be able to say that.

He would do anything to find out.

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Chapter 5

May 11th, 2012

Baxter

Baxter could feel the buzz of excitement humming through his body all the way to his toes. Today was going to be one more day filled to the brim with footy and Jazz. They hadn't been busier in weeks and every day felt more exhausting than the previous, but Baxter knew well what they were working towards and he had no regrets. With every match, he was one small step closer to his future dream. What excited him all the more were the rumours of more scouts coming to their next few matches. The upcoming championship, he'd heard, would be buzzing with important people.

Sometimes, the excitement was almost mind-numbing. He couldn't wait to finally make the Schoolboys and have actual chances to play for the Melbourne Storm or Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs. He bloody hoped he was good enough this season. Despite all those hours Jazz and he spent together doing a lot of things that had absolutely nothing to do with footy, he was still sure that he gave his best every single day. It wasn't like they didn't put in any extra hours anymore, of course they did, and they still worked their arses off on the field. They might have dropped a few hours of work out here and there and definitely stopped going to the beach as often as in the first weeks of the year. But all that shouldn't have any effect on their routine, they both made sure that nobody would have any reason to think any less of their performance and he was fairly certain they kicked ass, as Jazz liked to say, better than ever. He felt unstoppable. Almost unbeatable.

"Are you ready for the game?" Baxter asked, lowering his gaze until his eyes locked on Jazz's lips. Damn, he had a mouth made for kissing. He couldn't wait for the game to be over and check just how good they were at that. *Mhh*, kissing Jazz had fast become one of his most beloved activities to pass time. The feelings inside him were nearly out of control just thinking of later tonight. He beamed Jazz another cheerful smile and handed him his bottle of water. The guy still didn't drink enough, no matter how often he told him to. Jazz could be bloody *impossible*, but Baxter still loved him.

Wait what? Oh yeah, right. It still felt weird to think he could be in love, but it had been on his mind for a while now, because it was simply impossible to ignore all those ways Jazz made him feel. All the time. It had to be love, he was fairly certain. He wondered if Jazz felt the same.

“Born ready, and you know it. Thanks.” Jazz winked, took a long swig before throwing it back at Baxter. Jazz beamed him his trademark grin, brown eyes crinkling, dimples and all. He realised he had been staring after Jazz when he called for Baxter, “Come on, slowpoke. They aren’t gonna wait for us!” already half out of the door, leaving him behind as last of the team.

Baxter smiled to himself, dropped the bottle in his backpack and sprinted after Jazz. What he wanted to do right now was to jump on Jazz, tackle him to the ground and kiss the life out of him.

Preferably without any audience.

As expected, today’s match had been anything but a piece of cake, the other guys were strong and played their absolute A-game, nevertheless they won and *kicked ass*. The crowd loved them. Their coaches loved them. They were on a winning streak on top of that. Life couldn’t be any better. And he finally had his Jazz to himself for the rest of the day. Just. Perfect.

Sitting in his old Mustang, he admired Jazz’s profile for a long while until he eventually interrupted his texting. It was probably his mum, he often texted her updates on matches, or told her where they would be later that day.

“How about a barbie tonight?” Baxter eventually asked, and it didn’t take Jazz a second to look up from his phone and shove it into his backpack. Yeah, that sounded good to him. A lot of food, sunshine and Jazz.

“A what?” Jazz asked with a confused look. He looked almost comical, as if Baxter had just asked him something weird. Which he hadn’t.

“Barbecue?” Baxter poked him playfully. “Come on, Jazz. You’ve been here how long? And you still act like I’m speaking a totally different language at times.”

“Well, sometimes you really do.” Jazz laughed and, as always, it was the most contagious and lovely sound Baxter had heard all day. “And you always catch me off guard with those weird words of yours.”

Baxter caught himself getting lost in those brown eyes all over again. They never failed to draw him in and lose all sense of time. The way Jazz always would stare back and smile didn’t help for it to be less intoxicating.

“So, your place or mine?” Baxter said teasingly and pulled at Jazz’s arm, the warm skin underneath his fingertips still made his head spin and his breath catch. One simple touch would never feel like that with anyone else.

“Mine, I guess. Mom’s out as always, and I’m sure the others won’t mind. They’ll probably like to join our little *barbie* party.” Jazz winked at him and that was that. Baxter pulled him close enough to steal a long and lingering kiss.

And maybe another, and another.

As expected, Jazz’s aunt’s house was empty when they arrived. They bought a few steaks and things to munch on, on their way there. They would just put the rest of the unused food in the fridge. The small garden out in the back was perfect for the two of them. With a lot of trees and shrubs surrounding them, and almost no neighbours close by, it had been a pretty nice and relaxing *barbie*. Baxter hoped they could do that more often in the future. Someday maybe with all of Jazz’s family.

“When is your mum going to show up at one of our matches?” Baxter asked in full sincerity, there was no mocking or anything in voice. Baxter was concerned at times that Jazz didn’t seem to ever have any time with her at all. While he felt overwhelmed most of the time with the gigantic amount of babying by his own mum, he couldn’t imagine how upsetting it must be for Jazz not to have all that. Sometimes he wished they could exchange mothers, he preferred to be the one suffering a little more when it would make Jazz happy.

“I don’t know, Bax.” Jazz shrugged and finished his steak with one last bite. Baxter wondered briefly whether he would get to see Jazz’s mum again anytime soon. So far they had only met twice, and even then they only briefly exchanged greetings and quick introductions in the doorway. She seemed like a nice person and he wanted to meet her properly someday. He’d seen and talked to Jazz’s uncle and aunt a lot more often and longer in the past weeks.

“She will come to graduation though, right?” And that would be his last question, he promised. Jazz clearly didn’t enjoy talking about his family, he’d learned that pretty much right from the start.

“Yeah I think so. She’d said she’d be there, but you never know with her job. So I’m not betting my life on it.”

Baxter was glad that, at least, she would try, and that Jazz didn’t look sad, although the resigned look on his face didn’t make him feel any less concerned. Baxter knew that there was nothing he could do, which made it even worse.

“She will be there, Jazzy. I am sure she will.”

“Yeah, probably.” Jazz gave him a bright smile. “So, do you have anything planned for dessert as well? Or should I go into the kitchen and whip something up?”

“Oh, I think we might find something we could *whip up* together, what do you say?”

Jazz nodded and stood, holding out his hand in invitation. “I love the way you think, Bax.”

And Baxter loved how Jazz’s smile alone would always make his stomach feel funny and the rest of the world around him fade into the background. He was the luckiest person, being able to enjoy Jazz’s company, to drink in his smiles and be looked at with so much warmth and adoration.

Bloody hell, he was so in love with the guy.

May 20th, 2012

Jacob

Damn, how badly he wanted to wrap his arms around Bax, pull him close by his waist and kiss the life out of him. He constantly craved it, like white chocolate latte and Rocky Road ice cream. Today was proving to be a struggle too, especially with Bax looking so damn sexy. And then there were all those memories of their last actual night together. It had been a while since they’d had the chance to do more than just cuddling and kissing, but that didn’t make them any less real.

Those memories were burned into his brain, vividly so. Steamy, sensual memories. Hot, naked skin on skin. Fingers teasing. Lips sucking and teeth nipping, biting. *Oh fuck*. All Jacob could think of was kissing those soft, gentle lips again and again. If he had his way they would never be apart, but obviously, that wasn’t going to happen any time soon. Certainly not right now, out on the field, five minutes away from kick-off.

Damn, this was bad.

He could hardly concentrate on anything but Bax.

“Bax?” he began, only to be cut off by tiny, but insistent, kisses. “We. Can’t. S-stop.”

They were in the frigging toilet, the worst place to fool around. Bax, of all people, should know that. But it also made Jacob feel good, knowing that it wasn't just him who had a difficult time keeping his hands to himself. The match went great, better than expected. Jacob managed to, at least, focus enough not to screw up.

"I know, just wanted to tell you that I had a great time yesterday, Jazz," Bax whispered when he pulled back, a particular gleam in his eyes that told him he was going to be in trouble. The good kind of trouble. But they weren't in the right place for *that kind* of trouble. Dammit. It was so frustrating.

"We didn't do anything except play a round of *Mario Kart* and eat pizza." With Jacob's aunt and uncle for crying out loud. They had to spend yet another PG-13 kinda night in. So yeah, there hadn't been more on their agenda than that. Again.

Bax leaned in against him, pressing Jacob against the cold tile wall. "Exactly. And I loved every second of it," he purred, his lips tracing the curve of Jacob's ear, sending tiny shivers down his neck. When Bax released him with a nip to his neck, he gazed at him with the greenest eyes and the warmest smile. If Jacob hadn't already been head-over-heels, those simple words and just what they implied, combined with the passion and admiration shimmering in Bax's eyes, would've done the trick.

"Jazz, do you know how much I *love* looking at you?" Bax whispered, and now, it was Jacob's turn to lean in and press a kiss to his neck because he couldn't resist that inviting throat had been taunting him all day.

"Not as much as I love looking at *you*," Jacob purred into Bax's ear, steadying himself by holding on to his firm chest. Wow, those muscles. It never failed to amaze him just how much Bax's body turned him on. One touch and he was gone. Why couldn't he know how to teleport? Jacob knew just the place where they could do as they pleased. Any place but here would be perfect. He also wished he could stop time and stay there with Bax forever.

Baxter raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to seduce me with your Californian charm?"

"Mhh. Maybe." Jacob grinned. "Kiss me again?" Jacob loved the look on Bax's face, the light flush and the visible excitement. When he leaned forward and their lips met in a chaste kiss, Jacob was once again overwhelmed with the scent of him, fresh like an ocean breeze but barely hiding his masculine tang. It was a good thing they had just showered, because a clean Bax was far more arousing than a sweaty Bax. Well, on a second thought...

"*Anything* you want, Jazz." Bax's lips curved in a wicked smile, holding him captive with a lust-filled gaze.

"Yeah hold that thought, this isn't the place or time for what I really want."

Jacob wished they hadn't started this, because how was he going to make it through the rest of the day in his coaches, friends and Bax's company?

May 31st, 2012

Jacob

Jacob finished washing the utensils he had used for today's cheesecake. It had been his fourth try since last week and hopefully he'd gotten it right this time. It was one of the many recipes his grandma passed on to him years ago. They had cooked and baked together whenever one of them had had an idea for a new recipe, or whenever one of them felt hungry for something particular. His grandma always knew how to whip up something amazing. Jacob admired his Grandma Clara for her passion and talent.

One day he wished he could come up with a few incredible dishes himself. Until then, he had to practice a lot, if just rugby and spending time with Bax wouldn't always take up all of his free time. He loved taking over his aunt's kitchen.

"Good morning, Coby." Jacob turned at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Hey, Mom." He smiled at his mother as she crossed the kitchen. "Do you want coffee?" he asked cheerfully. Jacob couldn't help it; he was in a pretty good mood today.

"Thanks, dear," she said before dropping a kiss to his forehead. "Coffee would be lovely."

Jacob rummaged in the cupboard, and in no time had a cup of coffee ready. Those coffee pad machines were handy.

"Mmm, that smells good, honey. What are you making?" she asked when he turned to set the coffee and sugar onto the counter, where she sat in her usual chair.

"Cheesecake. Again. I know, I know." Jacob wondered when his mom would finally tell him to stop messing about in the kitchen all the time. Just the other day, they offered a bunch of desserts to their next door neighbors, because they couldn't eat everything he'd made.

“Bax is going to come over later, we’ll hang out here a while today,” he explained, while getting himself a glass of grape juice out of the fridge. “That’s still fine right?” For a moment he felt a bit panicked that they might have to change their plans for today. *Please say it’s fine.*

“Of course, honey. That sounds lovely.” She gave him a bright smile. “I hope you two will have a good day.”

Oh, he was sure they would have a fantastic day. It had been a while since they’d had enough time to enjoy their time together in private. Usually their days were packed with practice, games and a lot more practice. Today promised to be great.

“I’ll put the cake in the fridge later, take as much as you like whenever you come home for lunch,” he said, sitting on the empty chair next to his mother. Jacob watched her sip on the coffee, while skipping through one of the many newspapers his uncle always left lying around on the counter.

“Thanks, sweetheart.” She tucked a strand of brown hair behind her ear, then placed her hand on top of Jacob’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “I’m proud of you, you know that right?”

Huh. Jacob didn’t think he was doing anything special that would make anyone proud. He was just a regular student, one who loved to play football. A lot of football.

“Why?” He chuckled. “Because I make the best cheesecake in Queensland?”

“Yes, you really do.” She smiled warmly. “I am also very proud that you are doing so great with school and everything. Your aunt always tells me how everyone at Keebra loves you.”

Jacob wasn’t so sure about that. Probably not everyone loved him. There were a couple of names that came to his mind, who were far from loving him. Tom Morton, for example, had never gotten over the fact that he played his position now, even though it was neither one’s fault. And then there was Patrick Taylor, who had a serious problem with him and nobody knew why. Patrick was the only guy who still told those weird, and most definitely not funny, American jokes, and made fun of his accent.

Nobody else bothered about his accent, which by the way wasn’t that strong. In the beginning, some of the guys might have said they thought he talked funny, but that never bothered him because he thought they talked funny

too. Once they all became good friends nobody ever mentioned it again, well except Patrick, but Jacob didn't pay any attention to him. As for the teachers and coaches, Jacob thought yeah it could be true that most of them did like him, which still made him feel very happy about going to Keebra. It was a great school.

"Why don't we invite your friend for dinner next week?" his mom suggested. "I haven't had the chance to say more than a few words to him. I'd really like to change that. You two seem to be getting along so well."

His mom's words took him by surprise.

"Sure. I'll ask Bax." He smiled at her, wishing they could really do that, have dinner with Bax and talk a lot. They never really had much time for that, and he *so* wanted Bax and his mom to meet properly. But he knew that wasn't going to happen so soon. *Don't get your hopes up yet.*

"We don't have to if you're busy and all. I understand," he added quickly. Jacob remembered all those times she canceled last minute. He kind of hated getting his hopes up with every new plan to do something together, just to have her go to work in the end.

"Of course we have to," she insisted. "I know I'm not around as much as we both want. I promise I am going to take a few more days off soon, and then we can all get together."

Jacob looked at her in surprise. "From work? Completely off?" he asked excitedly.

His mother gave him a warm, reassuring smile. "How about I will take you boys out? How does that sound?"

Jacob felt a sudden rush of happiness and excitement hum through his body. It would be wonderful to have a few dinner dates with his mom and Bax, and maybe do silly things like go shopping with her, or both of them. Just going to the mall would be great, and, perhaps, they could see a movie and do things families usually do.

Once his mom left for the hospital, Jacob took out the cheesecake and set it aside to cool. In order to clean up before Bax got there, Jacob dropped the last few pieces of cutlery that he'd used for his breakfast toast and eggs earlier, into the sink and made quick work of washing up. Today was their two-month anniversary, which was a silly thing to remember he knew that, but there was no way he would not have marked *that* date in his calendar. It felt too important to ignore.

They didn't plan on celebrating, of course not, he wasn't sure if Bax would even remember. Jacob had only briefly mentioned it last month while they were away with the team for one of their matches. Obviously they hadn't had any private time back then, so they ended up passing out from exhaustion with a bunch of their teammates on the bus home. Yes, very romantic. At least now, they would have a lot of time to enjoy the day in each other's company.

It didn't matter one bit what day it was. He and Bax planned on taking over his aunt's house tonight, which turned out fairly easy since they would be away for a couple days, catching up on some alone time somewhere in a hotel in Sydney. And as usual, his mom would be working a double shift at the hospital. She might come by to grab some late lunch around the time he and Bax planned to be out of the house. It would be perfect.

The soft tune coming from the table behind him, indicating an incoming call from Bax, startled him slightly. He had been so engrossed in his thoughts. Jacob turned around to answer his smartphone. "Door is open. Come in, coast is clear." A smile quickly found its way onto his lips.

He was way too excited for today. Ever since their first kiss at the beach two months ago, they naturally fell into a form of dating without thoroughly discussing what it meant. Stealing kisses in the dark and sneaking away for a few intimate hours had fast become as important as their regular rugby practice, surfing and lifting weights. Of which, the last two had to suffer a bit in favor of a little more intimate moments. They were both probably quite happy with that though.

Most of the time it didn't bother Jacob that much, that they had to keep it a secret or that they weren't going to be addressing each other as boyfriends in the out and open. He knew what he felt was real enough, and he was almost certain by now that Bax felt the same about him. It was enough that they could freely express their feelings to each other, he didn't need to have the approval of everyone else. Although, he knew that, at some point, he had to come clean with his mother at least. Of course there were times when he wished he could cuddle up to Bax at the beach with everyone's eyes on them, without having to fear the sun might fall from the sky.

Hell, even being able to take his hand on a walk down the seashore while watching the sunset, like any other couple, would be nice from time to time, but they couldn't, and he knew better than to ask for it. At least not for the time being. Or ever. He still had time to decide about the future, right?

With his back to the living room, Jacob rinsed one last cup under the hot water. Baxter came up from behind and gently placed his hands on Jacob's waist, pulling him close against his chest.

The intimate touch didn't startle him and neither did those warm lips as they brushed his ear in barely a whisper, sending a chill up his spine. "Good Morning, Jazz." *Mmm*. That purr never failed to turn his knees into jelly.

"Morning, Crazy." At that, he felt Baxter's lips press hard against the side of his neck, followed shortly by his teeth grazing his skin teasingly. He loved when Bax did that.

Jacob turned around in his hold and smiled when Baxter's beautiful green eyes locked on his. Bax stepped closer yet, wrapped his arms tight around Jacob's back, and kissed him softly. The warmth of his tongue brushing along his lower lip drew a low moan from Jacob, before he took his mouth in a more demanding touch of lips and tongue. Holding back had been the most difficult for both of them, ever since their first discovery of how amazing kissing each other felt. Damn, were those kisses addicting. Soft lips touching, gently caressing, demanding and loving. Kissing Bax was something Jacob had wanted to do since he first laid eyes on him, and he was craving it now like nothing else. He just couldn't imagine a future without those kisses, without Bax.

Those lips were irresistible. Just watching him smile got Jacob's heartbeat going faster. Every damn time. They'd only known each other for rather a short time, but it sounded terrifying to wake up one morning and not have Bax in his life.

With his talented tongue, Bax coaxed a few more gasps and moans from him and Jacob shamelessly gave in to the rush of heat that overcame him every time they kissed. With a low moan of his own, Bax backed him to the counter behind them, running his hands up and down his body as they kissed some more. Jacob hoped he was as eager and desperate for more than he himself felt. He was going to go insane if he didn't get his hands on Bax's hot and very naked skin sometime soon.

"Mm, Jazzy," Bax whispered close to his ear, something he seemed to love doing a lot. "Don't you look gorgeous today, bunny." *Damn, Bax*. Sometimes he was simply unbelievable. The things that came out of his mouth. Jeez. It was almost as if he found it arousing to tease him.

"Don't call me that, Bax." *Seriously?* Bunny must be one of the most embarrassing pet names he could have come up with. Jacob looked nothing like a cute, cuddly little rodent.

"Bunny or gorgeous?" Bax asked teasingly, nipping at Jacob's jaw.

"Both." Honestly, Jacob could do without the gorgeous as well, but he would be a lot more willing to let that one pass instead of *bunny*.

"I have to think about that, bunny. You are incredibly gorgeous, I can't just ignore that."

That familiar glint in Bax's eyes did the craziest things to his stomach.

"Then at least stop with that damn bunny thing. That's just weird. What's that about?" Jacob grinned. "Do you have some sort of disgusting pet fetish I should know about? Maybe it's the fur that turns you on?" Now there was a thought. He wiggled his eyebrows seductively. "Should I go fur shopping? Bunny ears or kitty tails?"

Once he was eye level with him, Baxter gave him a disgusted look. "Now, who's weird?"

Jacob laughed out loud and took hold of Baxter's shoulders, pulling him hard against his chest. Nothing in the world could honestly ruin the mood for them. And just like that, with teasing kisses and arousing touches they fell right back into their familiar pattern of making out.

"Why were you cooking? I thought we agreed that I would take you out to dinner?" Bax's hot breath tickled along his throat, and he shivered.

"You know I love cooking," Jacob gasped when Bax bit down on his sensitive skin. *Holy G, that felt good.* "And, anyway, I only made dessert."

"And I thought we agreed on tonight's dessert already?" Baxter pulled back enough to gaze down on him, those intense green eyes made him catch his breath and his knees almost give out. Bax steadied him with firm hands on his hip, his hard and muscled body flush against his own.

There was no way that Jacob would have forgotten. Bax had agreed that with the house empty and all that freedom they could try something else, something a little more daring, and they both had been looking forward to it. He was a little nervous, but overall just way too excited. But first things first. Jacob had always wanted to try his aunt's kitchen counter for something other than cooking.

"You realize you've hit the Jackpot with me, right?" Jacob purred into Baxter's ear, tightening the grip he now had around his waist. He pulled him closer, seeking out his cock. Because rubbing against each other felt like the hottest thing, and Jacob couldn't get enough of it.

"And why is that?" He withdrew enough to see Bax raise an eyebrow, a teasing smile playing his lips. Jacob loved this, being intimate with him, being able to watch his *boyfriend* from up close and so very personal. It filled his chest with warmth, and his belly with butterflies.

"Mh... You know, I'm all jock, hard muscles on the outside, soft and cuddly geek on the inside," he whispered, his tongue leaving a wet path up Bax's neck to his jaw. Inspecting his work, he shuddered lightly. *Mhh*, that looked yum. He wanted to lick it all over again.

"And you can cook," Bax pointed out with a cheeky grin.

Jacob chuckled. "That I can." He reached for Bax's neck, gently pulled him closer again just to lick and nip and bite some more. He needed more, he wanted to feel Bax's hard body pressed against his own. Jacob's fingers traveled up Bax's neck, touching his nose to his cheek. "There are some other things I can do, care to find out?" he purred against Bax's warm skin, inhaling the scent that always drove him wild. Getting Bax naked had fast become his number one favorite pastime.

"Bloody hell, Jazz, I don't think I'll ever get enough of you."

Now was that truly so bad? Jacob pulled him closer and silenced him with more teasing kisses. He could swear his blood was boiling by now. There was nothing he enjoyed doing more than running his hands down Bax's strong arms, over *those* abs or just caressing his soft cheeks, neck and the lower portion of his back. Damn, the guy's back drove him wild. He'd give up his video games, comics, rugby and cooking if he could touch and make love with Baxter until his last breath. He had already admitted to himself that's where his heart belonged. It was hard to deny that Jacob was head-over-heels. *In love*. With Bax. Very much so. And damn if that wasn't scary.

"Bax," Jacob managed just a little too breathless, "Sit. On the counter."

Bax gasped when he pulled away from his searching lips. "The counter?" he asked confused, which made Jacob chuckle.

"Yes, the *bloody* counter. I would lift you up, all romantic and stuff, but you're a little too heavy for me," he said teasingly, poking Bax's chest.

“Are you calling me fat?” Bax asked in mock-hurt, Jacob could only grin.

“No, just too heavy to carry.” Bax shook his head but made quick work of hopping onto the kitchen counter, facing Jacob. He wiggled his legs and beckoned for Jacob to come closer, smirking and wiggling his eyebrows. Jacob loved Bax dearly, but sometimes he just looked a bit too goofy. Not that it made him any less sexy, and especially right now, all Jacob could think of was to get him naked, hot and bothered.

Bax raised his legs and hooked them around Jacob's hips. *Oh wow*. That was nice. They reached for each other, hands found arms and shoulders, and Bax's legs pulled him closer. Then their mouths met in a slow and sensual kiss. No, scratch that. A *very* slow and absolutely mind numbing kiss. Jacob gasped a little when their tongues met and he tightened his grip on Bax's shoulder, just a little uncertain how to go from here. He *really* wanted to get Bax's shorts off, but *that* kiss, those legs tight around him, it drove him crazy.

Baxter

After a nice, relaxing couple of hours by the beach, swimming and surfing, and a very sumptuous dinner a while later at an Italian restaurant down by the Golden Coast, they found themselves back at Jazz's aunt's house. The drive there had been a little too quiet, and Baxter still felt slightly grouchy. Jazz wouldn't let him get dessert at the restaurant no matter what he offered in return, said his cheesecake had to be eaten instead. Not that Baxter minded, he loved Jazz's food and especially his desserts, but that chocolate fudge the little kid at the table next to them had just looked so good. He wanted something chocolaty then.

Jazz's cheesecake turned out to be extremely delicious though, especially licking it off its creator's lips, fingers and collarbone. He still wondered briefly how it had ended up there. He also looked forward to trying to get tomorrow's chocolate fudge right on the same spot. Jazz promised he would make him chocolate fudge next time. Tomorrow, he decided.

“Come with me, *big boy*.”

Baxter held out his hand in invitation. Jazz glared at him as he reached for his hand, entwined their fingers, and Baxter lead them to the bedroom. Jazz pretty much hated *every* pet name Baxter came up with. It was fun. Jazz could still be quite shy and sometimes he preferred not to express what he wanted, at

least not verbally. Baxter didn't mind at all, they always worked out perfectly fine. Once Jazz was into it enough, he wouldn't hold back much and show Baxter *exactly* what he wanted. Just like this morning in his kitchen. Boy, just the memories made him blush. They'd fooled around in someone's kitchen, for crying out loud. That was just so hot. And dirty. And wow, they had to do that again sometime. But tonight was going to be very special, he'd see to that personally.

After walking through the doorway, Jazz turned to face him and Baxter softly pulled him down for a chaste kiss. A light brush of lips, and a nip to his nose when he withdrew, making Jazz giggle. He bloody giggled! Just how much more could he fall in love with the guy?

Jazz combed his fingers through Baxter's short blond hair, sending hundreds of tiny shivers running through his body. Lowering his lips to meet Jazz's, he kissed him again, slowly, lovingly. He just couldn't get enough of those lips. "Missed this," Jazz whispered in between gentle kisses and teasing little bites. He wrapped his arms lazily around Baxter's neck and held on lightly. Their last kisses had been just a little while ago—before, during and after dessert—but he knew exactly what he meant. He missed the feel of Jazz's lips on his every moment they weren't connected.

With firm hands on Jazz's waist, he pulled him closer, causing him to gasp when Baxter carefully pressed himself up against him, moving slowly, teasingly to an imaginary rhythm. "Need you on that bed, what do you say?" Jazz let Baxter lead him fully into his bedroom with a chuckle and a sweet smile on his lips.

"When did you...?" Jazz asked just a little stunned when he saw the shelves and table had been decorated with a few burning candles here and there, and a few of those weird scented sticks he thought Jazz might like. The faint scent of vanilla and coconut lingered in the room, Baxter liked it a lot. It always reminded him of how Jazz smelled, warm and homey. "While you were fussing about in the kitchen with that bloody cake and all."

"Wow, Bax. This is amazing!" The excited smile he gave Baxter made his heart beat madly against his chest, and for a few long moments, he was at a loss for words. He knew what he wanted to say, he just couldn't. It was far too soon and he didn't feel like embarrassing himself right now. This was going to be an amazing night, and no words left unspoken would change that.

“It’s nothing special, Jazzy.” Baxter pressed a kiss to Jazz’s forehead. “I just wanted it to look a little cosy is all.” A kiss to his cheek followed, then one to the corner of his mouth, and eventually he caught his lips in a searing kiss.

“Happy two months, Jazz,” he whispered, lips tracing the curve of Jazz’s ear, ending it with a nip to its soft flesh. When he withdrew, he caught Jazz grinning at him brighter than any sun possibly could, lighting up Baxter’s world right from where he stood.

“You too, Crazy.”

Holding on to his waist, he leaned in once more, and Jazz did the same, their mouths instantly meeting in a hot and passionate kiss, while Baxter tried to focus on manoeuvring them towards the bed. With a teasing bite to Jazz’s neck, Baxter pushed them onto the bouncy mattress. Jazz chuckled softly, pulling him close. “Mhh, Jazz. God, I’ve been waiting for this all day,” he whispered close to Jazz’s ear, teasing the soft skin underneath with gentle kisses.

“Me too.” Jazz gasped and gave his body in surrender, which Baxter greedily took. Something between them had sparked the moment their lips touched in a first kiss all those weeks ago. Baxter still felt it tingling underneath the surface of his skin whenever they kissed, like a connection that came alive with every time they were skin on skin, like a bond between heart and soul.

Baxter reached for the white T-shirt Jazz wore and whispered, “Want to touch your skin.” He felt Jazz shiver in his arms and nod in agreement. They tugged and pulled until Baxter had it over Jazz’s head, then wiggled out of his own. Jazz chuckled when he rolled them over in a clumsy mess of arms and limbs. Baxter crawled on top of Jazz and grinned down at him. “Any complaints down there?”

Jazz shook his head lightly but otherwise just stared back up at him. His warm brown eyes glowed, and a gentle smile played on his lips. Baxter lowered himself down, kissing Jazz’s shoulder blade and chest, and then nibbled at the smooth skin while Jazz cupped his arse and pulled him closer. Their cocks rubbed against each other, and wow felt that good. He reached for Jazz’s arse in return, rocking Jazz against him as he slowly, teasingly ground his hips. He wanted to stay in bed like this forever with Jazz, kissing lazily, grinding against each other, losing their minds.

Looking down between their bodies he noticed Jazz wore his bright floral-printed boardies, which he changed into once they returned home. Baxter fast

learned that Jazz always had to wear something comfy at home. Seeing this particular piece of clothing made Baxter feel a little fuzzy inside. They made him think of their day by the campsite and everything that happened those two nights. Everything had changed with that little trip. He loved those boardies.

He kissed Jazz's chest, stomach and cupped the obvious bulge, tugging teasingly. He pressed his lips against Jazz's soft skin below his collarbone, and eventually dragged them wetly down his chest. He stopped at his nipples and gave his full attention to each. He kissed and licked, nibbled and twirled his tongue around the small buds, leaving Jazz to wriggle and writhe beneath him. It made Baxter smile that they could be like this with each other, loving each second of one another's company, loving each other's bodies.

Baxter made quick work of removing Jazz's boardies as well as his own brown three-quarter pants. "You're so hot, Bax. I can't believe this is real," Jazz gasped, and it was easy to tell that he truly didn't trust his eyes, which had been fixated on Baxter the entire time. Just the thought that Jazz enjoyed watching him made Baxter shiver.

"Oh it's really real, Jazz. Believe me." He couldn't stop himself from grinning, the happiness and excitement was simply overwhelming.

"Are you sure? We might just wake up tomorrow and realize all of it has just been a dream." Baxter loved seeing Jazz equally happy and excited.

"Nah, impossible. Let me prove it to you how real this is," he whispered before brushing his lips over his mouth. He kissed him lightly, teasingly, savouring this sweet taste of heaven. "Okay, yeah," Jazz whispered breathlessly. "Yeah." Baxter chuckled and lowered himself down on his elbows to devour every millimetre of Jazz's strong body, just like their first time. He nibbled at every soft patch of skin, licked every hard plane of his chest, kissed every firm and bulging muscle until he sat stretched out between Jazz's thighs pressing a few more kisses around his ankle.

Baxter could spend hours doing this all over again. He admired Jazz's beautiful body from where he sat and slowly walked his fingers up his inner thighs making sure it tickled right where he knew it would.

"Are you still with me, Gorgeous?" he asked teasingly, and was instantly met with the deepest brown eyes glowing dangerously hot, making Baxter's head spin and his cock throb. He wanted Jazz so bad, to feel him on his skin, in his mouth, tasting him. He wanted all of Jazz, and because he could, Baxter didn't hesitate any further, crawling forward between Jazz's thighs and taking his cock deep into his mouth.

During the many times they had done that before, he learned exactly what would drive his Jazz literally crazy, so he did just that. Baxter included his hand and fingers to give pleasure in the best way he'd learned how. Never would he have thought that having a mouthful of cock could be that hot and arousing, delicious even. Baxter suckled and swirled his tongue, sucked deep and hard then leisurely and slow. He fast became addicted to tasting Jazz. Jazz whimpered and writhed, bracing his heels on the bed to rock his hips and move with Baxter's movements. It was mind numbing, and he could literally get lost in *this*. Touching his own aching erection only added to the amazing experience.

When Baxter released Jazz's hot and heavy cock with one final lick, he looked up at Jazz, and the heavy gaze filled with lust he found as their eyes collided, nearly did him in. A wanton smile grew on Jazz's lips with every further stroke and touch of his balls. Jazz shivered when Bax's fingers found and kneaded his arse. He spread those soft cheeks, and ran his finger teasingly over Jazz's warm rim. Every further touch drew hesitant, but insanely erotic, sounds from his lips.

Baxter slicked two of his fingers with the raspberry lubricant he had also previously organised and tentatively touched Jazz's opening. Just a light brush of slippery-wet fingers, carefully feeling out the area. Baxter knew there was no reason to be so damn nervous, but his heart still hammered madly against his chest. It wasn't the first time he had touched Jazz there, they had in fact done this quite a few times before, and Jazz seemed to have enjoyed it.

Holding up one of Jazz's legs, he brushed his slick thumb along the crack of his sexy arse. First teasingly, then with more and more eagerness, to get Jazz hot and ready. Boy, how he loved touching Jazz's fine arse. He relished in that first touch of his slick hole, getting high on rubbing against the tight ring of muscles and finally pushing in. Baxter watched mesmerised at the sight of his finger slow disappearing inside Jazz over and over again. Holy shit. That was hot.

Jazz gasped when Baxter squirted a good amount of lubricant on his cock, and his hands began to work their magic. Baxter felt his cheeks heat and flush at the incredibly hot sight of that pink, nearly translucent liquid quickly dripping down Jazz's length and towards the crack of that damned sexy, firm arse. He squeezed Jazz's cock with one hand, then rubbed his fingers over Jazz's balls while massaging his opening with his other hand.

With his eyes locked on Jazz's twitching cock, he pulled out his finger slowly and pushed back inside with an additional digit, fast finding the perfect rhythm to draw those sexy moans from Jazz. Reaching for his own aching cock, he wrapped his hand around the base and began stroking himself lazily, watching Jazz's reaction to his actions closely. Jazz hissed through gritted teeth, fisting the sheets at his sides and arching his back just slightly, but enough for Baxter to feel just a little concerned.

"Is that still okay?" Jazz nodded, and he tried to believe him. He had no idea what it felt to be fingered, especially not with more than one digit. But by the look on Jazz's face it was more than fine. Maybe one day he'd let Jazz do that to him too.

"Yeah," Jazz creaked, face flushed and eyes shut close. "I might just. You know. *Fuck*. I can't—"

And with only a few more tight squeezes and rough tugs Jazz let go, and white, almost translucent, drops of come rained down on Jazz's stomach and chest. Baxter loved watching the play of emotions on Jazz's face, the look when he came was incredibly sexy. *Damn*. He couldn't resist and lightly smacked that exquisite butt lying so teasingly, invitingly before him. Jazz yelped in surprise, and Baxter almost chuckled.

He crawled towards Jazz and breathed close to his ear, "Couldn't help it. That was just so hot." Baxter then trailed his lips along Jazz's throat, kissing and nipping teasingly on his skin. When he withdrew, their eyes met, and Jazz grinned wickedly, holding him captive with that lust-filled gaze that would just drive him over the edge one day.

"Do it again?" Jazz whispered, his voice barely audible, and never breaking eye-contact. And wow. How he loved what he saw, he wished he could engrave that picture forever in his mind. And so, Baxter lifted Jazz's leg and his arse off the mattress with it, reaching down and smacked his arse again. And just a little harder a second and third time. That look on Jazz's face, flushed cheeks and lust-filled eyes, the silent yelps and moans got Baxter high like nothing else.

"Jazz," he whispered breathlessly, "you're bloody killing me."

Baxter dropped Jazz's leg, lay down onto Jazz's strong chest and kissed his neck, nibbling his way to his ear while grinding his hip up, rubbing their hot and very much aroused cocks together. His lips caught something wet and slightly salty somewhere on Jazz's shoulder. "Mhh." Baxter hummed, hard muscles bunched beneath him, and *wow* Jazz's hardening cock felt amazing against his. His heart was hammering madly against his chest.

Jazz complained in the form of a low and deep groan when Baxter leaned back to gather their supplies. It made Baxter chuckle, and blush that he could have that effect on Jazz.

“Give me a hand here, Jazz?” Jazz raised his head, his cheeks flushed even a deeper shade of red when he considered Baxter for a long moment.

“Okay, I’ll do it myself.” Baxter chuckled and tore the condom wrapper, handing Jazz the bottle of raspberry lubricant. Jazz popped the lid with a muffled sound, and squeezed a big dollop of pink liquid into his palm while Baxter got himself sheathed a bit too clumsily. He was just too bloody nervous.

Those damn obscene squishy noises that bottle made didn’t help one bit. When he watched Jazz smear the lube up and down his erection and around his opening, Baxter had to be a bit too careful not to lose his mind there and then.

“Easy there, that’s my job.” Baxter growled and gripped Jazz’s cock. “Lie down and relax.” He scooted closer, covered his own erection with as much lubrication as he dared, he didn’t think emptying the whole thing would make it any better.

Baxter took hold of Jazz’s legs and pulled his arse flush against him. He teased his hole with the tip of his slippery cock, circling the rim before slightly pressing forward until the resistance gave way. With a deep sigh, Baxter slowly and carefully entered him. When he pushed a little too deep into Jazz’s arse, they both gasped. Baxter feared he might not make it much further than that, he was already so close.

“Fuck. Jazz, I’m sorry,” he gasped, almost whimpered. Baxter hoped he hadn’t been too rough, but hell, how could anyone control their body with that overload on... on everything?

“Are you okay, Jazz?”

“Uh-huh. Good. Real good.”

Jazz lifted his head and they found each other’s mouths with hungry lips. Both stilled as they devoured each other with maddening kisses, licks and nibbles. Baxter shivered when Jazz’s arse tightened around him and continued to do so. Boy oh boy, was this *good*, dangerously addictive. They both gasped when Baxter began to move again, and the following kisses were slow and sensual, less tongue and more lips, tasting, savouring and breathing each other in.

Baxter wrapped his arms around Jazz and rocked into him with slow, careful thrusts. When he leaned back to admire Jazz’s features, their eyes

locked as he slid in and out of Jazz's body. The moment was almost too much. Baxter slid closer and brought their bodies together again, needing to feel more of Jazz still. He rewarded Baxter with low moans and a toe-curling kiss, as if he poured everything he had into it.

Bloody hell. Jazz's mouth and tongue, and those kisses were driving him crazy and almost right over the edge. Making love with Jazz was overwhelming. Baxter could never have imagined that anything would feel like *this*, mind numbing and just absolutely maddening.

They tightened the embrace, and together they rocked, a slow, steady sway of their bodies. Muscles bulged and flexed, and Baxter slowly began to push deeper and faster, building a mind numbing rhythm that would soon send them over the edge. The sight of Jazz's smooth skin and those hard muscles bunching when he picked up the pace, bringing them both ever closer to completion, drove Baxter wild. It was absolutely maddening. Baxter moved in order to kiss Jazz lightly on the forehead, he slowed down all his movements, rocking his hips just a little, almost lazily pushing inside and out before picking up a much faster and determined pace, seeking out Jazz's lips with his own.

And wow, this was a completely new, and by far the most incredible feeling he ever felt. Their bodies melded, seeking more friction, more contact, while losing themselves in the most passionate, soul-searing kisses. When Baxter managed to let go of Jazz's lips he lowered to his neck, flicking his tongue against his damp skin, tasting and teasing him. "I'm..." he whispered unfinished when his lips reached Jazz's ear... *so bloody in love with you.* The need to let go grew too fast and became stronger with each thrust and every moan and gasp coming from Jazz's lips.

Baxter bucked his hips just a little faster and just a little deeper into Jazz's clenching arse and was instantly hit with an overwhelming rush of heat, shudders and shivers. There was no way to hold back any further than that and so Baxter gave in to his body's needs and let go.

He wasn't sure how much longer they continued to rock in each other's arms, but at one point he felt the hot, warm burst of Jazz's seed shooting between their bodies and carefully slowed down his movements. His entire body was on fire inside and out, his head was spinning and his heart hammered in his chest as if he had been running for a million years.

Baxter didn't know how they managed to hold back so long or how something like that could have felt so incredible. When he moved enough to

slide out of Jazz, his body ached all over and he wondered if he could manage to move any further without passing out.

Light, feathery kisses taunted Baxter's nose and he snuggled closer against Jazz. Arms wrapped tightly around strong shoulders and a broad chest. He hoped sleep would come slowly and last for longer than usual.

With Jazz in his arms, he didn't want to have to get up, if possible, ever again.

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Chapter 6

June 22nd, 2012

Jacob

To celebrate their recent victory, Jacob had been standing in his aunt's kitchen almost all afternoon to prepare Bax's favorite dinner—homemade pizza with a lot of champignons and double cheese, crispy fries and salad on the side, and most importantly, walnut brownies for dessert.

It was the most perfect celebratory dinner, Baxter would never get to taste.

Jacob had absolutely no good feelings when Bax dropped him off at his aunt's house after today's rugby practice. The afternoon by himself, fussing about in the kitchen, had dragged on so long he even passed out for a while on the sofa while waiting for his brownies to be done. Baxter had promised to meet him at his home over an hour ago, when finally, the doorbell rang.

Baxter was never *that* late for anything. Jacob knew something was up the moment his pizza *dinged* in the oven and Bax was nowhere to be seen. And all that just when Jacob thought things couldn't get any better between Bax and him. They had been together for almost three months and everything had been just so good, despite the whole keeping it a secret thing. He had to admit that it had never been his wish to be in a secret relationship, and there had been a few moments recently where things became a bit too awkward with their friends, family and well, everyone really. Jacob hadn't known anything other than hiding his sexuality from the world, but quite frequently, he wondered what it would be like, being out to everyone and being able to express his love for Bax freely. It sounded more and more tempting. It was slowly starting to get to him that they *always* had to be careful not to accidentally touch each other too intimately, or lose themselves in a kiss.

Maybe Jacob suspected that something wasn't right, and maybe he tried to ignore it because he was afraid to find out the reasons behind Bax's strange behavior. Recently, Jacob noticed how Bax would suddenly act all strange, especially the past three days. When they were out together, he avoided Jacob almost deliberately, which was something new and caught him by surprise. Everyone knew they were *really close* and nobody had ever questioned them before, so Jacob didn't have a clue what was going on with Bax. Yesterday,

he'd even gone so far as to tell him to go ahead without him, because he had something to take care of.

Something to take care of? Seriously? In the locker room without him?

Jacob offered to help take care of whatever it was he had to take care of, obviously intrigued and worried, but Baxter refused loud and clear. He told him to go home. Without him.

Not only had that been the very first time in almost five months that Jacob went home without Bax. It had also been the first time he went *anywhere* after school without Bax by his side.

Okay, so maybe they had been overly attached to each other, but that was just how it was and it felt right. What truly bothered Jacob, more than having to take a bus home by himself because *that* wasn't so bad, was simply the fact that he had been sent away without any explanation.

The impatient, annoyed look on Bax's face also did nothing to calm him down. He'd never seen Bax like that. It honestly frightened him. So yeah, Jacob wasn't the least happy about Baxter's secret job in the locker room, a part of him worried that Bax was in rather big trouble. Everything about the way he spoke to Jacob that day just didn't sit right with him at all. He knew there was something in the air; he just hoped it could be solved fast.

"Jazz, hey, I think we need to talk."

And that was the last he had heard from his boyfriend before he passed out. Or maybe not. He couldn't tell whether someone switched off the lights or he lost consciousness. Probably neither, but the next thing he remembered, they sat in the living room and his whole world shattered to pieces.

"Someone saw us, Jazz."

Bax sat down in front of him and took Jacob's hand in his, holding it in a loose grip. The simple gesture felt right and reassuring. Did he just hear Bax say what he thought he said?

"What do you mean, someone saw us? Where? When?" Jacob reached for Bax and pulled both of their hands to rest on his knee. For a moment, Jacob didn't dare to breathe or move. Baxter looked terrified. Absolutely freaked out, as if he had seen a frigging ghost.

When he spoke his voice was low, barely a whisper and underlined with mortification. "More important is what they saw."

Oh. Crap. This was bad.

“W-what, what did they see?” Jacob didn’t want to know. By the look of Baxter’s expression it was bad, really bad.

“They um, saw us, Jazz.” Baxter’s eyes suddenly unfocused and looked bleary. Jacob reached out and touched his hand to his cheek, Bax’s skin felt hot under his fingertips. “Two weeks ago, I think, maybe Sunday. Alex, Duncan and Sean. They saw us in my car.”

Oh-oh. Jacob was fairly certain he knew where this was going, and he didn’t like it. *Damn it all to hell.* This was bound to happen sooner or later, he should have known it would never work out. They couldn’t be careful enough forever. *Fuck.*

“Is it that bad? What did they see?”

Jacob gently caressed Bax’s cheek. He knew this was probably the most stupid question he had ever asked in his life, but he had no idea what else he could have said. The look on Bax’s face and his watery eyes told him it wouldn’t matter what he would say. Things couldn’t be fixed, kisses couldn’t be taken back and whatever hell they had given Bax couldn’t be undone. Baxter brought his own hand to his face and covered Jacob’s, then pressed it against his heated cheek. He let out a breath he must have been holding, and when he spoke, his voice was anything but steady.

“They saw us kiss. And touch. And be anything but discreet. Dammit, Jazz. Why didn’t we take better care? The car, really? What were we thinking? Why did we have to get caught?” Jacob gave his cheek a gentle squeeze and Bax tightened his grip on his wrist in return.

“Because it’s fucking *impossible* to hide forever, that’s why, Bax. Wasn’t it difficult already to pretend to be friends all day? Getting caught and found out was inevitable.” Jacob gave him a bittersweet smile.

“What did they say, Bax? This is going to be okay isn’t it?”

When Bax wouldn’t say a word, he thought he was going crazy. He needed him to say something, reassure him that this wasn’t going to be the end of *everything*. “Bax, come on please talk to me. You have to talk to me.” He felt his own voice break and a tear rolled down his cheek, which now started to fucking burn.

“Please.”

"It's not going to be okay." He wouldn't look at Jacob, and it broke his heart. He knew what this meant without having to hear it. "I'm sorry, Jazz."

No, he didn't want to hear it.

"What do you mean you are fucking sorry?" *Don't. Don't ask. Don't be so stupid. You know exactly what it means, you don't want to have him say it.*

"We can't do this. W-we can't stay together, Jazz."

"Why the hell not? Whatever they said, they can't blackmail you or whatever crazy ideas they have. They're our friends. Hell, they are *your* friends, Bax." He didn't scream or shout, he merely stated the obvious. Jacob knew it was wrong to attempt an argument because it wasn't Bax's fault. It didn't mean it hurt any less.

"They are *our* friends, and they'll have our backs. Well, some of them might."

"But?" *Oh. No. No.* He couldn't do this.

"Nobody else knows, Jazz, and they can't find out. Coach won't accept it."

"How do you know? You are his best player—he won't kick you off the team just because we fucking like each other."

Jacob knew he'd already lost him; he might as well retreat right now before they would end their relationship with an argument, or a fight. That was the last thing he wanted. Growing up with his parents arguing about anything from the weather, over dinner, to clothes, friends, his mother's work and whatever else they couldn't agree on. Jacob didn't want this for Bax and him. He didn't want to argue with the person he cared for, the person he loved. Ever.

"We shouldn't want to find out, Jazz. It won't have a happy ending. Especially not now, with all the championships and stuff. It's your career too, Jazz. I don't want to jeopardize it. You know how the sports world is, they're not very accepting."

You damn idiot, I don't care about rugby that much, and you know it. But he wasn't going to comment on that, it would only end in an argument, because really, he didn't give a damn about any sport when he had to choose between Bax and playing ball. There was no doubt about what his answer would be. Nevertheless, Jacob knew what he meant; he knew just how much Bax wanted to be accepted by everyone, especially the coaches and his team. He didn't play the way he played for nothing. It was his life. And Jacob wouldn't stand a chance.

“So, this is it?” *You’re choosing rugby? Without putting up a fight?*

Fuck. The truth hurt more than he had thought it could. He’d lost him. Lost his Bax, his *love*. He would be lying if he said he had never thought about what could happen if they were found out. Many sleepless nights Jacob ran the possibilities through his mind and every single time he promised he would never stand in Baxter’s way. He’d accept his decisions, give him up if he had to and most definitely stay away, in the background, if that was what he truly wanted.

It hurt, but if it would save Bax’s career, so be it.

There had been a time when Jacob wondered if their love, he was fairly certain that they were in love, had a future. And hadn’t it been obvious all along?

Jacob had always known that if it came down to it, Baxter wouldn’t give up on rugby and Jacob would never ask him to reconsider his decision for the sake of him. He couldn’t blame Bax.

He only wished it didn’t have to be this way.

July 22nd, 2012

Baxter

He couldn’t do this.

They were supposed to be a team. Jazz and him. They were supposed to be strong together, for the team. They were meant to be together, be strong for the damn team. Together. And this was just wrong. So wrong. They’d lost their *magic*, lost their bond, their friendship, their love.

Everything was just gone. Hell, the sun could fall from the sky and he wouldn’t fucking care. Jazz had become his light, he almost dared to say, his everything. Without that light, he didn’t need the sun, he was already living in darkness. And no sun could light up that kind of darkness. Without their bond, Baxter realised fast just how broken he was, inside and out. He was even too bloody broken to play. Baxter hadn’t been at his best in *days*. In fact, he had been by far his worst, there was no doubt about it.

He couldn’t just stand there and pretend there had never been anything between them. It hurt.

“You know how much this means to me, Jazz.”

"Yeah, I know."

With those three words Jazz had totally shut him out, and he didn't blame him. It hurt like a bitch, he couldn't deny that. It didn't take Jazz one day to do just what he asked of him, not to see each other again. In a heartbeat, he basically took off and never looked back.

Does he have any idea how I'm hurting?

Does he feel like dying inside as well?

Did he ever think about him? Baxter did. Every bloody hour. He just couldn't get him out of his mind. It drove him crazy to be apart. Not being able to talk to Jazz, not having his smile directed at him instead of their friends, not being able to touch, kiss and hold him. Hell, simply not being able to tease him and mess around as close friends killed him. They hadn't exchanged more than a few greetings the entire time. Days passed without a proper hello, weeks passed without as much as a spared look. How could Baxter not feel bloody broken? If this was how it was going to be from now, he didn't want it. He didn't want a future without Jazz.

They had been so good together. When Jazz came along, he'd swept him off his feet, and never had losing control felt more empowering. Being with Jazz, having *his* Jazz admire him, care about him and take care of him, had fast become more important than playing footy had ever been. With all that gone now Baxter felt lost, hopeless and just a little pissed off at the world.

He knew he should feel proud of his team, his mates, their victories and most of all he should be thrilled beyond words, because he'd finally made the bloody Schoolboys.

Another cup, another semi-final, and as expected they made it into the finals with an outstanding score. He'd *kicked ass* too, like Jazz would say. Baxter had been "*man of the match*" for many of their matches, despite his lack of enthusiasm. They even made him captain of the Schoolboys. It was just like he'd always dreamt, the admiration, the endless scores, the importance of his new position and being captain. He lived for the high of every game, the moment when they kicked the other team's bloody arses, except somehow none of that mattered anymore.

Being on the field to the point of exhaustion, playing footy for the Schoolboys didn't matter. Nothing could cheer him up. He missed his Jazz, on

the field, in his car, next to him on the street, by the beach and at the table at some random restaurant over dinner or coffee at their favourite shop. Baxter missed their banter, their kissing, their cuddling and fooling around. He missed his Jazz's cooking, his bubbly laughter, his beautiful brown eyes, and well, he simply missed his Jazz.

Nothing was the same without him, and he wondered just how long it would take to get over this hole in his life. This pain was incurable and nothing could or would ever replace Jazz.

"Bates and Knight make Australian Schoolboys."

And a lot more headlines similar to that flooded the internet these days. Some newspapers and TV stations had interviewed them a handful of times. Not only was all of this damn surreal, it was also too much to handle at the moment. It was difficult to have Jazz on the same team, and now they would play for the Schoolboys together as well? It was like a dream come true and hell on earth at the same time.

Baxter wasn't sure he could do this. There were a couple of camps coming up and so much responsibility, he couldn't let anything or anyone distract him any further. At one point, he might just screw up for real and not only disappoint himself, his family and coaches, but also ruin his entire future over a bloody broken heart.

Just how had it come to all this?

Baxter considered quitting the team a few times too often. Not seriously, though, he just wanted to run away and hide, because seeing Jazz every day without being able to touch him, and watch him play with that hurt expression was getting to him more and more. He didn't want to go on like this, but neither could he just quit. Footy was what he did best. What else could he do? Nothing and he knew it, and hadn't it been his dream to make the Schoolboys?

There was no doubt about it, of course it had been his dream for years, but then Jazz came along and turned his entire world upside down. And Baxter sent him away because he couldn't deal with the idea that he might not be accepted by everyone and lose his dream of playing footy.

He wondered if all that would be worth losing Jazz over.

It bloody had to be, because he wouldn't survive this pain otherwise.

Jacob

Today had been one of the hardest days he'd had to go through in the history of his life. After witnessing what appeared to be the worst day of Baxter's rugby career, which by the way, hurt Jacob probably more than anyone else, they were interviewed by a TV station. That alone hadn't been that bad, but then they made him and Bax pose for photos, together, smiling. They were made to stand side by side and smile their hearts out for what felt like the longest forty minutes of his life. Not only did Jacob not have any damn reason to smile, but forcing it for the camera in such close proximity to Bax had been nearly impossible. Eventually he managed, somehow, and after seeing the result, he thought he deserved an award for his performance. Maybe not an Oscar, because even to his own eyes he didn't look happy.

Jacob had been staring at the whole thing on his computer; their newspaper's online edition had it up in no time. Video and all. He always thought if anything like that would ever happen he wanted to be on good terms with Bax, he wanted to be friends and happy. Jacob wanted to be able to enjoy this experience, celebrate with Bax. Instead, he was going to mope around and read that damn article over and over. Or maybe just one more time and then never go online again. Ever. Also avoid newspapers and TVs, just in case. Maybe he would just never leave his room again.

Baxter Bates is fiercely making an impression on the Australian Schoolboy selectors. Bates, who will play centre position for this year's Schoolboys team, said he had never been more nervous as when they were announcing the team.

"I was truthfully a little surprised that I actually made it, I mean I played well, but I know I could have done better. I am truly delighted to have made the team despite my obvious bad day," he said. "I am also thrilled to have Knight on the team with me, going to the same school. I have known him for a while, and we make a good team on the field."

He didn't need to read the rest again, he could probably recite it in his sleep by now. The selectors were apparently truly impressed with how Jacob *"fought his way onto the Australian Schoolboys Rugby League team as one of just two Queenslanders selected"*.

Of course it was an incredible opportunity and Jacob *did* feel a little proud to have made the Schoolboys. Playing alongside Bax had always been so much

fun. Except recently, when it became nothing but painful. Geez, he had to get a fucking grip and stop moping.

“Honestly, I didn’t expect to get picked,” he said. “I haven’t worked to be part of the Schoolboys team, but I love playing rugby, and I am looking forward to this new, awesome and surreal experience.”

Those were Jacob’s words to the reporter, and they were true. Jacob was looking forward. A little. Next was the Australian Schoolboys Rugby League Championships in Port Maquarie, and he had to get his game face on and show them how it’s done. Jacob shuddered. This was just so bad. He didn’t know what to think or feel anymore, he *was* truly excited, but then, he wasn’t. It was a constant up and down. The past weeks had been pure torture and he didn’t think he could honestly go through more hours together with Bax. Not with the terrible mood they both were in, and most definitely not pretending nothing ever happened. Pretending they weren’t even friends was simply the worst. But what could they do? For the life of him, Jacob couldn’t put everything behind him and just move on. Not yet, anyway.

Most of their friends had given them hell already, wanting to know why the heck they were both acting weird. Of course neither had any answers, so they just shrugged it off. *Stress*. Or something. He hoped they would buy it, eventually. *Why did everyone even care?*

It was frustrating. Only those who saw them that day apparently knew that they had been involved in more than just a budding friendship, and to Jacob’s surprise Matt wasn’t one of them. And right now Matt appeared to be the one most concerned, especially about Bax. Jacob didn’t know why Bax hadn’t talked to *him* of all people. Out of all the guys, he was sure that Matt would be the most understanding and maybe even supportive. He didn’t want to think that Bax might be *that* ashamed of who he was, that even his best friend would never find out. Okay, well maybe Jacob could understand it a little, it was scary to tell anyone, especially people you care about. He hadn’t told his own mother yet.

Jacob just wished that Bax would be happy, at least, even if he wasn’t. He didn’t want to see him ruin his career because of him. He couldn’t watch him play this bad for much longer.

Jacob had to do something, but what?

He truly didn’t have the slightest idea.

Baxter

Just as he was leaving, Matt came bouncing into the locker room, smelling dirty, sweaty and just bloody disgusting. “Get away from me, mate. You stink like you fell into a bloody toilet.”

“Not any more than you. Wait, what’s up with the clean clothes?” Matt sniffed at him like he was a bloody dog.

“Nothing? I’m just going out.” He replied casually.

Therefore, he’d showered straight off the field and got dressed. Nothing weird with that. And now that he was all nice and clean, he could get away first and fast. He might even get a drink somewhere. Maybe not, since he wasn’t fond of anything alcoholic, yeah he might just skip the whole *get wasted thing* and be lonely and miserable without it. He didn’t need beer to get happy, or depressed. He could be either without it just fine.

Matt gave him a disapproving look. “Are you going on a date? Somewhere fancy?” he asked as if he hadn’t ever seen him in nice, clean clothes before.

“Just because I’m wearing something other than my lousy shorts? Seriously, Matt. Just get out of here and into the shower, you bloody stink.” Baxter shoved Matt towards the door and encouraged him to *leave* already. He didn’t want to deal with his friend right now, or anyone else for that matter. He just wanted to be alone and preferably far, far away from anything that reminded him of footy. And Jazz.

“No, no wait. Geez, mate. Chill. I wanted to show you this.” Matt held up his hands in protest, waving a small device before Baxter’s eyes. “There’s a ton of articles about you and Knight on the net.”—“*BATES AND KNIGHT GAIN AUSSIE SELECTION.*” Matt read aloud, almost yelling the words in his face actually, before he handed Baxter his smartphone. “Go on, read it already.” He added with a broad grin, obviously determined that Baxter looked at the report.

Baxter growled. He knew about those stupid articles. Nevertheless, he scrolled down to read what had Matt so excited, despite his wish to throw the phone against the wall and watch it shatter into a million pieces. Why did he have to feel so bloody angry?

He honestly didn’t give a damn what any of these articles said, Baxter already lived it, right here, right now, it wasn’t anything glorious, at all. So what? They made the eighteen and under selection of the Australian Schoolboys. The ASSRL loved them. They were “*standouts in the South coast*

side that won the recent Queensland titles” and apparently deserved their selection a great deal. And just how did that make his life any better?

He was miserable more than ever.

Baxter tried to enjoy it, really, he tried to bask in the spotlight just like he always dreamt he would, but it just wasn't satisfying. It wasn't that much fun to be in the spotlight and it didn't make him feel any better about his damn breakup. Three months. They almost made three months.

And now that? He was forced to be with Jazz, pretending to be best mates for the media while they weren't saying more than “hello” and “good-bye” on a daily basis, despite being in each other's faces all day. It was bloody terrible. And it still hurt. In fact, it was more painful than any footy injury could ever be. With their recent tournament over, and the start of the South QLD semi-finals set for Wednesday night, he was anything but excited.

Screw the GIO Cup.

He was going out now, and wherever was fine. He tried calling Jazz's phone endless times over the past few days but nothing. He didn't pick up. He didn't call back. He even ignored him this morning when Baxter tried to talk to him. Jazz actually ignored him. *Ignored*. Can you believe it? He couldn't. Baxter had been so shocked when Jazz just walked past him outside on the car park like he was bloody invisible. Like Baxter wasn't real and hadn't just shouted his name ten times or more. Baxter could only stare after him and be late for *everything else*, which earned him a good ear full from Coach Anderson.

It hadn't been a thrilling experience to be given a speech, but what hurt worse was Jazz's behaviour and the fact that he bloody ignored him. He wasn't furious. Baxter would never be violent or anything, he was just crushed and broken and wanted to die.

Just when he had gotten the nerves up to confront him and hopefully talk, all he got from Jazz was a dismissive look and the cold shoulder.

What in the world was he going to do about this bloody mess?

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Chapter 7

August 26th, 2012

Jacob

Another month gone and not much had changed. Not that he had expected anything to look brighter in just a few weeks. Well, that wasn't quite true, some things were going great, extraordinary great. They'd made the QLD semi-finals and kicked ass like nobody else. They'd even *won* the GIO Schoolboys state final. He should be thrilled beyond words, but reading all those headlines and comments in the online communities still felt as surreal as the first time.

He was anything but excited. Jacob probably wouldn't get used to seeing his name and interviews online and on TV. And honestly, he preferred not to. He couldn't fully wrap his brain around the fact that this was happening. Being on the field, playing a match, just being at practice alone, rugby still made him feel awesome beyond words, but then he would see Bax, and that sadness in his eyes and Jacob's heart shattered all over again.

He was absolutely thrilled for Bax. It was so good to see *his* Bax finally picking up his game, even if just a little, and truly becoming a star. Jacob knew he was on the fast track to becoming one of those big names. Everyone seemed to notice him, and Jacob had probably seen more of him on random rugby sites than in real life. Maybe not literally. It felt like there were worlds between them now, and it was a terrible feeling. Despite the excitement for Bax's recognition, the small fact that on the field, somehow, they'd both managed to play well together again. They sent those England Academy boys to a 2-0 series defeat in their last tournament, and it honestly felt good again to play to his heart's content. Kicking those English Academy boys' asses had been a blast. They were all nice guys too, and hanging out afterward had been fun, but on the field only victory counted. And it was a *bloody good* victory, if he might say so himself.

"When he finishes school, Bax will play in the under twenties side for the Gold Coast Titans."

He'd heard one of the reporters say that after they had finished interviewing Bax the other day. Yeah scratch that. Jacob didn't think it was what he truly wanted, because he knew for a fact Bax dreamt of getting out of Queensland and playing for one of the teams in Sydney, Melbourne or Auckland. Jacob had

to find a way to talk him out of this; he knew Bax had gotten a lot of offers from all across Australia. Maybe not every single team wanted him, but there were a few of the big ones that just had to be still interested, no matter what he might have announced. Even if they weren't together anymore, they could still be friends, eventually. And friends were there for each other right?

Jacob wanted to be friends again. After everything, Jacob knew he just had to get over himself and kick Bax's ass. He had no idea what the guy was thinking, choosing an offer to stay in Queensland when he could go to so much more exciting places. Not that Jacob had any problem with Queensland, really. He liked Queensland, but they both thought Sydney just sounded a lot more exciting, especially for Bax who'd grown up in Queensland. Now that he was finally on his way toward his dream, Bax simply could not miss taking that opportunity.

He had to show him just what a big mistake he was going to make by staying in Queensland.

If it just didn't still hurt so much to be around that idiot.

September 1st, 2012

Jacob

Long moments went by; songs passed one after the other. Jacob watched couples dance, reporters chase after the players, cameras here and there and everyone having a blast. Well, everyone except him. Jacob hated this—the party, including the food and the music, hated his friends having fun, and Bax surrounded by all those pretty, interesting people. *Fuck it.* He couldn't do it. Jacob couldn't just be friends, the guy still meant the fucking world to him, and he couldn't handle seeing him be all smiles and laugh with everyone but him.

And what is that girl doing so close? Touching him? How dare she drool all over what's mine?

Was.

Well, maybe never was his, but felt like it had been. He was still *his* Bax somehow. He would always be. Jacob hated himself for being such a coward, it took him *forever* to get up the nerve and show up here. Of course, he had been invited, but he would have skipped it if he didn't have to talk to Bax. And now he was going to run away again, wasn't he?

And, by the way, wasn't today the official beginning of spring in Australia?

Right, that wasn't helping his confidence one bit. He should have known that trying to talk to Bax today, of all days, just could not be a good omen. He tried to get a hold of him before, but every time he called, Jacob had chickened out and hung up before Bax could answer. Of course, he didn't pick up those countless times Bax returned his calls. *Coward.*

Jacob would probably never get over his *spring issues*, despite the somewhat incredible turn of events this year. It had been a wonderful spring, meeting Bax and everything that had followed. He had been fooled. His theory was that since today it was only *officially* spring here, he had actually been tricked by whoever plotted this. Didn't he leave America before spring kicked in? Yes, so what he initially thought as *spring gone good* had been nothing but a regular season. Fall. In Australia. Yep, it had been fall in Australia when he'd arrived.

Okay, so maybe he *was* making all this shit up and trying to find someone to blame, which obviously didn't work. Neither did it help much feeling more confident about talking to Bax.

Jacob still wanted to make up, be friends again, and tell him to leave Queensland for the sake of his career and all that. Without breaking down preferably, because he still loved Bax, and a future without him just sucked. If he could manage to talk him into leaving, it would also mean they couldn't be friends in the future. What a mess. It would be for the best though, wouldn't it?

It had been *months* since their last kiss, since the last time Bax had looked at him with eyes that held nothing but love and adoration for him. Now they were only filled with sadness and appeared empty when he saw him. Bax was disappointed. It hurt, but he couldn't blame him. Bax did what he thought was best, and when they both realized that it wasn't working, it was Jacob who did everything possible to stay away.

Why did he have to be so stubborn and freaking stupid?

He knew it was cowardly of him to ruin their extraordinary friendship just because they couldn't be *together* anymore. He just couldn't deal with that disappointed look and Bax's sadness.

Maybe it would be for the best if he left Queensland. It would definitely be the best option for his career. Was that a selfish thought? He had been empty and miserable, but being constantly confronted with Bax's pained appearance

was unbearable. He had hoped with him staying away, they could be happy again. Someday, maybe. Hopefully. So far it hadn't worked.

When Jacob tried to weave his way through the people and make his safe escape, before Bax had any time to notice he had been lurking around in the background, someone bumped into him and with all the frustration bubbling up inside of him he cursed. Aloud. Loud enough to be heard over the music apparently, because when someone touched his shoulder and he turned around, Jacob was eye to eye with Bax.

The walls felt like they were closing in on him, and he couldn't breathe.

"Jazz?"

No, don't. Just don't talk to me. Please. Jacob wished he could have screamed the words, told him to never talk to him again because it hurt so incredibly just hearing his voice up close. It hurt to hear him say his name most of all. A name no one else called him and never would. He didn't want to hear it ever again, because it already haunted his dreams. And he had enough nightmares already. Jacob backed off and searched for an opening. *Found it.*

He was going to run out of here and not look back. Taking the coward's way out, yep. With big strides, because he *was* a coward.

"Jazz, wait. I'd like to talk to you."

No, no, no. Stay away. Please. Squeezing the green Sprite bottle he had been carrying around all night, he unlocked his eyes from Bax, turned around and ran off as fast as he could manage with all those people still enjoying their party and totally oblivious to the pain in Jacob's heart.

He had to get out of the room and nothing would stop him.

Baxter

"Jazz!"

Baxter shouted as loud as he could and hoped like hell Jazz would just stop running and bloody talk to him. He'd tried to get a hold of him for days, and the guy just wouldn't pick up his phone. What was all that about? He had been the one calling in the first place, a few times actually. Baxter was confused and way ready to finally have a proper talk with Jazz. They needed to make up, or it was going to kill him.

Just when he thought Jazz would finally stop, someone pushed him. The next moment, Jazz fell face forward onto the floor. Baxter ran fast and caught up, but when he got a good look at the scene, his heart almost stopped. *Bloody hell*. He didn't know where to set his eyes, there was blood everywhere.

Fucking blood.

Everywhere.

Baxter pushed a couple bystanders aside and instantly dropped to his knees, undressed himself from the black, button-up shirt he wore and wrapped it tightly around Jazz's blood covered hand. He didn't know how hard he could press to stop the bleeding, a very large piece of green glass stuck deep in his palm. It was the most horrifying thing he had ever seen, and that it was Jazz who was in pain didn't help his nerves one bit. He was going crazy.

"I've got you Jazz, stay calm." If he could just stay bloody calm himself. He had to.

With his eyes locked on Jazz's, he pressed the shirt against his wound as hard as he dared. When Jazz tried to say something, he told him not to talk and just focus on him. "I've got you." And with both hands holding onto Jazz, he hoped like hell he could keep his cool and not give in to those tears that threatened to fall.

"It's going to be just fine, Jazz. It's just a cut." Baxter tried to smile reassuringly, but he knew he must have failed. Despite the trust in Jazz's eyes, Baxter knew he was close to freaking out.

If the glass had cut just a bit lower and a bit deeper...

He knew Matt was just trying to be a friend, but the guy was honestly getting on his nerves right now. Couldn't he see that there was no way he would leave Jazz alone? Would Baxter have to spell it out for him?

"Relax, mate, he just cut his hand. It's not like he's unconscious or anything."

Yeah, thank god for that. It *only* looks like he totally fucked up his hand. That damn bottle, the glass cut through quite a big part right in the centre of his palm and at least three fingers.

"But he is still fucking bleeding! Why don't they stop the fucking bleeding already?"

He knew he probably sounded like a psychopath but *fuck*, he'd never be able to erase that terrifying image of Jazz's blood-dripping hand from his mind. And then his face, all tears and swollen eyes, his cheeks covered in big red splotches. It was the worst to see Jazz cry. It must hurt like a bitch to almost cut off your fingers.

"B, listen, you've got to calm down, mate. Let's get the hell out of here."

"No bloody way, I'm staying." And he was, no matter what.

"Jacob's fine. They'll take him to the hospital. We all should go back to the hotel and get some sleep. Tomorrow is a big day, mate."

Baxter tore his eyes from Matt, the guy was exhausted from arguing with him, he could tell. He had a point too, the match tomorrow was important and it was late. Coach wouldn't accept it if they lost an important away game, not right now. But then Baxter saw Jazz shivering on his knees, clutching his hurting hand as if it would fall off any moment. Yeah, just one look at Jazz, and he knew he couldn't leave.

"He's right, Bax. You should get some sleep. I'm fine." Jazz gave him a weak smile, with a face all red and ruined, and it broke Baxter's heart.

Yeah well, tell that to someone else.

"No you're not bloody fine. Your whole hand is still bleeding like a bloody fountain!" Damn those nerves.

"And they'll fix it, it's fine really."

Baxter was exhausted, he couldn't deny that, but he wouldn't leave Jazz's side until he saw with his own eyes just how they would *fix* it. And then he would make sure that Jazz got enough rest and quiet and everything he needed. The look of hurt and defeat on Jazz's face killed him. He had to do something, he *needed* to do something. At this point, he would do whatever possible to take away the pain in Jazz's eyes, even if it would destroy him.

He didn't care anymore.

And besides, screw the world, he needed to be with Jazz and nothing would stop him.

"Nothing is bloody fine. My boyfriend is hurt, and I want to be here, is that too much to bloody ask?" There, he'd said it, one step closer to the truth and possible destruction.

“Boyfriend?” Matt gave him that challenging look that probably meant to say “*Why the hell don’t I know about this?*” or something along those lines. *Sorry, mate.* For the first time, he realised just how cowardly their whole secrecy had been.

He’d do anything to get a second chance, and he’d do it completely different now.

“Well, ex-boyfriend. I guess.”

Baxter tried to avoid everyone’s judging eyes, because he knew they were all bloody judging him right now. He didn’t want to see their disgust. What he couldn’t avoid was the intense stare he got from Jazz, so he gathered all his nerves and gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He felt like bloody crying instead.

Ah, fuck it. He might as well make a fool of himself right now.

“It doesn’t matter though, because I love you, Jazz, and I want to be with you right now.” Okay, so maybe he was forgetting something. “Well, if you want me to stay. I guess it’s up to you. If you want me to leave, then I will.”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

With just a few simple words, the tears of relief in his eyes just fell. Baxter dropped to his knees again and took Jazz’s bandaged hand in his, squeezing lightly. “Bloody hell, you could have killed yourself, Jazz.”

“Good thing I only fucked up my hand.” Jazz tried for another smile but failed, tears fell instead. Baxter brought his hands to his lips and kissed Jazz’s bandaged and blood covered knuckles. “I’m sorry about all the drama, Jazz, but I think I’ve been going insane since, you know, *that* day.”

“Yeah, I’d say so, considering you just came out to everyone including the reporters.”

“I don’t care. I’d do whatever, so you just know that I care about you so much it hurts.”

“And make you do crazy stuff.”

“Yes, and that.”

He still had to think of all the consequences his outing had just started. No way would his dad approve of him being *queer*. His mum probably wouldn’t mind that much; she might even be cool with it. As far as Baxter could

remember, she did have a gay friend or two. It was all too late now anyway, and for the first time, he honestly didn't give the slightest damn about what everyone else thought. It was his life for crying out loud. And he didn't want everyone else to have a say in it any longer. They either liked him the way he was, or just didn't. Their loss. Baxter didn't want to lose any more than he already had for the sake of everyone else.

Baxter looked at Jazz, properly looked at him. He could tell Jazz was exhausted and maybe close to passing out. How badly he wanted to take him to bed right now, hold him close and fall asleep. He wanted to wake up to a morning where all of this would be forgotten, and they could pick up where they'd left off. When their eyes met and that deep brown he loved so much was filled with more pain than anything, something tugged at his heart.

"It wouldn't be fair to ask for forgiveness I know that, so I won't. But Jazz, I love you. I really do. Always have and always will. Just don't forget that, okay? I'll never stop loving you. Not in a million years."

Jazz then pulled him by his T-shirt with his good hand and kissed him, softly, lovingly as if to say *thank you for everything*, and it tasted a lot like good-bye.

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Chapter 8

November 1st, 2012

Baxter

Baxter couldn't believe it was already November and graduation was just around the corner. This spring had been tough and absolutely crazy. He'd actually made the Schoolboys, something he hadn't thought possible after playing so terrible for a good while. It hadn't been easy to ignore the hole in his heart and constant ache but he had to focus on what mattered. Not that Jazz didn't matter, he mattered more to his heart than anything else, but he knew he had to play his best because that was what mattered to his career. It worked out too, eventually, for the biggest part at least.

Then, September and October came around and went by in a blur. There had been all those matches, camps, more victories, celebrations, interviews, and of course, Jazz's terrible accident, and everything that followed. After his dramatic outing, it seemed like the entire world went crazy for a long while. Okay so Baxter hadn't truly become *that* important, and of course, not the entire world cared about what happened. Nevertheless, everything felt just a little too overwhelming, and for a long enough time, it was anything but fun. Despite everyone's initial shock and disgust, all of his coaches, the Schoolboys included, stood behind him. They honestly accepted him the way he is, and it felt bloody good.

When everything died down, most people involved came to their senses and realised that it didn't have to be such a big deal after all. He was gay, so what? He liked guys, or at least one in particular, there was no bloody reason to think he would suddenly forget how to play footy. He was neither a serial killer nor terrorist, and he never gave anyone reason enough to hate him. He hoped that eventually everyone would understand those important differences. Being gay didn't mean shit. Not everyone stood behind him, of course, but the majority seemed to slowly understand that he had always been *that* person, and always would be.

It was hard, and it sucked at times, but he would get through it no matter what. Baxter would fight for what he wanted this time around, and he was just about to figure out what that really was. Until now, footy had always been on his mind, the one thing he could count on to be there in his life. Baxter had his

family who loved him, and he was thankful for that. His mum was very encouraging and accepting, and his dad, well he hadn't disowned him. He still wasn't sure what his dad thought of this entire *gay thing*, except that he told him often enough that Baxter should have kept it to himself. For his career's sake. But that was that. He gave him a hard time, just like always when he thought Baxter screwed up, but he would manage.

Career wise he had no other options. School had never been his thing, he hated it to be honest, and so university was definitely out of the picture. Of course, he could go find a day job, something, somewhere, and eventually he might have to do that but not now. He was still young, and he had dreams. Baxter had wanted to become a rugby player all his life, besides footy there was nothing he wanted to fill his days with.

Rugby, he thought, would always be his second home. But then he almost lost that security blanket, right after he gave up the person who he truly loved. For rugby.

Was it really worth it now?

What did he learn from all that?

He didn't know. After losing the one thing that had become more important than footy, he now wasn't so sure what his heart wanted. Did he want to devote his life to strangers who would constantly judge him, not only for how good he played, and worse, for who he loved?

Could he live without footy if he had love? If he had Jazz?

With footy in his life, he wasn't sure whether there would be enough time to fall in love again or maintain a relationship with anyone. Despite everyone apparently being so accepting now, playing in the rugby league would be time consuming, and he saw first-hand just how difficult it would be to be in a relationship and play professionally. Before Jazz, that hadn't even been on his mind, but now with everything he'd gained and lost and experienced over just one summer, Baxter wasn't so sure anymore what he truly wanted, and what he needed to be happy. Jazz had filled his life with so much laughter and fun and love that playing footy now just didn't seem that fulfilling anymore.

What the hell is wrong with me?

And then there was the fact that he and Jazz had been together almost twenty-four seven. It made maintaining their relationship a lot easier even if they couldn't openly show it. But now? Baxter just couldn't imagine what it

would be like when they would both be going their separate ways after the school year came to an end. With Jazz not being able to play anymore, there was no hope left that they could continue their incredible rugby career together.

As it turned out Jazz hurt his hand quite bad with that damn bottle, and he hadn't been allowed to play since. Which of course made sense, because his hand had to be bandaged and protected and all that shit. Apparently, it was healing well and they had hope that he would be able to use his hand again like before, maybe not do heavy work and definitely not play rugby. The only good thing until now had been that they could still see each other regularly, just like before. Jazz obviously came to class and he was made to join the team whenever and wherever even if it was just to sit around, which Baxter had been quite pleased with. Seeing Jazz wherever they went was enough to make his day.

The thought of not seeing him there on the field, the bench, the bus or wherever was terrible, it made his stomach feel funny, and not in a very good way.

Baxter hoped like hell that they could find a way to repair things between them, because not all the footy in the world could fix that hole Jazz left behind.

Jazz and he hadn't exactly made up after his declaration of undying love, and he didn't know whether they would. It had been almost impossible to read Jazz since then. It was frustrating. He wouldn't take it back though, even if Jazz would never forgive him. His love for him wouldn't just go away. It never will just go away. There was just so much about Jazz that he *truly* loved, and so many things he didn't want to live without. Just his friendship had meant the world to Bax and it had always given him so much energy and encouragement when he hadn't known he needed it. The guy made him feel like he could take on the world, if he just had Jazz by his side.

Jazz was a strong guy too, nothing could intimidate him, despite his rather chronic shyness. It had been funny at times just how shy he could get. And he would always make a fuss over the weirdest things. Gosh, he missed their banter. Jazz was simply extraordinary, with his incorrigibly good heart he would literally help the sun shine brighter. His capacity to love was immeasurable. Jazz would always try to do something special for the ones he cared about, he had a big heart and never seemed to realise just how much love he already gave with just being who he was.

Baxter had been the luckiest person to be on his receiving end for some time, and he would give anything now to reclaim that special position. And it

might just not be completely hopeless after all, because Jazz appeared a bit more affected by all this than Baxter initially thought.

The other day, they met at Jazz's house after school and hung out in his room, studying for one of their finals and played a bit on Jazz's old Nintendo console. Just like old times. It hadn't been the first time they'd spent time together again; Jazz had invited him over a couple of times before that. Despite their efforts to be friends and all that, it still felt slightly weird to be in each other's company. There would always be those moments when neither of them had anything to say, and they would just stare at each other for a bit too long. Often they would sit a little too close and bump into each other while playing Mario Kart.

A few times, they nudged and teased each other and almost fell into their usual banter, which would always end in wrestling and with a lot of kisses. *Before* it did, recently of course, it hadn't. It was those moments when they would realise that something was a just little off, and it always felt somehow embarrassing and, most of all, frustrating.

But then something else would happen, like that day when Jazz brought him a small plate from downstairs with a piece of square, brown, chocolaty cake sitting in the centre. A cute pink heart on top the smooth dark brown surface.

"What's that?" he asked because, well it looked a lot like chocolate cake but it didn't mean it had to be chocolate cake, right? And it wasn't anyone's birthday, and they didn't have anything to celebrate. And he just hadn't expected Jazz to bring him dessert, not when they wouldn't be going to enjoy it the way they used to.

"Flourless espresso chocolate cake. With a bit of raspberry sauce."

Well, there you go. It *was* chocolate cake, but with espresso and a raspberry sauce heart and no flour. "Is it any good?" Baxter asked teasingly, he knew from experience that everything Jazz made was delicious. Jazz rolled his eyes, "Why don't you just shut up and taste it?"

And Baxter just sat there a minute, staring at Jazz who took a spoonful of cake and then unexpectedly leaned in, gave him a chaste kiss, and wiggled his eyebrows.

"I like it," Jazz whispered and beamed him a shy smile that melted his insides. And that kiss, so quick but so *sweet*, literally, because there was a hint of chocolate.

He needed more.

“Deal.” He then ate the rest of the cake by himself, without any further kisses, and it was the most difficult task he’d had to accomplish in a very long time. Because after that kiss, all he could think of were Jazz’s lips and tasting more of him.

Jazz might not have forgiven him for being a coward, and he might not have said the words that they were going to give it another try, but whenever they were together more privately, away from prying eyes and ears it, it was always Jazz who would be brave enough to just kiss him and initiate anything intimate. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to, in fact not being able to kiss Jazz drove him crazy. But Baxter promised himself he wouldn’t do anything stupid to jeopardise their new found friendship. He’d give Jazz all the time in the world. And apparently he needed time, because it always stopped with just one kiss or touch. It drove him crazy, he couldn’t deny that.

Baxter would not let him go again this time, he truly loved Jazz and didn’t want a life without him by his side. Even if it wouldn’t be on the field, he would find a way for them to be reunited.

December 2nd, 2012

Jacob

The last three months had to be the longest Jacob had ever experienced. His horrifying accident at that party put him through a new kind of hell. He hadn’t been allowed to pick up a ball in months, and it was driving him insane, not more than being apart from Bax, but it added to all the unfortunate events that just seemed to pile up. He was frustrated beyond words. As expected, Coach Connor and Anderson had him benched for the rest of the season. They assigned him random chores and made him join practice, doing a lot of running around in circles when they thought just watching wasn’t good enough, as if to punish him for fucking up his hand. It wasn’t like he enjoyed not being able to use his hand, for crying out loud.

It was annoying at times, especially having to watch Bax play and not be able to join. And seeing him fuck up his game again every now and then was all the more frustrating. He had to admit though, Bax did a lot better now than he had two months ago, but he was still on an up and down streak. Maybe not everyone noticed the difference, but Jacob could tell. To him it was like the difference between day and night if he compared today to the beginning of the year. Bax was still incredible on the field, no doubt about that, especially over

the last month when he improved a lot. It might have a little to do with them being a lot friendlier with each other again. Jacob didn't want to be in over his head and think he was the reason for Bax's good mood lately, but he couldn't deny that he knew just how much they still meant to each other.

Jacob also couldn't deny that the whole incident at that party three months ago brought a lot of good with it, and seemed to have put things into place again, despite the terrible effects it had on his hand. He might not be able to play rugby anymore, and probably would have to make a few adjustments here and there in case it didn't heal well enough. But on the bright side he and Bax got talking again, and even managed to pick up their friendship. It was still shattered and extremely awful being with Bax and not *really* being with him, but he thought they were on their way to fixing even that part. They had to, because that hole in his chest had to be sewed together before he would bleed completely dry.

While Jacob was afraid that it might not work out a second time and the thought of losing Bax all over again was unbearable, he also knew that he couldn't do it this way. Being friends and nothing more was definitely not an option in the long run. He just couldn't do it, his heart ached every time he saw Bax and had to refrain from anything that would cross the line. Jacob could tell just how much it hurt Bax as well, despite his constant encouragement *to be friends* like nothing happened. But *things* happened, and it still hurt.

It almost seemed like Bax would do just about anything for them to be friends again. It was sweet though, Jacob had to admit. Until now, Bax had never asked for forgiveness and took all the blame for their broken relationship on himself. It wasn't like Jacob wanted to punish him for his decisions back then, he could have fought for their love too. He was ashamed that he hadn't, and it made him a little queasy just thinking about how easily he gave up.

Back then, it sounded like the right thing to do, and when he looked at how well Bax did with the Schoolboys and everything, despite his moping, he knew it had been the right decision. Jacob couldn't have lived with being responsible for ruining Bax's rugby career, if it had come to that all those months ago. There was no proof that it would have gone down like it did after the guy's stupid coming out drama during that party.

Jacob was thankful that it hadn't done that much harm to his career after all. His theory was that everyone had already seen how well Baxter played during all those tournaments, the Schoolboy championship, against the English Academy and so on. They had the chance to fall in love with him during the

winter and before that, and it would take a lot more than coming out as gay to fully destroy that love.

Bax was one of the most loveable guys when he didn't play rugby, and all the more so when he did. To Jacob, Bax was something close to a rugby god, his rugby hero, and he would always be. Therefore, he was especially thrilled just how many people stood behind Bax in the end.

Bax was meant to be on the field, and Jacob wanted to do everything now to encourage him to aim for the best, just like he always wanted.

Shortly after his accident, Jacob managed to talk to Bax about leaving Queensland, and somehow it went a lot like he expected. Bax said he *didn't feel like leaving his hometown just for footy anymore*.

Great. Of course he didn't tell him what made him change his mind or what exactly he wanted to do then; his only answer was that he had to figure out what he wanted. And that was that. They hadn't talked about it anymore simply because Bax refused. It frustrated Jacob. He knew now that he wanted to be with Bax, no matter how and where, therefore Jacob promised himself that he would try anything possible to make that happen.

He hadn't told Bax that much yet because he didn't want him to think they could just pick up the pieces and continue from wherever they left off that easily, even though he wanted to. It had nothing to do with punishment, really. Maybe. Jacob wasn't sure exactly what made him want to take it slow, but it felt like the right thing to do. He wanted them to find their way back together on safe ground, once everything else was figured out, and right now, everything still seemed to be too messy for that.

He remembered one night, many months ago, when they laid in bed together, cuddling and happier than ever, and Bax tried to talk him into playing professional rugby. Together. Bax always wanted them to play together on one of the big teams, preferably in Sydney or Melbourne. When he told him then that it wasn't what he wanted to do, Bax wouldn't listen for a long time. Eventually, he understood and accepted it, or so Jacob thought. Every now and then, he still hinted about just how great it would be to play together, away from Queensland and all that. Bax said it would be like an adventure, and maybe, even if they couldn't play together now, they could still have their adventure away from home.

Jacob never gave up on going through all of the possibilities, and he might just be a few phone calls away from having the perfect solution.

If he could just convince Bax to trust him.

“I’m going to quit the team.”

What the fuck? Jacob pinched himself. *Ouch.*

“What team?”

He looked up at Bax who was sitting on his bed, looking extremely comfortable, while Jacob lay on the floor on a bunch of pillows and blankets. It wasn’t uncomfortable but he would prefer to cuddle up with Bax on the bed. Yeah, screw that thought. They had been watching a couple of random cartoons and munching on veggie tarts he’d made yesterday. It was a wonderful day as it was.

“Whatever damn team. No more footy for me,” Baxter said matter-of-factly and just continued to zap through Jacob’s TV like he hadn’t just told him he would quit rugby.

He couldn’t be hearing right. Was it April Fools’? No, it most definitely wasn’t anywhere close to that. Bax must have hit his head or something.

“Are you fucking insane? Rugby is your life, your love, your everything. You don’t just quit because you’re having a shitty day, you big, fat idiot.”

Jacob hadn’t realized he raised his voice and was now sitting next to Bax on the bed. Bax stared at him with big green eyes and slightly flushed cheeks. Holy G, he was gorgeous.

“Why do you love calling me fat, Jazz?” Bax beamed him a playful smile.

Wait, what? “Don’t try changing the subject. We are so not through with this, Bax.”

“Well, I am. And you’re wrong, Jazz.” He smiled at Jacob with the same love and adoration he used to. “You’re my love and my everything. I don’t need any bloody footy.”

The ache inside of him swelled, and it was almost too painful to not respond with a deep and never-ending kiss right now.

“Yes, you do, Bax.” He instead forced out of himself, “And you know it.” Because it was true, he couldn’t let Bax give up his dreams for whatever stupid reason he thought would justify his temporary insanity.

“No, I don’t, and I will prove it to you.” The determined look on Bax’s face made his insides churn.

Damn you, Bax.

“Don’t you even think about it, Bax,” Jacob growled. *Damn you.* And the next thing he knew he’d suddenly straddled Bax’s lap, pressed his broad shoulders into the headboard of his bed and his lips were against Bax’s in a fierce and demanding kiss. He felt Bax’s hands on his hip, then up and down his back, all the while he kissed him back equally desperately.

Fuck, this was such a bad idea.

Jacob tried to stop and unlock their lips, but he couldn’t. He had missed *this* for so long, missed Bax’s lips and those mind-numbing kisses. He missed the emotions that came with those eyes, the comfort of his arms, the lust he felt from just one look or touch, and the love that came with everything that was simply Bax.

Jacob didn’t know what overcame him, but maybe he’d finally reached his limit? He couldn’t resist that guy any longer. And with Bax being so sweet and telling him that he loved him, more than rugby, Jacob simply hadn’t been able to hold back. He’d wanted him to know just how much he loved him too, even if he hadn’t put it into words yet. Which, by the way, seemed more and more stupid. He wanted Bax to know. If it just weren’t so scary, somehow.

When Jacob forced himself to withdraw, everything ended too fast, leaving Jacob’s head spinning and his body wanting more. He missed gazing into Bax’s bright green eyes like this, with his head spinning and heart pounding in his chest. He wanted *this*. Every day.

“Kiss me again? Please?”

Bax’s request surprised him, and he lifted his head, taking the kiss before Jacob had even had a chance to respond. He didn’t mind one bit. Bax pulled him closer still, and Jacob sank into his arms, welcoming the gentle embrace. This kiss was slow and tender, and Jacob poured all of his love into it, savoring the slow thrust of Bax’s tongue.

Damn, how he missed that taste.

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Chapter 9

December 8th, 2012

Baxter

Three days without footy. Three incredibly long days without touching any ball whatsoever or working out at the gym. Three fucking long days doing *nothing* at all. Baxter wanted to shoot himself. The first day had been manageable and somehow not too bad; he slept in, had a late lunch, watched TV, listened to music, went for a walk, took out a book and read. By the time night came around, he fell asleep fast and felt relaxed and refreshed.

The next day, Sunday, Baxter was already bored to death. He thought about repeating all those things he did the day before but except sleeping in and eating while listening to music or watch TV, there hadn't been many things he could repeat. Baxter decided to go into town, grab pizza for lunch, a coffee later and then maybe go surfing. Baxter felt like shooting himself all over again when he realised he didn't have anyone to meet and hang out with, because all of his mates would be too engrossed in many hours of practice. At least he wouldn't miss an important match.

Doing nothing by yourself for two days was insane, how anyone could truly enjoy an overload of free time, with nothing to do, was beyond him. If he'd spent an entire week like this, Baxter was sure he would either go mad or drop dead from boredom. Probably both.

Late in the afternoon, Baxter managed to get a hold of his mum and offered to pick her up from work a little early and drive her home. She owned a florist shop and would always spend extra hours on the weekend to prepare their online deliveries if nobody expected her home. Today, Baxter wanted her home. He was close anyway, since her shop wasn't far from Surfer's Paradise where he had been hanging out for far too long already. Another long day all by himself, *ugh*, and it had been anything but enjoyable. It was a little weird maybe, he had to admit, because Baxter could be quite lazy and honestly enjoyed doing nothing for a while, but when he knew he wasn't allowed to do anything besides being lazy, especially not play footy, it somehow made him all irritable and restless. It was going to bloody kill him if he didn't get to play ball as soon as possible.

Together they made quick work of grocery shopping, and Baxter even helped his mum prepare dinner. How Jazz could enjoy something so boring like

cooking was beyond him. He couldn't see the appeal in mixing sauces, spicing meat and chopping veggies. Slicing carrots and potatoes would definitely not become his favourite pastime. Once dinner was in the oven and his mum offered that they could bake cookies together, because she had been thrilled that Baxter joined her with such enthusiasm, he fled.

That enthusiasm had disappeared with the fifth carrot he had to chop and nothing, absolutely nothing, would have made him want to bake cookies. It was just too much.

He had to get back to his old life.

He just had to.

"What the fuck, B, you missed practice. Three fucking times in a row."

"So? I'm here now."

Because there was no way he would quit. He knew that giving up after three bloody days was pretty weak, but wasn't it better that way? At least he wouldn't have to suffer any longer, and hopefully, Coach would accept his excuse. Baxter didn't enjoy lying to his coaches or anyone else for that matter, but he knew if he told everyone he had planned on quitting the team he'd never hear the end of it.

"Don't let coach hear you talk like that, mate." Matt glared at him. "What the hell is going on with you anyway?" Now it was his turn to glare.

"Nothing, I just didn't feel like it, okay?"

"Okay? You just didn't feel like it? Have you lost your mind completely? It's not because of the whole gay thing is it? You know we are all bloody *okay* with it."

Yeah. To his surprise almost everyone he knew seemed to be dealing by now, and more and more people were honestly backing him up, reassuring him, and telling him just how good everything would be. Not like anyone gave a damn though, he knew that. Many were just all talk, and there was nothing behind those words. Baxter didn't mind as long as he had the approval and love from those who mattered. Like his family, best mates and Jazz.

"No, of course not. Why does everything have to do with my bloody sexuality?"

Baxter was getting a little annoyed though with everyone assuming his bad mood had to be a *gay thing*, or whatever their weird minds came up with. Even

his mother had been asking him the weirdest questions lately. Like him being moody or wanting to help her make dinner had something to do with him being gay. It didn't suddenly give him period cramps or shit. Seriously, sometimes he just felt out of place these days. Maybe it was a *gay thing* after all.

"Anyway, I was ill, if anyone asks, got it?"

Matt rolled his eyes at him and shoved him playfully into the nearby locker.

"Sure thing. Because it's you. But don't ever skip again just because you have your bloody period, mate."

"Oh, shut up."

So, yeah maybe it *was* a gay thing.

But more importantly, in the end he failed his attempt to quit rugby, royally at that. Baxter had to admit he couldn't do the whole *no footy* thing for the life of him. He had been sure that if he just set his mind to it he could do it, that he could do anything he wanted. Apparently not. If he was being completely honest, he didn't want to stop playing footy. It just seemed like if he did he could have more time to spend with Jazz, focus on other things, build a new life.

A different life. Which apparently he couldn't do. It would be embarrassing now to face Jazz, but he simply needed to play. Jazz had been right, he couldn't quit. *You won, Jazz.*

Baxter just had to find another way to fix things. There had to be another way. There just had to. Jazz tried to talk him into reconsidering one of his former offers with Melbourne Storm or the South Sydney Rabbitohs, but not only would they probably not want him now, Baxter also couldn't leave Queensland. Oh, how he would love to play for the Bulldog's in Sydney...

Baxter just couldn't. He wouldn't leave Jazz behind, especially not when they were so close to finally finding their way back to each other.

He wouldn't give up, not now.

December 9th, 2012

Jacob

Today was the day. Jacob would play his very last game. It would also be his best, he fast decided, because wearing his favorite maroon jersey, playing

alongside Bax, who he had sort of made up with, in the very same stadium one of his favorite teams had played just had to be the best game he could ever play.

After a few attempts of playing with his bum hand he quickly realized that it just wouldn't work out playing more than a couple of minutes. Not only did it hurt like a bitch to move it, the doctor told him over and over again that if he used it too much too soon, he would risk a high chance that he'd fuck it up for good. Well, those weren't exactly the doctor's words, but pretty much what he meant to say. Jacob could probably live without playing rugby on a daily basis but he needed to do at least some light work with his hand eventually. Even though he never wanted to play in the rugby league, the thought of not playing properly ever again wasn't that easy to digest. The weeks he had been benched and just watched the others play had been tough, but he knew it was too late now anyway and he just had to accept his fate and make the best out of it. He was still alive and otherwise healthy.

After a little immature begging and negotiation with the doctor, Jacob was allowed back to play at least partly for their season's final, which now meant the end of his rugby career. Jacob wanted to play one last time, even if it wasn't the entire match. He just wanted to be there to support his team and play one last time with his *mates*. There was no way he could play professionally with a bum hand, he just hoped it would heal enough for him to get back at cooking, because even chopping veggies for a certain amount of time hurt like a bitch.

On their way toward the stadium, with just a few hours to go until his final match, Jacob almost lost his nerve and began second-guessing the whole thing. His mother would be there too. Geez, he hadn't felt that nervous in forever. He was also excited that he could play one last time for his mom, she had only seen him play a handful of times, and she promised she wouldn't miss his last game for anything in the world. Since keeping her promise to be home a little more often and being there for him at his graduation, Jacob had no reason to doubt she wouldn't come today. Just recently, he finally managed to tell her all about Bax and him, that they were officially dating now and what he was planning for his future. Oh, and that the whole gay thing, obviously. Which to his surprise hadn't been all that surprising to her. Jacob loved her dearly, and now they could be more open about everything with each other. He felt like an adult.

Jacob promised he wouldn't be a chickenshit anymore, so... *no more second guessing, man!*

Yeah, he could do today. But, what if he wasn't good enough? What if he hurt his hand again, and it didn't heal this time?

Baxter nudged his side. "Are you nervous, Jazzy?"

How the hell did he know? Damn, was he that transparent?

"Uh, maybe a little?" He decided to go with the truth, since there was no reason to pretend to be all rough and tough with Bax.

"Come here." Bax beamed him a warm smile and pulled him close by his shoulder. Jacob wrapped his arm around his waist and held on to Bax just because he could. The closeness soothed his nerves a little. "What if we lose this game because of me?"

"Nah, that won't happen. I will make sure of it." The gentle press of Bax's soft lips on his forehead did the trick. He trusted Bax to do his best today, and so would Jacob. They could do this, together.

One last time.

They are so going to kick those guys' asses.

Bax and Jacob were just heading toward the parking lot outside the stadium. Their match, his last match, had ended almost an hour ago, and they were now going out to celebrate their victory. It hadn't been an easy win and playing with his bum hand proved to be a little more painful than he had anticipated, but it didn't look like it took any further damage. It wasn't like he had ever been one to catch and throw the ball all the time like others. Jacob had had a great time today and would always look back on that day with a bittersweet smile. He'd miss this; his friends, rugby and the excitement of a great victory like today's. Jacob might even miss those disappointed moments and regrets of a missed chance that were inevitable playing sports.

Once they reached Bax's car, Bax jumped right into the backseat while he told Jacob to wait outside, saying he would want to be in the sunlight for this. *Huh? Just what had gotten into him again?*

"Sorry, Jazz. I forgot to give you this before the match." Baxter handed him a small black, rectangle box, complete with neatly tied, pure white bow on top.

"What's that?" An electrical zap ran through his body when their fingers brushed. Baxter smiled, placed a hand on his shoulder and guided him to the side. "Open it," he whispered with that shy smile that made Jacob weak in the knees.

And so Jacob did. When he saw what lay inside on top of purple velvet, his heart almost stopped. It was beautiful. "Bax," he gasped and reached for the small, golden charm in the shape of Australia. It was light in his fingers, thin like a few layers of paper maybe, and close to the size of a poker chip.

There was a heart shaped hole where Queensland was supposed to be. Jacob was speechless. Baxter reached for his hands and untangled the charm further, and only then, he realized that it was complete with a chain, making it a necklace.

"Turn it around."

Jacob turned it over. "Oh wow, Bax. I don't know what to say." He could only stare and try everything possible to hold back those tears. On the back of the golden plate were their initials engraved, a clean and beautiful **JB**.

Underneath it said, in tiny letters, "***I lost my heart Down Under***".

Jacob wanted to cry. It was the sweetest and mushiest thing he'd ever seen. He loved it.

"You don't need to say anything, Jazz." Baxter smiled at him hopeful. "I just hope you like it a little."

"A little?" *Was he insane?* "I absolutely love it."

Jacob sighed and looked at it again. "It's gorgeous, Bax. Thank you."

"It was supposed to give you good luck today," Baxter whispered, "but as expected, you didn't need any good luck charm." Jacob tore his eyes away from his brand new necklace and when his eyes locked on those familiar green orbs, he couldn't do anything but smile until his cheeks hurt.

"Oh, Bax." Jacob sighed. "Come here, Crazy," he somehow managed, holding out his free hand in invitation, which Bax took with a smile on those lips he longed to kiss.

"Jazz, I really missed you. I don't want us to be apart. Ever," Baxter whispered, as he pulled him close.

"I know." Jacob almost lost his fight against those persistent tears that were still threatening to break free.

"I just don't know what to do. I want us to be together. Always," Baxter whispered, so close to tears himself that it almost killed Jacob. This mess they had gotten themselves into was just insane, and stupid. They wanted each other, they loved each other, and there was no good reason for them to be apart.

"I know." Jacob took a handful of Baxter's soft maroon-colored jersey shirt and just held on because he couldn't move, those green eyes held him captive, and his body appeared to be frozen in time.

Matt chose that moment to pop up from wherever he and the others had hid and snapped a picture of them. What else he might have gotten on film was lost to Jacob after drowning in those bright green and gold eyes and those beautiful, long and deep kisses that followed.

It was a moment he certainly wouldn't ever forget, when Bax then gently grasped his face between his palms, raising it until their eyes were locked on each other, and told him that he loved him. Right in the middle of the crowded street, for the whole world to see.

Jacob couldn't keep it inside any longer and told him that he loved him too.

Always had and always would.

Baxter

Their last match of the season had been a blast, they'd killed those suckers. It had also been the best send-off they could have given Jazz. Gosh, how he would miss playing the field with him. Footy without Jazz somehow just wouldn't be the same. They had gotten so good in the beginning of the year and always had that special connection, and *kicked ass* wherever they went. It was going to be lonely not seeing his face on the field anymore, not that he ever had a lot of time to look at his mates during a match, but simply knowing Jazz was there had been the best motivation possible.

Not seeing him at practice and after matches in the locker room, even after school and all that, would be terrible. They probably wouldn't ever be able to lift weights together as well. Baxter had a good taste of that during Jazz's absence due to his injury, but at least then Jazz had still been around all the time. Jazz never had been completely out of sight for a long amount of time. He couldn't imagine what it would be like not seeing him for days, weeks and maybe months in a row.

Besides not being able to play footy with Jazz, Baxter was beyond thrilled, because they'd made up, honestly made up and were back together again. For bloody real this time. *Out and proud*, as everyone liked to say. Jazz accepted his apologies, accepted his regret and most of all, accepted his love. He hadn't planned on buying Jazz back with that necklace or anything, it was supposed to be just a good luck charm for his last match.

Baxter wasn't so sure why exactly he'd got a necklace made, the idea just hit him one day, and it felt like the right moment for it. He thought it was romantic and all, plus he wanted Jazz to have something that would make him remember him, think of him wherever they might be. They'd both lost their hearts to each other, so why not? It seemed perfect, and Baxter was thrilled with just how much Jazz loved it.

He was all the more thrilled that Jazz seemed to truly love him too. Hopefully, more than the necklace. Things were looking great and he knew everything would work out. He would get his happy ending with Jazz, he just knew. They still had to figure out some things, and he was sure that not everyone would be that accepting of their love and relationship, but together they would get through everything.

He had never felt surer of it.

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Chapter 10

December 22nd, 2012

Jacob

"I don't want us to be apart. Ever."

Bax's words repeated in Jacob's mind the entire drive back from rugby practice. How he wanted those words to be true, that they could be together every day for a very, very long time. The wish to spend his future with Bax had been on Jacob's mind for a while now; the thoughts a lot more frequent those past weeks. Jacob believed that it might not be impossible to wish for things like that, they just had to make it become reality. Their reality. He felt a little queasy thinking about the things they still had to discuss.

Practice had been a bit weird those last few times he joined. Jacob felt a lot like *the girlfriend*, which he sort of was, watching her crush play ball with the tough boys. Now that he wasn't part of the team any longer, he felt more like a damn cheerleader than anything else really. He couldn't deny that he loved being the cheerleader, but it was just a little strange to sit around in his normal clothes cheering on his boyfriend, knowing that he wouldn't be on that other side ever again.

Jacob hoped that the bitter tang of sadness would go away soon. Not playing was still a little hard on him, most of the time he didn't know what to do with all that excess energy. Recently, he picked up running and tried a few different kinds of sports that wouldn't involve using his hands as much. So far, he hadn't found a lot that he enjoyed doing.

Once they were home, Jacob made quick work of unpacking the small bag of groceries they had gotten on the way. He turned at the familiar touch to his shoulder, and the very instant he was met by those green eyes the butterflies were dancing again. It was ridiculous.

"Jazzy." Baxter reached around him, picked up the bottle of chocolate sauce they'd bought and slowly backed away, grinning mischievously at Jacob. "I think we have the house all to ourselves today."

Damn you, Bax. Jacob wanted to jump at him and kiss that sexy smirk off his lips. He followed that come-hither look step-by-step, quickly giving up on the idea of preparing that casserole he wanted to make tonight.

“And as you know we both are very free this very moment and for long enough to empty that bottle here.” Baxter wiggled his eyebrows and held out his hand invitingly. God only knew how Jacob could have thought about making dinner in the first place. Jacob took Bax’s hand, entwined their fingers and let Bax pull him flush against his strong body. When they were only a breath apart Baxter let go of his hand, gripped his chin instead and kissed Jacob deeply, longingly, while he slowly maneuvered them both out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Bax lowered him down on the large black sofa in the center of the room, planting feathery kisses on Jacob’s nose and cheeks. When something heavy dropped onto his stomach and rolled onto the sofa he remembered the bottle of chocolate sauce that Bax sneaked out of the kitchen.

“That sauce isn’t for playing, Bax. I need it for tomorrow’s cake.” Bax raised his head and gave him his teasing “so what?” look.

“We’ll buy a new one tomorrow then?”

Jacob groaned. “No way we’re getting chocolate on my aunt’s sofa. She’ll kill me.” Baxter lowered down again to kiss him sweetly.

“Who said we will? We are going to be careful, and if not tell her it was my fault.” Bax offered with a smile, “I’m craving something chocolaty. Come on, Jazz, live a little.”

Jacob laughed, gripping Bax’s shoulders. “Didn’t you hear me say *no*? Grow up a little, Bax. Chocolate sauce isn’t for playing.” Okay he had to admit that it sounded rather hot to share some liquid choco with Bax, especially if they were naked. But they couldn’t just do *that* on his aunt’s sofa, could they?

“Just one tiny drop, Jazz. I’ll squeeze it right into your mouth, okay?” Baxter whispered seductively close to his ear, kissing the soft flesh below once, twice, and then sucking down a bit more forcefully.

“Geez, Bax.” Jacob felt his cock throb at the thought of Bax squeezing whatever part of him, and chocolate dripping into his mouth. No, not his. Bax’s. Oh boy, that was the hottest image, ever. He shivered when Bax trailed teasing kisses down his throat. He gripped at Bax’s shoulder when he sucked at one spot in particular, long and hard until it made his head spin.

Well, maybe one tiny drop wouldn’t hurt anyone.

Jacob sort of craved something chocolaty too, and what better *thing* to combine it with than Bax?

"I think I have it all sorted out, Bax."

And he had. Jacob was beyond excited about the news he could finally give Bax. He knew it might not go down so well considering he acted without asking for Bax's permission, but it all happened so fast and turned out so perfect that he could only thank fate or whatever helped him along the way. He hoped Bax would be just as thrilled.

"Oh have you now?"

Bax pulled him closer, by his waist, until their knees slightly bumped against each other. His hands slid back and a little lower until they rested comfortably on Jacob's ass. He smiled up at Bax, admiring his green eyes and that light flush on his cheeks for a moment too long. Jacob stepped closer yet and backed him up against the kitchen counter behind them. Damn, their little chocolaty make out earlier did absolutely nothing to satisfy his craving for more of Bax, and so Jacob caught his mouth in a chaste kiss, his lips moved against Baxter's when he murmured, "The Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs want you to play for them."

Baxter pulled back so quickly that Jacob's face almost collided with his chest. "What? Did you just say the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs want me to play for them?" he asked, sounding rather shocked, like Jacob had just told him he saw aliens in their backyard.

"I think I did." Jacob chuckled and reached for Bax's shoulder, gently wrapping his arms around his neck. Bax's hands snaked around his lower back and held on lightly. "I've got it all in a letter, black on white with every contract detail you might need."

"Why would they want me after I refused to take their offer a few months ago? And why would *you* have such information, and I don't?"

"Just trust me, Bax."

It sounded a little strange to Jacob's ears hearing himself say that. He had never wanted anyone to trust him in his life, but right now it was the only wish he had. He hoped Bax would trust him more than anything. "Read the letter, take the offer and... and I'll fix the rest."

"The rest?" Bax's lips quirked up, and he didn't take his eyes of Jacob when he leaned back, his hands now resting on his waist.

"Yeah, the rest. You and me. And our future." Jacob could tell Baxter wasn't buying any of it by the way his eyes gleamed with mischief, and his

smile bore down on him. It made him just a little weak in the knees, and his nerves faltered.

“That’s a huge responsibility you are taking on there, Jazzy.” Bax grinned and pulled him closer again, playfully nipping at Jacob’s nose. A quick kiss to his cheek followed.

“Do you doubt my awesomeness?”

Jacob tried to sound as confident as he could. He hoped it was good enough for Bax to trust and take a chance on him. Jacob knew there still was the possibility of him not wanting to accept the offer. It scared the shit out of him now. He wouldn’t survive if Bax didn’t want the same future he wanted.

“Not at all, Jazz.” Baxter smiled a bit more genuinely now and leaned in to kiss him sweetly on the mouth. Jacob sighed into their lip lock. Would he ever get enough of those kisses?

“Not at all,” Baxter repeatedly whispered close to his tingling lips, before catching them in another lingering kiss that honestly took his breath.

Jacob’s knees wobbled and almost gave in. “So, are you going to do as I tell you?” He felt breathless from that kiss and dizzy from how scared he was that Bax’s answer might be no.

“Do I have any choice?” Baxter smiled down at him, his lips slowly quirking up in a playful grin. Jacob felt his stomach flip-flop. “I don’t think you do,” he whispered. Jacob had planned on sounding more confident but failed royally when those eyes collided with his. He just couldn’t do big and butch when Baxter looked at him like that, teasing him with so much adoration and love. It was the weirdest mix only Bax could manage.

“Honestly though, Jazz, why would they want me now?”

“They want you, Bax. Trust me they do.” He knew that Bax would probably feel unhappy that Jacob had his hands in all of this, but he couldn’t just stand there and do nothing; he couldn’t let that opportunity slip away.

“Just *what* did you do?”

“I swear I only talked to some of the guys there, while making sure I’d get my future figured out. I was lucky I met Mr. Hasler when I did.”

“Des Hasler? The Des Hasler? The head coach? You talked to him?” Bax gaped at him, pulling him closer by the waist.

“Yeah Bax, I did.” Jacob chuckled. “He’s only human too you know.”

He knew people made mistakes and deserved a second chance at their dreams. Especially when it wasn’t their fault that they had slipped away.

“And as it turned out he is a big personal fan of yours. When I explained our situation, you know the whole gay thing, and me moving to Sydney next year, and how I possibly couldn’t be apart from you, he seemed to be willing to talk to the CEO and whoever about maybe offering you a position for their next season.”

“Wait what? Sydney? Why on earth are you moving to Sydney, and why haven’t you told me any of this?”

“I am telling you now, Bax. You know I was down there to look into places, and as it appears, I could fix both of our futures. You just have to play for the Bulldogs and move to Sydney with me.”

Jacob sounded a lot more confident now—god knew how he managed that. He was getting his hopes up again with the growing excitement from remembering his trip to Sydney a few weeks ago. Jacob had been thrilled when his mom and aunt decided to go with him to check out some universities and places to live.

“Are you serious? You want me to move to Sydney with you?”

“That’s what I just said. If you won’t accept that damned offer, I will be moving by myself, and that’s so not how I planned this, Bax.”

“You are insane, Jazz.” Baxter cupped his cheek, his fingers playing with the tip of his ear.

“I know.” Jacob couldn’t help but grin, the sudden burst of happiness he felt inside was overwhelming. Baxter looked genuinely surprised but also very pleased about the idea of moving to Sydney together.

“Come to Sydney with me, be my rugby hero,” Jacob whispered and fought back those tears the best he could. Bax didn’t let him say more than that because he pressed their lips together and kissed him for all he was worth. Jacob was thankful for that; kissing Bax was so much easier than talking right now.

He held on to his strong shoulders and let go, giving Bax as much as he wanted to take. With every brush of lips and slide of tongue, he felt put back

together and invigorated. Jacob thanked god, and whoever else might listen, that he wouldn't have to give up on Bax.

"I am sorry that I went behind your back and did all this. I hope you won't be mad and think it makes you less of a man because you let your boyfriend sort out your life, or something like that. I only helped a little anyway." Jacob batted his eyelashes and smiled his brightest smile. How he loved calling Bax his boyfriend. It got his heart beating faster every time.

"Oh, Jazz," Bax sighed and kissed Jacob's lips, slowly, gently, and a smile spread across his face. "I could never be mad at you, especially not for something like that." Bax then kissed him fully on the lips, firm but lovingly, with one hand cupping Jacob's cheek and the other slowly running down his chest and side. Jacob felt himself quickly getting lost in that sweet and demanding kiss. Bax withdrew too fast, the action drawing a whimper from Jacob's lips.

"I'll let you make me breakfast every morning, drive me to work and make me packed lunches. You can also pick me up from work, make me dinner and tuck me into bed," Bax whispered, his sparkling green eyes locked on Jacob's. "I let you do anything you want with me, Jazz."

Jacob laughed out loud, "No way in hell will I treat you like a twelve-year-old, Bax." Baxter grinned.

"No, definitely not after tucking me in."

"No definitely not." Jacob felt his heartbeat quicken with anticipation. "I won't give in that easily this time, I promise. I'll fight for what I want now." Baxter raised his eyebrow. "And when are you going to tell me what *exactly* that is?"

Jacob felt his cheeks heat up. He dropped his head onto Bax's strong chest and nuzzled his neck. "For one thing, I want you," Jacob whispered against his throat, lips tracing the curve of his clavicle.

"The rest you'll find out very soon," he said before pressing a lingering kiss on Bax's skin. Jacob knew he wanted a life with Bax, he wanted a future with him and to experience all those things couples did. Jacob wanted to live his life with Bax by his side. He wanted it all with Bax and nobody else.

"I love you, Crazy," Jacob murmured and pressed his lips to Bax's, wrapping around him in a tight, passionate embrace, and kissing him for all he was worth.

Baxter's arms tightened around him. "Love you, too, Jazzy," he whispered against his lips, his fingers gripping Jacob's shoulders as if he would slip away if he didn't.

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Epilogue

March 31st, 2022

Jacob

When Jacob had gotten into Keebra, he'd honestly had no idea what he was getting himself into. The decision to graduate from that very school hadn't been his; Jacob had to thank his mother and Aunt Betty for their planning and plotting. Apparently, his love for rugby and very good reputation from the San Diego Aztec Rugby Club had helped with that. The coaches at Keebra Park had been impressed with him before he'd even met them. At least that's what his aunt had told him after graduation.

Jacob felt grateful that he'd had the chance to go to Keebra, even if it hadn't made him the next Darren Lockyer. That last school year had showed him what was truly important in life. Their rugby team had fast become his second home. Those days he'd spent with his friends from school, playing rugby and going surfing with Bax and the others were some of the happiest days in his life. Jacob would always remember them with a smile. He was also very thankful for all the lessons he'd learned from his coaches and teachers. Not only did he become a better person, Jacob had learned a lot about loyalty, respect and discipline.

His senior year encouraged him to be true to himself and be brave enough to live the life he'd wanted. It taught him to never give up, never give half-hearted or you will get half-hearted result. Through Keebra he'd found Bax, who then showed him the way to love. He'd learned that it was something very beautiful and worth fighting for, no matter how scary it can be or how difficult it may seem.

After he and Bax made their way to Sydney the following year, Jacob joined the culinary arts program at the LeCordon Bleu, which was one of the best culinary schools in Australia, and eventually made executive chef. Jacob had struggled for a few years on and off due to his hand injury that, every now and then, brought back those pains and aches. It hadn't hindered him from graduating as one of the best chefs or from finding an amazing position at one of the finest restaurants in their neighborhood.

Baxter started his career as center position with the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs where he had played an amazing game since his first day and fast

became their most essential player. He was currently plotting plans for a coaching position in the near future. Jacob admired him for his passion and love for the game more than ever. From personal experience, Jacob knew how much Bax enjoyed teaching his tricks, and he was sure it would make him a wonderful coach. His chest ached as he was now browsing through one of many photo albums. This particular one held a bunch of snapshots Matt took of them together in front of the stadium on his last day, before and after their final game. They hadn't noticed some of those pictures being taken at the time. Jacob was now glad they existed, those were a wonderful memory he'd treasure forever.

Jacob looked forward to *forever* with Bax; he loved *his man* more than he thought was possible. For nothing in this world would he ever give up on him again. Jacob wondered quite frequently just how much more he could honestly love the guy.

Could they still be so in love, even after ten years of being constantly in each other's faces?

Jacob would have never thought it were possible, not after his terrible experience with his parents, who grew angrier with each other by the day. On the other hand, Jacob never dared to question Bax's love for him, especially not after they had gotten back together. After the point of no return, he simply dived into it with a hopeful heart and constant prayers that they would make it. And they did. Ten years later, they were still madly in love, head-over-heels and absolutely happy.

"Jazz, are you home?" The familiar, gravelly voice broke through his thoughts and interrupted the silence. Jacob felt his lips curve into a smile at the sound of Bax's heavy footsteps on their wooden floor inside the house.

"Outside. Bring me a drink please, would you?"

A few long moments later, Bax stepped outside and joined him. He smiled and handed Jacob a glass filled with iced tea. Jacob felt himself return the gentle smile and a whispered, "Thanks."

Their eyes collided, and his pulse sped up. Ten years since they'd met, and he still got butterflies whenever he looked at Bax. The feeling was mutual, he was fairly certain, and for him it felt all the more intense on a day like this. He knew it was silly and all in his head, but today was their anniversary, one of them at least. It had been Bax's idea to do something a bit more special today, their actual anniversary, and the day Jacob had told him he loved him, thinking

of it as their reunion anniversary or something like that. It was sweet, a bit mushy, but sweet and totally Bax. He loved how his wonderful rugby hero could be so adorably sentimental.

Of course, Jacob wouldn't say no to another day he could celebrate their love, and mark it onto the calendar. Although he could mark every single day in his calendar if he wanted. Every day was worth celebrating their love.

Bax sat down next to him on the grass and scooted close enough for him to kiss his neck and inhale his scent. The guy still constantly *sniffed* at Jacob and scolded him when he wanted to switch body washes, which Jacob did every now and then just to annoy Bax a little.

"Missed you today," Bax whispered sweetly and pressed another kiss to his throat and then his cheek. "What are you doing, Jazzy?" he asked curiously, but Jacob knew his thoughts were far from wanting to find out what he had been doing. They would talk later over dinner, and Jacob was fine with that. There were a hundred and seventy nine other things they could do right now on *his* mind as well.

Jacob held up the old photo album he had been browsing, reminiscing their past together. "Looking at old photos of you and wondering just where all that beauty went." Jacob grinned and waited for that pinch to his side that eventually came. With every moment he spent thinking about Bax, replaying all of their wonderful moments, memory after memory, he felt more and more thankful for that odd not-so-spring-like spring and the even better actual spring that followed that year they'd met. Everything that happened, happened for a reason, and Jacob was thankful for where it had brought them. He couldn't imagine how his life would have turned out, if he hadn't moved to Australia, or if he hadn't met Des Hasler when he did.

"Are you saying I'm not sexy enough anymore?" Bax glared at him with that teasing glow in his eyes, and the inviting smile on his lips, that made Jacob catch his breath. He sighed when Bax reached for the photo album, taking it out of his hand just to put it aside. Jacob's heart beat faster with every inch Bax came closer and forced him to lie back onto the ground. The green grass tickled his neck and bare arms, making Jacob shiver as goose bumps rose.

"I would never dare to think that, Bax." He gasped just because Bax's closeness sometimes did that to him. "You are still the sexiest thing that's ever happened to me."

And, of course, that was the truth and they both knew it, which probably was the reason for the wide and wicked grin Bax flashed him before closing the distance with a deep and consuming kiss. Jacob gripped Bax's shoulders and pulled him hard against the length of his body, enjoying the intimacy and delight of having Bax in his arms, his weight pressing him so beautifully into the ground below.

Jacob loved that man more than his own life.

He was more than ready for another ten years with Bax, and another, and another.

The End

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Author Bio

Riina Y.T. currently resides in Germany. She spent countless exciting days in the UK, US and lost her heart in Tokyo.

With Spring, Bax & Butterflies Riina wanted to give everyone a sweet little something, and hoped it made you smile. She is looking forward to share many more stories with the world.

She would be thrilled if one day her stories could brighten someone's day in the way those beautiful romances always lighten up her dull everyday life.

When she doesn't daydream about boys in love and isn't glued to her Kindle, Riina loves to travel the world and explore the unknown.

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