

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# AS HE WATCHES

Finn Marlowe

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## AS HE WATCHES

**By Finn Marlowe**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **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.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group*. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

As He Watches, Copyright © 2013 Finn Marlowe

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group

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

# AS HE WATCHES

By Finn Marlowe

## Photo Description

A handsome young man, wearing only tight boxer-briefs pulled slightly down to bare his buttocks, stands at a window, hands flat on the glass, his well-defined muscles on display. It's early in the morning, overcast, but the man's not looking outside, he's facing the camera. His expression betrays many emotions, a shy wariness, annoyance, a touch of hurt, and perhaps a little anger. He's stunning. You can't look away. That expression beguiles—what does it mean?

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*“For now, you stay where I put you.”*

*That's the first thing he says to me after I undress, when he presses me up against the glass and positions me just so. I'd ask him to tell me more, but he's got a fetish for self-denial, and if I push I might not get to touch him at all. That's the last thing I want.*

*The thing is, I don't have to listen to him. What we do together, it's completely voluntary and pretty undefined. We set up a meeting, he gives me directions, I obey. He's not paying me, not coercing me, and he knows if he tried to do either I'd be gone. We didn't meet in a club; it's remarkable that we met at all, when we live in two very different worlds. He likes to look, to touch, but he almost never gets off. I like the feeling of his eyes on me, I like doing all the things he says, but I want more. How do I push the boundaries when I barely know what they are?*

*\*\*Look at the challenge in that man's eyes. He wants something, but he might not even be sure what it is. How is he going to get it, and who is he looking at? What I'm really looking for here, author, is an exploration of*

*power dynamics. It doesn't have to be explicitly D/s or BDSM, you can use your discretion when it comes to the depth of the relationship between the main characters, but I'm looking for the explanation of an enigma. Something off the wall, something different. Whatever else it may be, this is not your typical romance. Contemporary is my preference, but if a different genre is speaking to you, run with it. I can't wait to see what you come up with!*

*Sincerely,*

*Cari :)*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** athletes, underwear fetish, humiliation, illness/disease, atonement, masturbation, orgasm denial

**Word count:** 25,251

# AS HE WATCHES

**By Finn Marlowe**

That couldn't possibly be more icing. Then again, a bunch of hyper eight-year-olds with cake... yeah, it could be. Or it could be something even more disgusting, and that didn't bear thinking about. Erik would check on it in a minute. If he lasted that long. From his upside-down vantage point it *looked* like icing, in fact the blobs were tinted the very same revolting combination of purple and blackish-green that had been on top of the giant birthday cake before it all got devoured. Devoured, or, more likely, discarded in places he'd stick his unsuspecting hand into sometime next week.

Erik tried keeping his concentration on identifying the lumpy substance coating the underside of the table instead of his trembling arms. Yes. Definitely icing. Under the table. Christ. This had to be the worst party yet. No, second worst. Nothing could beat that time they hosted the Parents of Multiples group, but this one came close. At least all those twins and triplets hadn't been stuffed full of birthday cake and running high from sugar intoxication, unlike today's little hellions.

A pair of well-muscled legs appeared in front of him, blocking the view of his next grummy chore. The distraction reminded him of his bent wrists and blood-starved hands. Despite the muscle tremors now making a quick trip up to his shoulders, Erik spared a jealous thought for those legs as he struggled with his next handstand push-up. Jordan was a powerhouse of tightly-packed muscle, whereas Erik was more the long-and-lean type. Oh, well. Who wanted to look at kid-smeared frosting anyway? Under the table.

No wonder he had a headache.

"Give it up, pussy white boy, you're never gonna beat my record." Owner of kick-ass muscle definition or not, Jordan could be such an asshole. "Never. Look at those arms just a-shakin'. I give you thirty more seconds before they give out and you find yourself sucking vinyl."

“And I’ll give you ten seconds to get outta my sight before you’re licking my sweaty toe-jam after I cram my foot down your throat.” There’d been at least thirty party attendees. Thirty over-stimulated, sugar-wild, wound-to-the-max boys whose parents had walked in the door and evilly turned the horde loose on him, Jordan, and the new coach, Brittany, who still looked a little shell-shocked. Poor girl. No immunity. She hadn’t been hired yet on the never-going-to-be-repeated-in-this-lifetime Parents of Multiples Day.

The muscle burn in his arms morphed into pain. One more—he could do one more. And not because Jordan was watching. His straining shoulders disagreed with one more. Hell no, was the unanimous opinion. Fighting gravity, Erik forced his quaking arms to finish that one last upward thrust while he kept his legs glued at the knees and toes pointed. Jordan might have him beat in overall strength, but Erik knew he was the better gymnast. Summoning some of that inborn grace Jordan lacked, Erik neatly back-flipped out of his handstand and smoothly landed on his feet. *Take that, jerk.* He wasn’t showing off. Not one bit.

“Still didn’t beat me, Healey,” Jordan muttered.

“Wasn’t trying to. Just trying to get rid of the stress headache.”

“Why? Got a hot date?”

Ha—no. “Maybe.” Jordan had a thing for petite gymnasts, the bendier the better, and had once admitted that’s why he stuck with the sport so long. While he figured out his next Olympic sport to excel at, he taught gymnastics to kids, same as Erik. They weren’t friends, exactly, but they got along, which would change in seconds if Jordan found out he liked guys, not bendy gymnasts. Well, unless they were guys.

“Well, I do, and she is fucking *hot*. And limber—oh, my God. She’s gotta be double-jointed. Let’s finish cleaning up so I can leave this hole for a better one.” Jordan surveyed the party area. “Looks like every second kid forgot their jacket. On the floor. And how the hell do they get home wearing only one shoe, huh? I wanna know.” That was one of the many mysteries of the universe that would never be solved. “I’ll tidy the coat room and do lost-and-found if you put back the extra mats.”



Sure. Just like Jordan to take the easy job. “Fine, but that means you get to clean the table then.” Ha. Payback.

“Whaddya mean, I already cleaned it.”

Erik grinned. “Look underneath.”

Jordan gave him a confused glance and bent to look under the large table. “What the hell! You’ve got to be kidding me. How come nobody saw this happening?”

“Selective vision.” There was just no way to keep a proper eye on the kids on the apparatus if you supervised all the untamed monkeys playing everywhere else. They’d been woefully short staffed for the party. Again.

While Brittany sanitized equipment and Jordan cursed and cleaned, Erik chuckled and stacked the mats and looked for stray children left behind. It could happen. Like it had on Multiples Day. You couldn’t be too careful. Especially with identical triplets. How would you even know when one went missing?

Being dateless, and feeling sorry for a traumatized Brittany, Erik left last and locked up. Not like he had anything else to do, even if tonight would be his last as a carefree twenty-four-year-old. Tomorrow, at precisely 6:15 a.m., he’d hit the quarter century mark. He’d gotten the obligatory birthday visit with his mother out of the way this morning at breakfast, one day early because she had plans for tomorrow morning that couldn’t be cancelled. Or so she said. Kind of odd, her passing on his birthday like this.

So that left another long, lonely, *boring* evening ahead of him. Too bad he didn’t find a spare triplet in the foam pit. They could’ve watched *The Avengers* together—one more viewing and he’d probably get all the lines memorized—or rolled around on the giant exercise balls. Or, ordered pizza only to have it come back up afterwards while they bounced on the trampolines. Erik liked kids. They never expected you to be something you weren’t.

Or, he could seek out more adult-oriented activities for the night. But that would mean making an effort. Finding a club of some sort. A place with dancing? Scratch that—why show the world you can’t dance worth crap? And

those tightly crowded spaces... and strange hands grabbing him... No—just no. Bullies seldom grew out of their hurtful ways, they just developed slyer tactics when they grew up. And with the asthma creeping back...

Besides, a man only went to those kinds of places if he wanted to get picked up. Erik wasn't that kind of guy. Too shy. Too socially awkward. Jordan had only been telling the truth when he said that. And actually, there was only one person Erik wanted anyway, only one man with whom he'd dare bare his body, let alone his soul. Better just to go home. Alone.

Because maybe, just maybe, that man would call tonight.

Sure. That was about as likely as Jordan deciding the women's basketball team was the new petite. Nothing wrong with hoping though, was there? And it would be just like him to text out of the blue, when Erik least expected it. He'd been doing it more often lately too, summoning Erik, and the word was *summons*, too, Erik didn't kid himself. He didn't have the guy's home number, and he never arranged one of their hasty rendezvous. Heck, he couldn't call him if he wanted to, and yes, Erik definitely wanted to. But they had a one-sided deal. *He* summoned and Erik went. That's just the way it was.

And just the way he liked it. Which was kind of sick and twisted, but he wasn't going to think about that again today.

Erik never knew when he'd see him again. *If* he'd see him again. He'd never been invited to call. Didn't know where his black-haired mystery man lived. Hell, Erik didn't even know his *name*.

But if those two little magic words—*one hour*—appeared on his phone right now? *Gone*. Erik wouldn't miss that one hour deadline, either. That's how it worked, their crazy, twisted hook-ups. First, he'd get that two-word text. *One hour*. One minute after replying, if he replied, he'd get another message, an address, part of an address, only it would arrive hidden in some kind of code, perhaps be tangled in a strange riddle. Wound in a poem. Scattered in a photo collage of street signs or jumbled landmarks. Or, his personal favourite, an anagram concealed in the lines of an architectural drawing or old blueprint.

Where the hell did the guy find those things, anyway? Erik mentally added city planner to possible occupations for his mystery man.

There'd been a couple times the tricky bugger had almost stumped him with a difficult clue. Once, he'd been late—not even five minutes—only to find the appointed meeting place empty and the man gone. That had sucked. So he learned not to be late. Not to be stupid. Because being stupid took time, and extra time was never given.

In response to that missed hook-up, Erik upped his game. Thought fast on his feet. Drove fast or ran like hell. Studied city maps over his cereal bowl in the morning and read up on the city's historical sites on the Internet at night so he'd be ready for the next clue. Time spent on Google Earth filled in for the best friend he never had.

Yep. Sick and twisted.

Just the way he liked it.

\*\*\*\*

Very irritating, all that noise. And the hand flapping. Jesus. Douglas spoke more with his hands than his voice. Probably used sign language in his sleep. Winter slouched in his chair and tried to ignore him. No such luck. If Douglas could be said to excel at anything, it was yapping. Totally ruined his concentration, the yammering twit.

Winter had been busy altering the picture on his tablet and almost had it done. As far as clues went, it was an easy one, but fuck, their meeting had gone an hour overtime, and now he had to hurry. Pissed him off, having his plans derailed like this. Especially today.

Douglas's tone turned petulant. "Am I boring you, MacKay?"

"Why, yes you are, Dougie. You noticed." Douglas wasn't worth lying to, although he always got away with it when he did.

"Oh, fuck you."

Not even if he was the last man on Earth. "Yeah? You thinking of switching teams?"

“No,” Douglas answered. He had an impressive sneer. Douglas defined the typical uptight, straight man. “Come on, Winter. Why don’t you try paying attention? This is important.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“The Shelton deal—”

“Is no concern of mine.”

The folder Douglas had been flapping around during his tirade suddenly flew across the meeting room table and slid to a stop right in front of him. *Hmpf*. Dougie’d always had good aim. But nothing was gonna save the Shelton deal. They’d been outfoxed on that one. No matter, another sweet deal always waited just around the corner, and they all knew that. Winter left the folder untouched.

Blessed silence settled in the room for a few minutes, enough time for Douglas to catch his breath and wring the kinks out of his hands before his next tirade. “You can’t just quit,” he finally said, more softly than Winter expected.

“I can, and did. You guys agreed to buy me out.” And with considerable hostility, too.

“You can’t quit. We’re like the mob. Once you’re in, there is no out.”

Felt that way, too. “But I *am* getting out.” Winter stood and straightened his newly rumpled suit. “Look.” He pointed at his perfectly polished shoe. “Got one foot out the door already.” He made an exaggerated step toward the door. Christ, was he never going to get out of here?

In the twelve years of their four-way partnership, they’d seldom quarrelled; they were a well-greased, perfectly-tuned, smooth-running machine of destruction. Winter knew his defection hit the other three hard. Okay, he’d blindsided them. But knowing his partners, his college friends, as he did, a clean break had been necessary. There could be no dragging things out, no giving false hope.

Winter wanted out—*needed* out. Nothing and nobody would stand in his way. Not even their friendship, or the years-long familiarity that passed for friendship. Now that Winter had seen that misconception for what it was, he couldn't *unsee* it. They hadn't truly been friends in years.

"I don't even know why you want out." Douglas actually looked kind of hurt. *Huh*. "What are you gonna do anyway? You don't know anything else."

And that, right there, was the reason. Not that Douglas would understand.

Douglas shook his head. "You'll be bored to death in less than a month. After you've spanked or fucked your way through all the boys in sight and twirled all those little umbrellas that come in your drink and grown fat on some private beach somewhere, what are you gonna do? You live for the thrill of the chase. The kill. You know you're a shark. Arrogant maybe, but a badass, killer shark in his prime."

True. Couldn't argue that, most of that, but he'd grown tired of using his teeth to shred all the bleeding fish he could catch. And Douglas, for all their supposed friendship, simply had no clue there was only one boy he wanted to fuck. "You guys will get along fine without me." Not at first, but eventually. "I'm officially bequeathing my patch of the ocean to the rest of you Great Whites."

"You're making a huge mistake."

The only mistake was not getting out sooner. "I'm late, Douglas. I have to go." Winter had better things to do than hop aboard their guilt trip—they could mail the brochure. "Forget the Shelton deal. It's done. Over. My last piece of advice to you is to snap up that Parkview Heights foreclosure while you still can. My source tells me some new sharks are circling the waters, scenting for blood. They're looking to feed, and Parkview's a tasty morsel."

"Enough of the fucking shark analogies, you asshole." Douglas's usually restless hands fell still. Something akin to sadness flickered across his face then vanished. "Don't go. We need you."

A sliver of remorse stilled Winter's cruel tongue, a weapon as sharp as his teeth. Once upon a time they'd been close, the four of them, before the feeding

frenzy turned them all into something less than human. Winter had to get out now, while he could still wash the blood off. Reaching out, he gave Douglas's shoulder one last squeeze for the friendship they'd once shared. "I can't stay. I won't stay. I'm sorry."

Before he could weaken, before his shark-like nature had a chance to insert itself into the first smart decision he'd made in God knew how many years, Winter turned away and strode for the door. Regret walked with him, as hot and burning as Douglas's resentful glare on his back. How had he allowed himself to come to this? How had they all?

Down in the lobby, Winter transferred the data from his tablet to his phone. Everything was ready. He might have red hands now and be unworthy of the touch of someone pure and clean and honest, but damned if he wouldn't change. He'd scrub and scrub until all the blood came off, until he found the decent person he once was underneath.

In a last symbolic act, Winter wiped his feet on the mat at the front door before he left the building. Done. He was done here. Done with this old, no-longer-suited life. Between the door and his car, some of the weight eased from his shoulders. Bright morning sun caught him in the eye, a harbinger of better days. Time for new beginnings. And speaking of time, he glanced at his watch. Almost nine. Perfect.

Like him, Erik rose early and got busy with his day. By now he'd have been up for hours, would have eaten, had that cup of coffee he swore up and down he never drank, would have shaved, showered and gotten geared up to go. Oh yes, he'd be ready for a challenge. Time to put birthday boy through his paces.

Smiling, Winter tapped his favourite two words into the screen and sent his message on its way.

*One hour.*

God, it would be hard waiting that hour. His hands already trembled in anticipation. Those short interludes he shared with his beautiful gymnast were the only times he truly felt like himself. In fact, it had been Erik who'd

unwittingly shown him what he'd become. Not very pleasant waking from a daze and realizing you were a heartless bastard.

If Erik made other arrangements for the morning, he'd kick his ass. He'd planned this scavenger hunt for days, even freeing Erik from family obligations with a few secretive phone calls, one to his mother of the fifty damned questions and one to his boss to ensure he had the day off. He'd staked his claim. Fuelling the excitement already growing in his belly, his phone chimed. Right on time. A one-word reply appeared, and not the usual, almost bashful, "Hi" Erik favoured, but a daring, taunting, "Go!"

Cheeky brat.

The second hand ticked so very slowly around his watch, taking forever as he waited the requisite minute before sending the first clue. Finally! Grinning, he sent the missive on its way with a prayer the boy would decipher it fast. He needed to see him, his beautiful obsession, and soon. Didn't mean he'd let him off the hook. Erik would have to earn his pleasure.

The game was now, officially, afoot.

\*\*\*\*

What the hell? A weathervane? Erik stared at the picture.

A cock.

*Someone* wasn't exactly trying for subtlety today. Erik had been about to walk over to the organic market for a post work-out stretch and lunch supplies when the text came. Already having his shoes and jacket on gave him a small head start, and somehow, he knew he'd need it. A morning tryst? Never had one of those before. The unexpected daylight summons rattled his nerves, almost like doing a tricky vault used to. His dick, however, liked the unexpected and twitched in approval.

Excitement, both kinds, made his fingers jittery as he twisted his key in the lock and shoved them into his pocket along with his new inhaler. Good thing gymnasts were expert at recovering from stumbles, because he almost tripped down the stairs staring at his phone instead of where he put his feet.

Okay. A copper weathervane with a rooster on top. Which element was the important one? The copper? That meant pennies... or wires or plumbing. Could be any flippin' thing. Who the hell was on a penny, again?

What about the rooster? They crowed. Annoyingly, he gathered. And they serviced the hens. *Yeah, that's so funny, you dolt.* Feathers? Even though he tripped along in full sunshine, Erik shivered. That man could probably do serious torture with a feather. He'd driven Erik crazy with the edge of a credit card once, so yeah, a feather... *damn.* Another tingly shiver travelled downward and stopped at his balls. *Keep your mind on task! Time's a-tickin'.*

So, a weathervane. How did those work? Erik had never been on a farm in his life. *I can tell you the weather right now, Mr. Mystery. It's sunny, warm, and about to get hot.* Didn't those things show wind direction?

Erik yanked open the car door and got assaulted by a stinky blast of damp, dirty gym clothes. No time to shove them in the trunk because some dickhead had parked their huge crew-cab in the small car section, boxing him in. He eased his way into his small car, desperately wishing for more leg room—and fresh air.

Pulling out as fast as he dared, Erik promptly made up the lost time by speeding through the parking lot. Weathervane? Guy was *loco*. Anagrams were much easier. He stopped at the curb, foot eager for the gas pedal.

Which way should he go?

No cars waited behind him. He looked at the photo again. Okay. Weathervanes pointed. But it could be pointing any direction, damn it. He looked again. *This can't be all.* Jesus, he'd already blown eight minutes! He had to be missing something... maybe...? The back half of the rooster seemed to be shinier. Aha. Glints of photoshopped sunshine lit up its back and tail feathers. The arrow pointed the other way. And it was morning... *Devious bastard.*

Alright, then. Head west.

Gunning the engine, Erik did. Fortunately, traffic was thin, the morning rush over. At each red light, he looked at the photo again. The man with no



name, well, he had a name, Erik just didn't know it, had never hidden two bits of info in one clue before, but Erik wouldn't put it past him. Possessed a definite ruthless streak, that one. When the next message came, Erik almost rear-ended the delivery van in front of him. *Get a grip, idiot!* He tapped his phone, his foot twitching on the gas pedal.

A horrible song immediately, and loudly, insulted his iPhone. And his ears. Sounded vaguely familiar. And old, like, 1950's-old old. 1960's? Spotting an opening ahead, Erik pulled over and then frowned at the colourful tie-dyed shapes undulating on the screen. Hippy stuff. Mr. Mystery was nowhere near that old. Mid-thirties at most, Erik guessed. Brows furrowed, he listened to the song, ever mindful of the minutes racing by. Silly song seemed to be something about a... *love potion number nine*.

Good Christ. One of them had lost their mind. *And it's not me*.

Panic fluttered in his stomach as Erik forced himself to patiently listen to the annoyingly catchy song a second time. Something about love potions and kissing a cop, wait—where was that, again? On the second replay, the words began to make sense. *Thirty-fourth and Vine*. That had to be the clue. Or did it?

If he was meant to be going west like he thought, then the next street he needed to hit couldn't possibly be Thirty-fourth, now long behind him. Therefore it had to be Vine Street. Right? There was no way he'd have time to hunt up a Madame Rue, gypsy or otherwise, unless tarot card readers were savvy online businesses now.

And crap—the guy wasn't a cop, was he?

Because that would be so hot.

Vine Street was only a few blocks ahead. And kind of trashy. If he wanted a tattoo, he could probably get one there, along with hepatitis, a quick oil change, and an overpriced coffee.

Erik had no idea whether to go left or right at the lights, and that stupid van made it hard to see anything in front of him. Taking a chance, Erik changed into the right-hand lane and peered ahead. Gas stations. Muffler shops. Yep, a

coffee place. Two of them, one on each side of Vine. Shoot. He was never going to make it at this rate. Forty minutes from now he'd still be twiddling his thumbs and trying to figure out whether to go north or south on Vine. Mexican restaurant... golf supplies... shoe repairs... adult toy store...

Wait. Adult toy store?

Erik slowed. Un-fricking-believable. *Leather, Lace and Love Potions*. Open for business. Couldn't be a coincidence. *And one of us has definitely lost it*. Erik turned right, pulled a quick left and shot into the small parking lot in front of the store decorated with scantily clad women. *Maybe it's me—I'm the one who's crazy. Mom always says the crazy one is the last to know*.

No way was he going in there. Not in broad daylight.

Just... no.

Erik cast a wary eye along the street for a cop instead. None. Not even at the coffee place. What the hell was the world coming to? And it wasn't like mystery man ever let Erik kiss him, on Thirty-fourth or Vine or anywhere else. Erik wasn't even allowed to *touch* him. His lips were perpetually lonely. Someone should write a song about *that*.

Was he supposed to stop here? Head up Vine? Go somewhere else?

He would fail this time. Some birthday this was turning out to be.

\*\*\*\*

Planting the GPS tracker in Erik's car had been a really, really asshole thing to do. And brilliant. Shame be damned. If he wanted to know where Erik was at any given time during their game, he simply found a Starbucks or McDonalds, caught their Wi-Fi signal, and tracked him. Clever little imp he was, too. He'd arrived at the store already.

That song had been too perfect. So many possible choices, yet Erik picked the right one, first try. Excellent. Winter admired intelligence in a man. It was so rare.

Time to give birthday boy his first order. Push his boundaries. His eager fingers texted another two-word message. *Go inside*.

Whether Erik actually would or not, he wasn't totally sure. Depended on how badly he wanted the next clue. How badly he *wanted*. For someone who worked with the public, who taught dozens of kids daily, had the brats climbing all over him, Erik hadn't quite grown out of his boyhood shyness. A handsome face, a pro athlete's body, a simmering sexuality, and no idea anyone would look at him twice. What a crying fucking shame.

Winter didn't think Erik got down and dirty with anyone else. Which was good, because just thinking of someone else touching him, putting hands on that beautiful, powerful body, made his inner monster turn green and see red. And that was, theoretically, bad. Rationally, he understood that, but the shark inside wasn't rational. It was territorial.

Winter had felt territorial almost from the beginning. No one and nothing ever took him by surprise, a point of pride. Yet Erik had managed it, and from the very second their eyes met. Not across a crowded room, but a crowded parking lot.

Some genetic experiment had gone horribly wrong, and a teeming throng of identical pod children had erupted out of the gym and swarmed all the vehicles in a mass exodus that put the disaster management people's plans to shame. Protecting his own unique DNA from cloning, he'd hid out in his car until the experiments successfully escaped.

Winter had never seen such organized chaos. Hopefully never would again. But when the dust settled, there had been Erik standing outside the doors looking stunned, sweaty and edible. Sweaty hot, sexy hot, just plain fucking hot. He'd lifted the hem of his T-shirt to wipe his face and treated Winter to a vision of the most glorious abs he'd ever laid eyes on. He'd stared openly—shamelessly. Erik had caught him at it.

And liked it.

Using his charm, and Winter could be a charming prick, he'd gotten the gym club's owner to loan him the hot gym teacher with the dancing blue-green eyes to show him around not only the premises, but the surrounding buildings and beyond. Creek-front prime land waiting to be rehabilitated. No toxic waste dumps. No endangered birds for the environmentalists to squawk about.

Nothing but the two of them and a volatile sexual tension that had blown Winter's mind.

Of course he'd exploited that tension.

What a heartless bastard he'd been. But somehow, later that same night, in a vacant building they'd just sold, he'd given Erik something he'd craved, fulfilled a secret need inside that no one else had ever reached. Bastard he may have been, and bastard he still was, he'd never betray Erik's secrets.

That unforgettable night had also put an abrupt end to the parade of nameless men in his hotel bed, or pushed up against the wall in some seedy club's bathroom, or down on their knees before him, begging. No more settling. He wanted the real thing. When he'd ceased to believe he'd ever find the matching half of his own kinky self, chance had seen fit to put Erik in his path.

Such a risky business, falling for someone. It took balls of steel. Bravery. Unimaginable control. Things that scared the shit out of the shark. Right from the start, he'd told himself to be careful, not to let Erik get under his skin. Ha-ha. *You never stood a chance.*

Their meeting had acted as catalyst to changes Winter had already wanted to make in his life. After that, he'd pushed his timetable ahead. And soon, Winter would be ready to lay it all on the line and tell Erik he wanted more than hurried encounters with too few words spoken. He wanted it all. A real relationship, days and nights spent together, futures shared, lives entwined. Everything.

He'd just needed to finish cleaning up his act first, because there was no way in hell he was ruining another life. Still had red hands from the last time.

Leaving Erik hanging in a parking lot wasn't the way to go about making the man his. Pushing his shy guy this hard could backfire on him if he wasn't careful. But no risk, no reward, right?

Taking a deep breath, he fired off his next text.

*Pick three things. Do not think, do not ponder, do not contemplate. Take the item that, the second you see it, you want it. You will not concern yourself*

*with price or propriety, but will put it in your basket and move on to the next item. I've arranged for store credit in your name. Some rules apply, naturally. So:*

*Of Leather, pick one. Of Lace, pick one. Of Love Potions, pick one.*

*You have fifteen minutes.*

Since it was Erik's birthday and all, he'd be generous. Then again, having Erik arrive all hot, sweaty and frustrated did have a certain appeal... ooh-yeah.

To get Erik out of his car, because he knew damned well he'd be stewing in it, Winter texted a short warning.

*I'm waiting.*

\*\*\*\*

*Go inside...*

"I'm not doing it." Talking to oneself in these circumstances was perfectly reasonable. Other people did it all the time. He heard them. In Walmart, especially. "I'm not."

The store didn't look all that seedy. In fact, the front window and entrance appeared neat and clean, almost inviting. Could've done without the half-dressed female mannequins staring at him. Dredged up all kinds of pervy feelings. All he needed now was dirty fingernails and a trench coat. Procrastinating, Erik spared another glance at the pretty collection of lace undies on the mannequins.

Shit.

Lace.

*Of Lace, pick one...*

What the hell? Leather, Erik got. In fact, he'd had a boner since he pulled into the lot and read the word *leather* on the sign. Ever since Mystery McNasty had shown up for one of their liaisons wearing skin tight, lace-up leather pants and black boots, Erik had been a convert. The things he'd done down on the floor at the mercy of those boots...

And the love potion part seemed easy enough, although it didn't necessarily have to mean lube. Erik worried his lip between his teeth. They'd never done anything that required lube, although some little packets made the odd appearance. *He doesn't even let you touch him, no way is he going to fuck you.* That suited Erik fine, since he wasn't any good at it anyway. Guys always shoved it in too fast and it hurt, which, apparently, was Erik's fault. *Bet if Mr. Mystery did it to you, you'd like it...*

*Stop it!* He'd already blown five of his fifteen minutes, and he hadn't even opened the frigging car door. Now wasn't the time to think of what the man would or wouldn't do. Or how much he'd like it.

But lace! Twisting his neck for a better look, Erik eyed one of the skimpy bra-and-panty-wearing mannequins with suspicion. No. There had to be some mistake.

Sure. A mistake. Mystery man didn't make mistakes. Wherever today's game ended up taking him, this play had been meticulously planned in advance. *Quit whining, you know you don't have to do this.* Nameless or not, the man didn't own him. Erik was a free agent. Could quit anytime he wanted. Except... they didn't talk about it, but Erik knew that the price of their continued hookups was his total obedience. That was the way it was.

*And you like obeying, don't you? No! I hate it. I hate the humiliating things he makes me do.* Erik didn't know why he couldn't stay away. Right—sure, plead ignorance. *You stay because he drives you crazy, he haunts your dreams, awake and asleep, and just thinking about him gives you a knot of excitement in the pit of your stomach unlike anything else you've ever felt in your life. Admit it, you like having his eyes on you, you love pleasing him... you want more.*

And surely that was the most bizarre thing of all, Erik's all-consuming need to please his dark-eyed tormentor, even if the man never got off himself during their strange encounters. *Forget mystery man, I should call him my ice-man.* Took Erik a while to realize the ice-man's pleasure took a different form than the physical. For some inexplicable reason, he thrilled to watching Erik

get off, which for its own inexplicable reason, tripped all Erik's switches. What a twisted pair they made.

And that was just the way he liked it.

But... rules were rules, and ice-man was a stickler for the rules, so if he wanted to get off in his company again, he had to... *go inside*.

Dang it.

Wishing he had that trench coat to hide behind, Erik got out, locked the car with a *beep*, and scowled back at the haughty ladies and the smaller, groin only, male mannequin with the lacy underwear. What? Wait a second. Hand on the door, Erik looked again. Oh-ho. Those definitely weren't ladies undies. They covered a very unladylike bulge between the plastic legs. Christ. Lace panties for men. *This is the last time I'm doing this, I swear*.

Inside, the reek of day-old incense curled his gut more than the humiliation of being there to begin with. Erik took a deep breath anyway and sent silent kudos to the inventor of the rescue inhaler. Time to get his ass in gear. The orders had been clear, and if he had eight minutes left out of this throw of the dice, he'd count himself lucky. As he grabbed a basket from the rack and stepped beyond the entry, Erik's eyes bulged.

Holy shit. So much stuff...

Kinky stuff.

The clerk standing at the till didn't jump up and scream "Pervert!" at him. Instead she smiled at him and his reddening face then went back to unpacking a box of dildos. Christ Almighty. And people said he had to be nuts to do *his* job.

Fifteen minutes would have been nothing, a blink of the eye in the crammed-to-the-rafters place. How the hell could he find three things in *eight freaking minutes*?

*Easy. Don't think, don't ponder. Just pick.*

Leather implements covered one wall. Spanking things. Flogging things. They kept the rope collection company. Ah, rope. Erik enjoyed a shiver of

fond remembrance. Nothing humiliating about being tied up, at least not the way mystery man did it. The rasp of rough hemp against his wrists, the whispered threats in his ear...

*Get back on track—he said leather, not rope.*

Maybe they made leather rope? Checking the shelves under the wall of whips, Erik didn't find any. As he sidled down the aisle, the stock took a decidedly masculine turn. Yes! Cuffs? Harnesses? Erik's dick swelled enough to tighten his loose track pants. He wasted a precious few seconds speculating. Not thinking—he wasn't thinking—he was just trying to get this right. While he liked the harnesses, they didn't want to leap off the shelf and land in his basket. He kept going, looking but not touching, and saving his focus for breathing and opening his mind to possibilities.

Chaps. *Nice*. Jackets and belts. Paddles and crops. *Mmm... crops...* And God, that scent...

*And those things there... yes, that's it.*

They were displayed on a buff mannequin dressed as a cop. A very kinky cop holding a strap-on instead of a baton. But that wasn't what made his heart skip a beat. It was the elbow-length leather gloves with laces, buckles and tight braiding on the palms that Officer McSlutty wore. Holy frickamoly—scratch the holy, there was nothing holy about them. To be touched by those things, to have those rough braids slide up and down sensitive, taut flesh... yeah. *Take them and put them in the basket...*

There were only two pairs for sale, and the ones not on the mannequin were, thankfully, large size. The heady scent of leather filled his nostrils, obliterating the cloying incense. Cold, or warm from body heat, the tanned skin would feel amazing sliding over his skin. Especially if a certain someone's strong hands were inside them. Erik's heart skipped another beat as he slid them off the shelf and into his basket. *Would he let me touch him, I wonder, if I wore the gloves?*

*Sure—as if. You know he won't.*



*And he'll probably just spank you with them—you should take something else...* But Erik didn't. He took two big steps backward and unwittingly found the store's fetish section. Too much! His mind couldn't take it all in at once, the vinyl, the buckles and straps, the hoods and gags. Lots of things intended for men, too, like the metal cock-cage artfully pinned to a cardboard cut-out of an underwear model. Who the hell would willingly submit to wearing that thing?

*You know who...*

*Shut up! You're out of time. Stop thinking for God's sake. Find something lacy and get the hell out of here.* Those underwear displayed at the front had been... acceptable. The fabric had been a repulsive sky blue, a shade that brought back all sorts of horrible memories of endless hours confined within the blue walls of his childhood bedroom. Surely there had to be other colors—yes, there, on the shelf. Black. *Boring.* Yellow. *Now that's just vile. Nobody looks good in yellow.* Pinkish ones, with a black leather inset at the front that laced them up. Oh, God. *Those ones.* Erik fingered the tag. His size, and not pink—ashes of roses apparently. Christ.

*I'm not crazy enough yet. I still know I've lost it.*

“There's a fabulous corset that matches those,” the clerk said from behind his back, startling him.

The panties fell into the basket as Erik almost jumped out of his shoes and made an undignified, girly noise. “Pardon?” he choked out.

“Right here,” she said, squeezing past him to rummage through a bunch of hangers. With a clack of plastic, she disentangled one hanger from the rest and held it up.

*Holy shit.* Fabulous was right. And wrong. Wrong! And dirty, oh, so fucking dirty. Erik's chest tightened alarmingly. *Not an episode—not now, please not now. Just breathe.*

“You're pretty big,” the clerk said, sizing him up, “you need a larger size.” Slipping the hanger back on the rack, she flipped to the next one, pulled it out

and held it up. “Here we are. Isn’t it wonderful? I wish they made a women’s version. It’d sell out in five minutes flat. It’s the sexiest corset I’ve ever seen.”

“Uh-um...”

With no shame whatsoever, she leaned forward and said, conspiratorially, “You should take it. You’re perfect for it. The color alone—*please*. You *need* to take it. There has to be some justice in the world.”

“I...”

With an evil smile, she slowly eased the stiff bundle of deep pink lace and black leather toward the basket, her expressive brows raised in question. She was giving him the perfect opportunity to say no, thank-you. Only Erik’s tongue wouldn’t work. Then it was all the way inside his basket and Erik still wasn’t breathing. Lace. *For me*.

“He’s a lucky guy,” the clerk said, then sighed and turned back to straighten the messy hangers.

Goddamn it. *Don’t think! Nothing’s left to contemplate. It’s already in the basket.*

*Fine.*

Next thing, then. *Of Love Potions, pick one.* Okay. Easy. Erik re-evaluated that a second later at the glass displays full of... what the frick? How many kinds of lube could there possibly be? His chest still felt tight, like he couldn’t get enough air. Patting his pocket, Erik felt for the comforting shape of his inhaler. *You don’t need that. It’s not an attack. You know what’s wrong with you, and it’s sitting in the basket.* All his blood seemed to have moved downward. Erik slid the basket in front of his crotch. *Never again. I mean it! This is the last time.*

The omnipresent clerk suddenly reappeared, and in front of him this time. Still scared the shit out of him and Erik jolted, banging the basket against his inopportune erection. Smiling her sly, knowledgeable smile, she reached up on the shelf behind the counter and pulled down a bottle. “The best,” she commented and handed it over. Dazed, Erik reached out like a fool and opened his hand. “Now for condoms,” she said.

*What? Who the hell was this woman?* Erik found his voice; it was just an octave higher than usual. “I don’t need—”

“Oh, trust me, honey. In that outfit, you will definitely need them.”

Between all the blood burning in his face and swelling in his dick, there was none left for his heart to pump out a terrified beat. His chest felt so very, very tight. Soon, he’d get lightheaded. Where was his inhaler? A box of condoms magically appeared on the counter in front of him.

“Can I get you anything else?”

Not thinking, not pondering, Erik put the lube, then the condoms in the basket. He shook his head. “Thank you, no,” he managed. “I think... I think I’ll just... *go*.”

A sweet and wonderful laugh filled the empty store. “If it helps, just think of me as your fairy godmother.”

Oh, for—“That’s not even funny.”

Apparently she thought so, for she laughed at him some more, wrapped everything in purple tissue and tucked his purchases into a fancy box, then a bag. “Here you go.”

Almost done—hallelujah. “I think—I’m supposed to, ah, have a store credit. My name’s—”

“I kinda figured you were the one.”

Acute embarrassment set off little tremors in his hands. Hadn’t felt like that since grade school when Davy Smits called him Wheezy the Cheezie in front of everyone. What had mystery man told her about him? Tightness crawled across his chest. Erik didn’t think he could manage another word. Fuck it, and yes, this deserved using the *fuck* word. This was nothing but a big, fat conspiracy designed to humiliate him. He nodded his thanks instead of speaking, because, really, it wasn’t her fault—he did this to himself. Curling the bag in one big hand, Erik fled the store with what little of his dignity he had left.

*Never again.*

*How could he do that? Tell a stranger about me? I thought he understood...*

\*\*\*\*

One last clue. Winter cheated and gave Erik twenty minutes, not the fifteen he'd originally said. Fuck it. If Erik showed up half hour late he wouldn't give a flying fuck, he'd make him strip on the spot before he lost his mind. What the hell had he picked? Should have installed a hidden camera by the register. Next fucking time. That would probably be overdoing it, though.

And it would ruin the surprise.

Some rules were better followed. When he felt like it. And he needed to quit fucking cussing in a hurry. Erik worked with kids and didn't need to catch his potty mouth. Potty? Hell, hardened sailors wouldn't want to be in his head right now.

The clue, a *Snakes and Ladders*.gif had been a bitch to make. Computer shit was his former partner Andrew's specialty, only Winter's name was now permanently inked in first spot on Andrew's shit list. Dougie was right. You really couldn't leave the mob unscathed. Well, fuck. Probably wise to be self-reliant anyway.

Maybe Erik wouldn't even know what *Snakes and Ladders* meant. Yeah, well, that's what the Internet was for. Today's rendezvous point, across from some defunct store called The Snake Pit—and no, Winter did not want to guess what the hell that meant in case some snakes got left behind and wanted to slither over for a visit—should be easy enough to find. Never could tell with Mr. Healey, though. Full of surprises, Erik was.

Against all understanding, Winter had taken a liking to the antique wooden ladder collection tacked onto the side of the brick building he'd bought out from some down-on-their-luck family who'd been in the sign business there for sixty years. Would hunting them down and returning the ladders wash some of the blood from his hands? Would it help if they knew he loved the old building and would give it new and lasting life as his office?

Doubtful. Seven years bad luck for each one? Hell. But life goes on, right? *Not for some people though, does it?* Squeezing his hands into fists, Winter leaned back into the seat, closed his eyes and refused to let the horrifying memory flare to flaming life. *It wasn't your fault! Not yours alone.* Maybe if they'd extended the deadline, hadn't been so fucking heartless, things would've turned out differently... *and maybe they wouldn't. She was already unstable... but Jesus-fuck, why the kids...?*

He'd never know why. But Winter MacKay prided himself on learning from his mistakes. Next time he'd get it right.

Unclenching his hands, Winter opened his eyes and moved his head into the crack of sunshine coming in through his window. Better. Today was Erik's special day. No more of this pointless self-recrimination. And more than Erik's day, this one was also his, because once he signed off at the lawyer's at three, he'd be on his own, his own man, all choices his to make. Course, all the fuck-ups would be his, too. Therefore, he just wouldn't make any.

Best of all, once he walked out of that overpriced, snooty, uptown law office... *Erik will be mine.* Finally. At least he hoped so. For all he knew, Erik would give him a good kick in the chops for his presumption and tell him he didn't stand a chance. No risk, no reward, right? *Right?*

Damn it. Worrying accomplished fuck all, and he had to quit it. Better to be a man of action. In a nod to vanity, Winter finger-combed his wavy hair, smoothed his jacket and straightened his tie. Erik had a thing for a nice suit. Actually, when they were together, Erik had a thing for just about everything. Almost any dark, perverted act Winter could dream up. *God, I'm one lucky bastard.*

Being with Erik brought about great feats of creativity. They didn't fuck—he'd forbidden himself that—and he almost never let Erik touch him, so satisfaction had to come from satisfying Erik, which was perversely satisfying in its own way. Fuck.

Philosophizing and it wasn't even noon yet.

Leaving the car behind in his very own little lot that he didn't have to share with anyone, Winter wandered over to wait by the entrance for Erik's arrival. Should be any time now, the clever brat. Damn—looked like both the mailman and paperboy had discovered his existence. They'd crammed the old-fashioned wooden box full of useless shit already. While he sorted through the fliers for anything resembling real mail, Erik's piece of crap car skidded across a patch of gravel and entered the lot doing roughly Mach 5.

Shit on a stick.

Time to put a stop to that before he killed himself with that lead foot. This was just a game, not do-or-die. Winter felt the need to beat the speed out of Mr. Hell-On-Wheels. And he'd enjoy it a great deal, leaving little red crop-kisses all over that impossibly muscular butt. That should slow him down. Or not. Probably just rev him up more.

Shifting slightly, Winter moved out of the shadows enough for Erik to spot him. Then he went inside, rushing up the stairs as fast as his pulsing dick would let him. Almost time. *Don't hyperventilate. Get a handle on yourself.* What the fucking fuck had Erik picked out? *I am never setting myself up for another surprise as long as I live. What was I thinking?*

His main office space stood empty except for the new, large couch and wooden-slab coffee table he'd had custom built and delivered. Things could get messy with them, so he'd covered the seat cushions with the handmade throw his sister Autumn had sent for Christmas. Colors went well. Floor to ceiling glass made up one entire wall of the upper floor, with antique leaded panes at the top. Utterly spectacular. Winter sat on one end of the couch, planted one foot on the table and waited, wagging his leg impatiently.

Showtime.

Some form of witchcraft had given Erik all the grace of a cat. He moved silently, weightlessly. Always startled him, that sure-footedness. A faint crinkle of plastic alerted him to Erik's presence only seconds before he was, suddenly, *there*. And damned, if he wasn't the most beautiful man Winter had ever laid eyes on.

Beautiful even in his fury.

Eyeball knives and daggers were thrown. Ouch. Usually, when their eyes met for the first time after being apart, sparks flew. Today, dual sparks. Lust and anger. Oh, yeah. Taking control of the situation, Winter said what he always said first. “Clothes *off*.”

Glaring, Erik slunk forward and thudded the largish bag, and box inside, on the table. What the hell could possibly require a box that size? Jesus, was he never going to find out? Still glaring—and was that a little bit of hurt creeping in there under the anger—Erik jerked out of his jacket, balled it up and flung it on the floor.

“What? Were you born in a barn?”

A nasty retort burned dangerously hot on Erik’s tongue. If he’d been a less shy individual, no doubt some verbal sparks would have spewed out. But that wasn’t Erik. Instead, he bent down, snatched up the jacket and hurled it toward the couch, narrowly missing Winter’s head. *Temper, temper*. Good thing he didn’t have Dougie’s killer aim.

The silky, quick-dry shirt Erik wore underneath almost fit in his big palm after he roughly yanked it up, and off. Fuck—*those abs*. He’d never seen anything like them. Rock would be envious. In angry jerks, Erik toed out of, then kicked off, his running shoes, flinging them across the newly buffed hardwood.

“Do you need an attitude adjustment?” Should give him one regardless. For fun.

Pausing with his fingers on one sock, foot up, Erik sealed his lips into a tight line. Such balance—God. Not a single wobble, despite the anger, as he removed his socks. A dangerous glint lit his pale eyes as he crushed them in his fist.

“If you so much as *think* of throwing those at me, I’ll knot them together and gag you with them.” Maybe would anyway.

All that remained for the striptease was a pair of very thin exercise pants that would look terrible on anyone who had the audacity to have some body

fat. It was obvious Erik did not want to bare himself. Today was not quite going according to plan. Maybe he needed a few minutes to calm down. They did talk, it wasn't all sex between them. "Are you wearing underwear?"

Erik threw another volley of eyeball darts his way. "What kind of question is that?"

"One that I asked, and therefore, I expect an immediate answer."

"Yes."

"Then take off the pants, but leave the underwear on."

Seething, Erik took a deep breath and shoved at the weightless material until the pants fell to his feet. God in heaven. Boxer briefs. Skin tight.

*Those muscles...* Unbelievable. But... hmm. Erik had always been lean. Healthy, but lean. Last week, Winter had thought Erik had lost a couple pounds. Today, he was sure of it, and the young man didn't have any to spare. He was so cut, every muscle cast a shadow. Drool-worthy. Definitely drool-worthy. But edging toward not-so-healthy.

Backing up, Erik gave the pants an angry boot.

"That's enough!" Winter was up and on his feet before he thought to move. Erik actually stepped back a pace, startled, then took another and another, until he backed into the window.

"Turn around," Winter snapped. Where the hell was all this anger coming from? "Hands on the glass."

For a few seconds, Erik considered disobeying. Winter noted the rebellion in every tense muscle in a body where every flex and ripple showed, but eventually his big hands settled on the glass, chest high. After a moment, Erik's jaw unclenched. He licked his lips and opened his mouth, an argument at the ready. Turning, his long fingers slid along the glass with a cringe inducing squeak.

"No. Don't move." Not yet. "For now, you stay where I put you." Brat could just stew there for a minute until he got a handle on his temper.



But damn, did he have to be so stunning when angry? Settling again on the couch, giving them both a minute to relax, Winter did what he liked best. Waited. Watched.

Definitely skinnier. And buffer. If that was possible. How much did Erik have to work out to get muscles like that? Fucking amazing. Those shoulders—oh, man. They'd look incredible with his arms strung up overhead, wrists tied. Would Erik like it? A theory worth testing. "Put your hands up higher."

Erik's head snapped round, the look on his face startling. Very un-Erik-like, that expression, a strange alchemy of anger, defiance, resentment and... hurt?

Hurt. Not the emotion he wanted to arouse. He'd been aiming for excitement, lust, and a little fear with an undercurrent of humiliation. Birthday presents for his kinky boy. Winter slid his foot off the table, and as he set it down, his toe sent something plastic skittering into the coffee table leg. He reached down and picked up the funny white object. An inhaler. Jesus. When the hell had he starting needing one of those?

Erik might be many things, but liar wasn't one of them. He'd said he'd outgrown the asthma that had plagued him as a kid... yet here was a shiny new inhaler, with a dispensing date of less than a month ago. *Albuterol*. Sounded nasty. Perhaps this had something to do with the lost weight?

Setting the device on the table, Winter rose and walked up behind Erik, whose muscles rippled down that long, powerful back as he stopped behind him. Creating shudders was one of Winter's favorite pastimes. Normally. This second—no. The scent coming off that newly bared skin smelled so completely, fabulously Erik his mouth watered. Winter breathed in deeply, then out against the exposed nape, all hot and worried. A sigh followed Erik's deep shudder.

"Erik," he said, feeling strangely tongue-tied. "Are you... unwell?"

The tenseness instantly returned to Erik's shoulders and neck. His jaw clenched and he didn't turn his head like he normally did, but kept his eyes staring out the dirt-stained glass. "I'm fine," he finally bit out.

"Are you?" Didn't sound fine. Usually Erik got talkative after sex, or whatever humiliating, sexual thing Winter demanded he do to himself, but today the conversation would have to come first. Seeking to calm unsettled nerves, Winter set his hand between Erik's shoulder blades. The powerful muscles underneath leapt under his touch. "You're angry."

A faint snort of contempt answered him.

Normally such blatant disrespect would have made Winter contemplate suitable punishments. But Erik wasn't his sub. They didn't have a defined relationship. They simply... *were*. Coaxing instead of chastising, Winter slid his hand up Erik's spine into the closely cropped hair at his nape. Bristly. *Wonderful*. "I take it you didn't enjoy your shopping trip."

Head lowered, Erik gave it a little shake and ground out an unhappy, "No."

That was to be expected. Shy, guarded Erik would have wrestled with the humiliation versus the need to obey. But that was the whole point. "There's nothing to be ashamed about. Stores like that wouldn't stay in business if people didn't patronize them."

"It was humiliating!"

"And how was that different from everything else I make you do?"

"You... you..." he paused, and smacked his hand on the glass. His voice dropped to a whisper. "You made me feel..." Erik lowered his forehead to the glass and went silent.

"I made you feel... what?"

Erik breathed against the glass. "The things you make me do—no, the things *I* do... sometimes they're really humiliating, but you never make me feel humiliated, you know? You never make me feel ashamed of myself... of what I like. But today..."

Winter could not comprehend how it could bother Erik this much. “It was just a store—”

“You told her about me!”

Ooh shit. Didn’t think of that. But really, Winter wasn’t *that* insensitive. Most of the time. “All I told her was that I was sending an impossibly hot young man on a scavenger hunt and he’d be picking out three things, and she was to charge it all to my card. I only gave your first name. That’s it. Nothing else.”

“Really?” Erik asked, sounding desperate to believe.

“I swear it, Erik. And that’s the oath kind of swearing, not what usually comes out of my mouth. I would never violate our trust. What happens between us, stays between us. I’m not inclined to share you with anyone, anyway.”

Erik shuddered, with relief this time. “It was awful.”

Leaning in, Winter rested his chin on top of one muscular shoulder. “It shouldn’t have been awful. It was supposed to be... *enlightening*.” Which was the full and complete truth. “I knew you wouldn’t exactly love going in there, but I wanted to challenge you. Give you a push. And I was curious.” Ha—understatement. “I wanted to know what you’d pick, given the choice, instead of me always choosing for you.”

“I didn’t want to pick anything!”

“No?” Was that true, or a Healey-style misdirection?

A tense silence suggested that statement wasn’t the whole truth. Interesting. Unfortunately, as much as his curiosity was killing him, there could be no examining that large purple box until a certain issue got resolved. “We’ll discuss that further in a moment.” Winter ran his hand back down Erik’s neck, and over the tight muscles of one incredible shoulder. Jesus. Man must sleep with a barbell in each hand. “Right now, I think we need to discuss something else.”

Erik tensed visibly.

“Why did you get into gymnastics?” They’d discussed the *why* before, but Winter was going somewhere with this.

Surprised by the question, Erik turned. Winter cupped the back of his head and turned him back toward the glass. He’d get a better answer if he kept Erik in a submissive mind-set. “Answer me.”

“I already told you! My stepdad thought regular exercise would help my symptoms, expand my lungs and all that crap. And gymnastics was something I could do inside where everything was climate-controlled, because I was always sick. Drove him crazy. For a couple years there, I caught *everything*. And he said if it didn’t help me with the asthma, at least it would toughen up the rest of me so I wouldn’t get picked on all the time. I was kinda pathetic.”

“Sounds like a decent guy.”

With a sigh, Erik rested his forehead on the glass. “Yeah, he is. I like him a hell of a lot better than my real dad. He doesn’t care that I’m gay. Even though him and my mom split, I still talk to him all the time and see him when he’s in town.” Erik shifted on his feet. “And he was right. About the gym. I owe him a lot.”

Winter wanted to shake the man’s hand. “But something’s changed, hasn’t it?”

Touching Erik, while delightful on its own, also had the added bonus of loosening his mouth. As Winter’s hands moved, soothed and comforted, Erik leaned into the caresses and waged an internal civil war—*should I trust, or should I keep my troubles all to myself?* Winter understood. He had no one to unburden himself on, either.

Whatever had happened, it must have been bad. Despite Winter’s roving hands seeking to calm, Erik fidgeted, switching his weight from foot to foot as his hands worried over the glass. “I—” he took such a deep breath, his chest expanded visibly. “I had... an attack. An acute episode.”

Oh. “And? Been a while, had it?”

“Yeah. Years. I can’t even remember the last one. Before that, I mean. My teens, I guess.”

“What happened?” *Please trust me enough, Erik. Unburden yourself. I can take it. I want to take it.*

“I, ah, well, I went jogging.”

Okay. Now there was an activity Winter despised. But a necessary evil since he didn’t want to develop a paunch like the one Dougie tried to hide with a succession of sloppy shirts. At least Winter did it like a civilized man, on a treadmill. In a gym. “So. Jogging. Crack of dawn?”

“No.” Erik scowled. “I don’t run in the dark. It was almost light out. But still really cold. Dry.”

Even with Winter’s limited knowledge on the subject, *cold* and *dry* didn’t sound like the best combination. *I’d probably hack up a lung. Even though I quit smoking years ago.*

“I didn’t really want to go out. I was dog-tired, but I’d been slacking since Christmas—and I know what you’re thinking, and yeah, my mom’s shortbread cookies are to die for—and usually a good workout energizes me. So I thought maybe I’d have a good run, get the blood pumping... you know, that it would wake me up. And after I’d have a long, hot shower... I thought it’d make me feel better.”

“Did you warm up first?”

“Sure. Same as I always do. I stretched, walked for the first block and then...”

“You tore off, full speed ahead, like the devil was hot on your tail?”

“Pretty much.” Under his hand, the tense muscles relaxed. “I got about a block before it hit. Never had one like it in my life—my whole chest just seized up at once. No warning at all. Just wham! Couldn’t suck in a single breath. Not only couldn’t I breathe, it hurt like hell, like someone really big was squeezing the crap outta me. Someone with claws. And he’d put a plastic bag over my head first, for laughs.”

“Jesus, Erik—”

“I panicked—and I mean totally freaked out, had a full-blown, fear-for-my-life panic attack. I couldn’t breathe *at all*. I’m told I ran right out into the street. Straight into oncoming traffic.”

“Shit. How did you...?” Survive? Not get turned into road hamburger?

“Do you believe in Guardian Angels?”

*No. Because if they existed, those kids never would have...* “No, not really.”

“Well, I never used to, either. But someone must have been watching out for me, because not only did the van I ran out in front of not hit me, but the lady driving it had a kid with asthma, and that kid happened to be with her that morning. Skating lessons—no hockey. Something with huge jerseys.”

“Jesus.” So what if he said that already, because, *Jesus*.

“So she gets out of the van—probably to kick my ass—and sees me turning blue and gasping like a beached guppy. I’m lucky she’d seen it all before, and so, unlike me, she didn’t panic. You can’t panic when you’ve got a sick kid to keep safe. She grabbed the kid’s inhaler outta her purse and used it on me right there in the middle of the road.”

Maybe Guardian Angels did exist, they just took human form from time to time. “And that fixed you up?” That easy?

Instead of tenseness in the shoulders, Erik shivered, little bumps breaking out on his fair skin. “No,” he whispered into the glass. “I was too far gone.”

Goddamn-fucking-Jesus-motherfucker.

“But she got enough of the stuff in me to help. Had to spend the night in the hospital. I really hate nebulizers—makes me feel like I’m suffocating and you get this taste in your mouth and the smell...” He wiggled his fingers against the glass. “There were cops everywhere, and I think people watched me from their cars. I never had to go in an ambulance before. I only remember... bits and pieces. But I remember my Guardian Angel—her face... her eyes, how frightened she was, and I remember...”

“Hmm?”

“How much it hurt.”

Right. Winter knew personally that Erik had a pretty high pain tolerance, not that he was a sadist or anything. They played with pain on occasion. So obviously Erik meant something else, a different hurt. The boy had to get to it in his own good time. Private people couldn't be rushed. Winter was really sick of that. *The world would be a much better place if everyone just catered to my need for instant gratification.*

“I never... I never even got to thank her. That woman. She saved my life, and I never even said thank you.”

“I'm sure she knows.”

The goose-bumps faded into a tight shrug. “I still wish I could tell her.”

Winter smoothed the last of the shiver away with his hand. “You'll be more careful now?”

“Yes.”

The new inhaler seemed adequate proof, but Jesus. “Was it really awful?”

Winter was patient with Erik's silence. “It was... I was really scared,” he finally admitted. Instead of his forehead, Erik rested his cheek on the warm glass. “I thought I was gonna die. Alone. Death was so close.” He pinched his finger and thumb together. No space between. “This close.”

*This close* gave Winter a shiver of his own. Doing something he never allowed himself to do before, he leaned in and pressed his lips on the spot his hand had been warming between Erik's shoulder blades. A single kiss. It would be three o'clock before too long—only a minor cheat, really. “Keep your inhaler with you at all times.”

“I will.”

“And listen to your doctor.”

Erik's fingers slid over the glass until he rested his cheek on one strong hand. “He's a twit.”

“No, he isn't. He just doesn't let you get away with any bullshit.”

Erik's eyes popped open, green as emeralds in the morning light. "I listen."

"Right. Listen. And then go right on ignoring his advice."

"No, I—"

"Spare me. I know you ignore it, because you've been exercising too much." Erik probably thought what worked once would work again. That he could somehow force his body to obey, that if he only worked hard enough, trained more, trained harder, it would cure him. "And you're not eating enough." From too many cookies to not enough. "Working out until you drop is not going to cure you."

Erik gave him a confused look. "I know that."

Winter slid his hands downward and spread his fingers so they caressed over ribs and muscles and landed on the waist band of those delightfully form-fitting boxers. He edged the band down until he could see the beginning of the cleft of Erik's ass—his incredible ass. When the fuck would it be three o'clock? "If you know that, then what's with all the weightlifting?" Nothing else could build the definition Erik sported. Every inch of him was, well, *ripped*. "And you've lost, what, five pounds?" Winter gave the firm ass a smack. Rock hard. "Your body's not betraying you. You don't need to punish it." Winter rubbed the cheek he'd swatted.

"That's not why I've been doing it—" Erik blurted, then abruptly snapped his mouth shut.

Yeah? If not that, then why? "Then what's been motivating you?"

Erik turned his face into his hand again and covered his eyes with his fingers.

So shy. God, he loved that. "Erik."

A red flush crept up Erik's neck. The tips of his ears pinked. Poor guy had no hair to hide behind, everything he thought, visible. "You," he mumbled into his fingers.

"Me?"

"I do it for you."



Fuck. Falling for this boy was gonna kill him. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

Good lord. If Erik got any more perfect, Winter’d never be able to take off his clothes in front of him, and he’d never been the least bit modest. “Why do you think that?”

With a sigh, Erik peeked out from between his fingers. “Because you...” He re-covered his eye, hiding again. “You know, because you never... you don’t... well... I thought if I... that if I was *more*... that you’d let me... that you’d quit denying yourself...” He trailed off, flushing all the way to the roots of his hair.

Forget plausible deniability. Winter knew exactly what Erik was referring to. He slid a finger under the leg band of those tight underwear. Hard muscle, smooth skin. Best of both worlds. “There’s a certain power in denial, my dear boy.” And that, he’d discovered, was true. Shocked the hell out of him. A kink he never knew he had. “Denying myself while granting you release has been...” What? Torture? Heaven? A place somewhere between the two? “Empowering.” Ah, yes. That was the word. “Denying myself you has been the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” But no suffering, no reward, right? “And the most amazing. Freeing.” Fuck. Surely it was almost three o’clock by now?

“But—”

“Hush, now.” This was not quite the birthday gift he’d planned. They would talk more after, like he always wanted, once the urges had been sated. And there would be an *after* this time, because he was keeping Erik to himself all damned day. And night. “I’ll tell you more about it later, but right now...” Winter took a deep breath, “right now, I want you on your knees while I take a look in that large, fancy box you brought me.”

“Brought *you*?”

Winter laughed. Felt good to release some of the unpleasant tension and make room for the good kind to come. “Of course, *me*. Just because I let you pick them doesn’t make them yours.” Winter gave the elastic band a snap and

put the boss back in his voice. “Beside the couch, now. On your knees, legs apart, shoulder width. Hands behind your back.”

Erik pushed himself off the glass with more of that freakish grace and moved to do as he was told. Winter folded Erik’s crumpled jacket and set it on the hard floor as padding. A gymnast was nothing without his knees, after all. Erik settled into his submissive position like was born to it. What a treasure. And growing hard, too—those shorts hid absolutely nothing.

“So sexy,” Winter said, because Erik was that, and more. “Time for me to deny myself one last time.”

\*\*\*\*

*One last time...*

Not like Erik hadn’t been expecting it or anything. So why did hearing it hurt so much? Ached in ways he hadn’t imagined it would, a strange tightness that pulsed over his sternum and inched up his throat where it squeezed, somehow more painful than that horrible asthma attack had been. *If you hadn’t been so stupid and thrown your jacket on the floor, your inhaler would never have fallen out and eagle-eyes wouldn’t have spotted it... and realized how pathetic you are.*

Sure. Like the man didn’t already know.

*No wonder he didn’t want to tell you his name.*

Who’d want a sickly, socially awkward nerd who got along better with eight-year-olds than grown men? *Why did you have to go and blab everything?* Erik squeezed his eyes shut so tight they hurt, too. He always blabbed. Every time—the secrets just burst out when he wasn’t feeling... *himself*. When he was... soaring. *When he makes you soar—the way nailing your best vault used to feel. And you fly because... you trust him.*

And still did.

“Stop that.”

Erik startled at the stern reprimand. *Stop what?* The toe of a shoe nudged his inner thigh, and, like the slut he was, he spread his legs farther apart, purely on reflex. But he kept his eyes lowered, his thoughts hidden.

“Stop fretting and look at me.”

*Not yet.* Erik hid behind his lowered lashes a few seconds longer. Mystery man was expert at reading body language and that funny pain still lingered in his chest—he’d know how Erik felt, how much he *wanted*. But... one last time, right? When Erik opened his eyes, the man was closer than expected, his face only inches away, and he was staring at him intently.

He was, without a doubt, the sexiest man Erik had ever seen. In the bright morning sunshine his unusual eyes looked even more beautiful. The irises were ringed, dark blue, almost navy, around the outer edge and a bright blue, almost aqua on the inside. Stormy skies with a patch of sunshine. They were stunning. Erik loved those eyes. No wonder he always blabbed.

“You’re troubled this morning.”

*You think?* The man had no idea how horrible it had been going in that store. *Even though I always swear it’ll be the last time every time I’m with you, I never really want it to be the last time. No one ever sees me, the real me, except you.* This time, he wouldn’t blab. Nope. Because there was humiliation and then there was *humiliation*. “I just feel a little... unsettled.” Entirely true—not even a lie.

The beautiful eyes were also keen with intelligence. “Do you want to stay? Or do you want to get dressed and leave?”

What? Leaving was the farthest thing from his mind. Erik wanted more, not less. “Stay.”

“You sure? Decide right now. Because if you stay...”

Erik knew exactly what he meant. If he chose to stay, he chose to obey. Mystery man didn’t make idle threats, and even though it was a threat, his dick stirred to life in the confines of his underwear, which strangely, he still wore. “I’m staying.”

The toe that hadn't moved from between his legs slid along his thigh. Erik didn't dare look down. It could go anywhere, do anything, that shoe. Maybe he'd be ordered to lick it. Or ride it. Or jack off with it pressed to his neck. Anything.

Mystery man merely smiled and then relocated his foot. Erik jerked, but held position as the buffed leather worked under his balls and rocked up and down. Oh... *frick*. Erik grunted, not in pain—in shocked excitement. Ice-man's toe wiggled and dug in, almost painful, but not quite, that heady place right in between. The very tip of the shoe wormed its way backward until it nudged so very close to his hole that Erik almost lost the interlocking grip that kept his hands together.

“Uh-uh. Hands together.”

Mystery man was, first before all things, a right bastard.

“I think it's time to see what you brought me.”

No—God no. How the hell had he managed to forget that box? And all that was in it? Lace panties. And a fricking girly corset that would tie up the back with silky laces...

Mystery man's lip curled, more of a snarl than a smile. “Oh, I think I'm going to enjoy this.”

No—just no. He couldn't open that box! Erik pleaded the only way he could. With his eyes.

“Oh yeah, I'm gonna open it. Beg all you like. I love that whimpering sound.” The foot, still under his balls, retracted. Slowly. And a little painfully, sliding and digging. Once freed from under his balls, mystery man gave him a lazy smile and dragged the tip right up his straining erection. The dusty ridge of the sole caught him just under the flared head of his cock. Then dug in. Erik gasped. Then the foot moved completely away, leaving both relief and disappointment in its place.

Erik let out his next breath with a heavy sigh. His dick twitched. Why did he like everything that man did to him? Even liked the sound the box made

sliding out of the plastic bag, the horrified anticipation of knowing what lay inside, what would soon be revealed, because *he* was doing it.

With his hands behind his back, Erik couldn't curl in on himself and hide. Which of course, was why he'd been put in this position. Devious bastard.

Continuing his torment, the cruel man carefully folded the plastic bag into a neat square. *Slowly*. Then he turned the box around on the table until the opening faced him. Erik wanted to look away—*yes, look away!* But didn't. Mystery man's fingers worked the lid up.

"Hold still," he commented, without looking away from the box.

Easier said than done. Erik wanted to crawl under the table. There was sufficient room to fold himself beneath the massive slab and disappear. Despite the jacket padding, his knees hurt. His favorite boxers were too tight. There was far too much light coming in the big windows. In the empty room, his rapid breaths echoed annoyingly.

The lid popped off.

Someone gasped. Erik wasn't sure it was him.

"Interesting selection, Mr. Healey."

Erik spread his legs a little more. Closer to the floor that way. Maybe he could sink into it if he stretched far enough? Did the splits? Erik hadn't lost his flexibility yet, despite his quarter-century-old joints.

Mystery man pulled out the expensive lube first. "Good choice." He broke the seal. Definitely going to be used then. For a second, Erik hoped. *He's not going to fuck you. This is the last time, remember? And you don't even like getting fucked.*

When he pulled out the condoms, Erik expected a glib comment, something like, *no need for these, is there, Mr. Healey?* Instead, he looked at the box, raised the corner of one dark brow, and set them beside the lube. Okay... but no. The man liked to watch. Sometimes touch. Not fuck.

A buckle clanked softly as he withdrew the long, leather gloves from the thin tissue. A rush of heat flared in Erik's chest, and his cock pulsed within the

confines of his underwear. Those gloves... *breathhtaking*. Mystery man examined them closely, a secret smile lighting his eyes. "Another fine pick."

The little plastic tie that held them together went *snap* as he broke it. He fingered the lacing. His lips curled into a cruel smile as he noticed the purposefully rough braids on the palms. "I think I'm *really* going to enjoy these." He slid his one hand inside, loosened a lace and adjusted a buckle. "Oh, yes," he purred.

Why the hell didn't he put those back on the shelf when he had the chance? That purr guaranteed he'd feel that the rough hide marking up *his* hide. Mystery man had a good, strong arm—two of them. Might be ambidextrous. Erik wriggled on his heels and inched his legs back together, a harder task than expected because of the slippery fabric and his stiff dick bobbing everywhere.

"That's close enough," the man warned. The devil-shoe tapped his thigh and then nudged it, forcing his legs back apart. "I may deny myself, but you don't get to deny me. Ever."

Frick—no, fuck. No one would notice if he swore inside his head. That growly voice reached between Erik's legs and squeezed his balls as effectively as if it were the man's hand. The man's hand in one of those gloves. The soft cotton of his briefs would have a definite wet spot now.

Plucking on the glove's fingers, mystery man pulled his hand out and set them beside the box. Seemed... *reluctant* to let them go. God, he was so gonna feel the rough side of those somewhere. Would he get... *spanked*? The rush of heat that flooded his groin almost made his hands slide free from their death clasp.

Spanked.

Ooh crap. His mom never even spanked him as a kid. Would he put him over the couch? His knee? That massive coffee table? A shudder of revulsion—and excitement—caused him to almost lose his grip. Again.

"There must be something really interesting tucked inside this last wrapping," he commented, "You're a jittery wreck." His nose wrinkled slightly. "Smells... *leathery*." The ringed eyes gave him a look of disapproval.

“I believe my instructions were quite clear. One of leather, one of lace and one of love potion. Not two of leather.”

Oh, goddamn. Erik hadn't considered the leather on the corset, he'd only had eyes for the lace. The set was mostly made of lace, though. Pink lace—*ashes of roses*. Did that count? “I—but there is lace. Lots of lace. Look inside.” *Shoot. I just told him to look in the box.* Sweat began to slicken his clasped fingers. *Will he leave now because I didn't get it right? Did I blow my last chance?*

“Then let us see what is, apparently, *not* leather.”

The last layer of paper crinkled as the man unfolded each side, handling it almost delicately. Erik could not look away, but focused his gaze instead on the strong hands, the precise movements, and the twinkle of tiny diamonds on the face of his wristwatch. Shame burned deeply, a molten path travelling from neck to belly. Out of an entire store, he'd chosen women's underwear. Ashamed or not, his cock throbbed hot and eager and dripping against the already damp boxer-briefs.

Mystery man froze. *This is too much even for him.* The room filled with the sounds of two sets of ragged breaths. *Please say something... anything! Tell me I'm dirty. Or disgusting, sick and repulsive. Anything!* Erik's legs slipped further apart as he hunched over, curling his shoulders as much as he could without breaking his grip.

“Jesus,” The man finally said.

The corset came out of the box first, ribbons dangling, sunlight passing through the holes in the lace. Mystery man fingered the pink material, then caressed the central panel made from strips of leather sewn together, the part that would cinch him tightly. Erik hadn't noticed in the store, through his horror and his arousal, that the leather had been embossed, not that he could make out the pattern. Still without speaking, the man laid it across his knees and smoothed it with his hands.

*Please look at me... or say something... please...*

He did neither. The lovely ringed eyes of sunshine and shadow stayed aimed on the box of shame. When he reached into the tissue for the final item, he made a sound, low and a little menacing. A growl. He hooked the panties—couldn't call them anything else—on a finger and held them up for inspection.

Erik made a sound of his own, and not a sexy one like Mr. Mystery had made. A whimper.

*Just leave... all you have to do is get up and leave. If you go, you'll never have to see the disgust on his face.* His knees remained locked. If this was his last chance, he'd take what he got. *Just close your eyes and pretend he likes you...*

Startling him badly, the shoe nudged his balls. Gently, though.

"Erik."

Even breathing hurt as he opened his eyes.

"Stand up, boy."

*Don't think, just obey.* His knees cracked as he stood, hands still clasped. For some strange reason, his legs trembled. He felt oddly uncoordinated. Hiding the unaccustomed weakness, he snapped his knees together. *He's probably gonna tell you to go home and play with your pretty dollies.*

"Take those off." One big finger reached out and tugged on the leg of his shorts.

What? Off? Confused, Erik looked into the face that haunted his dreams. No dark stubble today—too early in the day for stubble. He couldn't count how many times he'd dreamed of touching that face, kissing that cruel mouth, or being the recipient of one of his rare smiles. All those dreams crumbled to join the dust that hung in the air and coated the windows. Coated his life.

Finally remembering the order, he slid the underwear down, disgusted that despite everything, he was still hard. Nothing, but a slut. Naked, he looked his dark-haired watcher in the eye.

"So beautiful," ice-man said.

Beautiful? Not get the fuck out? "But I thought—"



“Calm down, Erik. I don’t know what’s got you so bent out of shape this morning, but take a deep breath and relax before I decide to bend you right back into shape.” He set the corset back on the table and crumpled the matching slip of pink lace in his fist. “Talk to me.”

Oh, how he wanted to. No, damn it—would. One last time.

“I—I’m... so ashamed.” Frick. Blabbing again. The rest tumbled out easier. “And scared,” he whispered. Because he was. Deathly. Scared he’d never see him again.

“Scared?” The space between ice-man’s brows furrowed. Was that... concern? “There’s no need to be scared of your desires, Erik. We’ve discussed this.”

“But I’m so disgusting!” Too late to save things now, might as well let it all out. Blab to his heart’s content.

“You think I’m disgusting?”

What? “No! Of course I don’t! Not you. I meant me.”

“But if I like the same things you like, then I must be disgusting too, if you are.”

“You’re not! You’re—you’re... *wonderful*.” There. Said it out loud. *I finally said it*. And he wasn’t the least bit ashamed of that.

Warmth slid up his thigh—a soothing hand. His leg quit trembling. “And I think you’re wonderful, too. Not disgusting. Wonderful. A treasure. *My* treasure.”

*Me?*

“Yes.” A cold spot instantly formed where he removed his hand. Pink lace flashed as the fingers that had just touched him snapped the price tag off the underwear after freeing them from his fist. “I love these.”

No way. Just... no. He liked them? Panties? “Really?”

“Oh, yes. I can’t believe this is what you picked. Get them on. I can’t wait to see you in them.”

Erik's fingers shook as he took the little scrap of fabric. "You want me to...?"

"I'm waiting."

Fitting his feet through the leg holes seemed impossible, like one of those dreams where you can't get anything right. He shook everywhere. Mostly his fingers. Almost put them on backward. The stretchy strange material felt funny against his skin. Scratchy. Hot. *Incredible*. Ice-man settled against the back of the couch. Spread his long legs. Struck his patented *put-on-a-show-for-me-boy* pose. By the time Erik worked the panties up to his knees, he wasn't sure he could get them all the way on. His thighs were too big. And his dick too hard.

"They'll stretch. Undo the lacing a little."

Fumbling, Erik loosened the black ties at the front. The leather insert eased open a little, but...

"Come on, boy. You know I'm not the tiniest bit patient."

Careful not to tear the delicate material, he tugged. They did fit over his thighs. Barely.

"And I don't need to remind you not to come without permission, do I?"

"No, sir." Erik had never screwed that one up. He jerked the see-through material up higher, worked the back up over his buttocks and the front over the straining, solid rod of his leaking cock. *Don't come, don't come...* With one last tug, the lace snapped into place over his erection and the leg-hole seams nestled neatly into the small space between thigh and groin. The leather inset barely contained his cockhead as it butted and surged against the waistband. *Feels so good, so nasty, but don't come... don't.*

"Fuck, that's hot. *You're* hot."

Closing his eyes, Erik gritted his teeth. He wouldn't come. He'd obey.

"Fucking sexy."

That growl. Erik almost came undone. *He likes them? Likes me in them? Thinks I'm sexy?* Erik cracked his eyes open. Mystery man's eyes were dark and intensely focused. And filled with lust. Erik recognized that shimmering

glint. His trousers couldn't conceal his massive erection, either. *Maybe he really does like me like this? Maybe I don't disgust him. Well, more than usual.*

"Lace them up, now," he ordered, voice gone thick.

Make them tighter? Jeez-Louise. He couldn't. Any more pressure on his cock and he'd lose it. Fumbling again, Erik pulled on the ribbon ends, squeezing the leather edges together. "Oh, God," he groaned.

"Like that, do you?"

Yes. "No, I—"

"No lying. Not to me. Ever."

Why had even bothered trying? "I—yes, I like it. You know I like it."

Flashing his pearly whites, he grinned in agreement. "Tie a little bow with the ribbon. Make me a present."

How he managed to do it, Erik had no idea. His fingers had lost all coordination. He was so close to orgasm, he was scared to move and trigger what he'd been forbidden.

"You look stunning. Show me the back. Turn around."

Being careful how he turned, and where he put his hands lest they rub on anything, Erik turned.

"God, I love your ass. And those panties..." Mystery man's voice had gone all deep and husky. "I want to rip those off and fuck you into the floor."

Holy Christ. Fuck. Floor. *He wants to fuck me?* Erik wanted him to do it, even if he was rough. If this was to be the last time... then maybe? "Please?" he whispered.

"Not this morning, gorgeous."

Of course not. What those words meant, was... *never*. Their time together was almost at an end. The couch scraped the floor as mystery man stood. His body heat hit Erik first, then his hot breath on the back of his neck. Delighting in the closeness, Erik shivered.

“I fucking love you like this.”

Erik had no idea what *like this* referred to, and didn't care. He liked it too. Imaginary wings sprouted from his back. Soon, he'd get airborne. One last time. Hands settled on his ass and slid across the thin material, hot—so blissfully hot. “Ohhh,” he groaned. So wonderful, being touched. So rare. He leaned back, chasing more contact.

“Spread your legs.”

Without hesitation, Erik did. Whatever the man wanted. He loved it all. Even the sharp pleasure of pain sometimes meted out. No pain this time though, just a big hand stuffing itself down the back of the panties. The addition of the hand removed any slack left in the front, causing the lace, and leather inset, to pull snug against his cock, “Stop!” he cried.

“Does this make you want to come?”

“Yes,” he gasped. Fingers invaded his crack. Oh, fuck. “Very close.”

“Not yet. You want to come, you'll have to work for it.”

Devious bastard always said that. Meant it, too. “Whatever you want,” he whispered.

The pad of a finger brushed over his hole. Erik jerked and almost ruined the panties and his perfect record with a huge spray of spunk. Mystery man chuckled, low and dirty. “On the couch, baby. I want you to amuse me. Show me a good time.”

Even though the couch was only three steps, Erik almost didn't make it. The urge to climax was becoming impossible to resist. Walking forced the tight fabric to rub in unaccustomed ways. Delicious ways. *Dirty* ways.

“Lean back against the arm and spread your legs nice and wide for me.”

Erik scooted back. His legs fell open. Any relief he found in not moving was short-lived when ice-man picked up the gloves and tugged one on. Keeping his eyes more on Erik than the leather, he adjusted the buckles, then the buckles on the other glove, worked the lacings and pulled the second one

on—two hands of dark promise. They had hidden zippers he hadn't noticed in the store, so once adjusted, two quick zips and they were on.

Ooh.

“Like these, my horny little slut?”

No more lies. “Yes.”

“Me too.” He grinned. “Now touch yourself.”

Oh, no, no, no. He couldn't. If the man so much as looked at him hard enough with those pretty eyes, he'd come. Touching—no. Just. No. Erik shook his head. *I can't, really, I can't.*

“Come on. Just a little stroke. Show me. Start at the tip and slide your fingers down to your balls. I want to see it, wanna see you touching that pretty lace and your cock at the same time. Come on, dirty boy, give me a proper show.”

Dirty boy. Hot tingles of pleasure spread over his skin. Though he shaved everywhere, even his pits, kids hated gross, sweaty pits, any missed body hair rose up, felt alive—electrified. The slight movement of his arm to his thigh shifted the material of the very tight lace, a tug and caress on his oversensitized cock. Erik gasped, and closed his eyes. He couldn't do it. The edge. He'd stumble.

“Look at me.”

If he opened his eyes he might see the gloves. Or those beguiling eyes. Or pretty pink lace. “I can't. I'll come.”

“No you won't. I haven't given you permission. So look at me, sexy baby, and touch yourself.”

*Touch myself. As he watches.* Erik's favorite thing. Mystery man touching him would be better, but he never did. Now, never would.

Touching the edge of the panties, Erik opened his eyes. His lids felt leaden. His hips jerked, his cock eager for the attention of his fingers. One stroke. He could manage one. Like doing that one extra push-up in front of Jordan. Willpower. It simply took willpower. Praying he had enough, Erik moved his

fingers across the lace to fondle the head of his cock. A slippery wetness oozed through the tiny holes, slick on his fingertips.

“Yes...” his lover of unknown name said, barely louder than a whisper. “Stroke down the shaft now—go slow—and then grab your balls. Gimme a thrill, boy.”

If he made it that far, he’d be okay. Playing with his balls alone never made him come. But today... it might. Keeping the ordered touch feather light, he did as told. His back arched up off the couch as his slick fingers glided over delicate lace and stiff flesh beneath, almost like an unzipping of his soul. *Don’t come... obey.* Curling his fingers, he grabbed his balls, the orbs swollen and full in his hand.

“Squeeze them. Hard.”

Erik squeezed, unsure how hard was *hard*.

“More,” he was ordered, “enough to throttle down that racing engine of yours.”

Hurt himself on purpose? Down there? Even as the idea horrified him, his hand tightened. Until it hurt. Because those twin pools of aqua and navy were focused on him, ordering him to do it, watching him with a crazy intensity, his engine remained stuck in overdrive. The pain simply made the sensations brighter, and the day’s worries duller.

After a few painful seconds, mystery man said, “That’s enough now.” The cruel smile reappeared for a second, then vanished. “So gorgeous, hurting for me.”

The exiting pain stung more than the pain of active squeezing, and Erik sucked in a breath, holding himself still everywhere else. The edge wavered right in front of him—so damn close.

“Slide those slutty panties down for me. Not too far, just until your cockhead pops out. Show me how much you like to strip for me. How much you love me watching you in your tight, slutty, girl panties.”

Mystery man had lied. Now he was closer to coming than he ever was, the pain a distant memory. “I want to, but I...” Erik paused, afraid to even speak. The stretchy lace felt incredible under the pads of his thumbs. And his skin underneath felt hot to his own touch, searing, as he hooked them under the waistband. What had he been saying? Putting on a show, because he loved to be on display for this man, Erik slowly pushed down on the fabric, panting away the climax that still haunted his every move.

“That’s it, baby boy. Show me your cock.”

Trembling now, Erik wiggled slightly, enough to free his straining erection caught under the curling elastic. The head popped out and bounced free, his cock impossibly hard. A startled gasp escaped from his lips.

“A work of art, Mr. Healey. You look pretty in pink.”

Wasn’t anything special, but the praise created a nice, tingly shiver all over. The muscles on his chest rippled, and his nipples ached for a pinch. This was his last tingly shiver—better enjoy it. How could this be the end? How could he live without more?

“A little lower now. Show me the rest of you. I want to see all you’ve got. I paid a fair price for my ticket to Erik’s naughty burlesque and expect to get my money’s worth.”

The material rasped and thrilled as Erik pushed the waistband lower, purposefully working his abdominals, showing off all those hours spent in the gym for this man. In hopes of... winning him. Not that it mattered now.

“You are blowing my mind here, gorgeous.” Then mystery man did something he’d never done before.

Instead of just watching, he touched. With those damned gloves.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was just *one* hand. On Erik’s knee. Hardly cheating. Right?

Not cheating at all, actually, considering Erik was definitely blowing his mind, along with everything else, including his shaky resolve. *You’re spoiled rotten, you do know that? Dad is right.* But no fucking way was he breaking

his vow. No! The gloves didn't hide the red hands, and there was no way he would allow himself to have Erik until he signed those damned papers—not until he dotted every 'i' and crossed every fucking 't'.

He hadn't suffered the denial all these months for nothing. And oh, how he had suffered.

*Just a few more hours...*

But those panties! Goddamn. He'd never seen anything sexier, and he'd been privy to lots of sexiness in his time. Beyond the usual, which, with Erik, had always been thrill enough. Perhaps it had more to do with the man who wore them. The way Erik shuddered and flushed and trembled as he touched them, pulled them on. Then how he revelled in the naughtiness of it all. What a gem.

Never could have imagined in a million years Erik would pick what he did. A corset. Holy motherfucking hell. He'd had to put the thing down before he exploded. Almost lost his cool there for a second. Barely had any cool to spare with just the flimsy undies going on over those muscular legs. Erik had no cause to feel humiliated for liking them, he knew that rationally, but the shark enjoyed his suffering. The power rush... ooh, yeah.

His naughty boy was putting on the show of a lifetime. Almost time to let him come. He'd earned it. Winter earned it. Watching Erik come was... fucking fantastic. "Pull them down all the way now." Pink lace. Jesus. Erik was going to make *him* come. In his ridiculously expensive trousers. "Dirty little sluts come with their panties around their ankles."

Erik was so far gone, all he managed was a deep groan.

"Are you my dirty boy?" And his eyes. Blown.

"Uh-huh."

"Then show me."

Teasing him—no, seducing him—Erik pushed them down. That pinkish color suited his paleness, and the leather inset suited his maleness. Exquisite. Erik should wear lace all the time. Especially around his ankles. Fuck—no,



*frick*. He had to quit thinking like that. Made his control go four directions frickered. When was it gonna be three o'clock?

The gloves were insane. No, they trumped insane. Tonight, he's spank Erik with them. Surely the boy expected it—wanted it—picking gloves designed for that purpose? Hand to rock-hard ass. About damned time for some serious touching. And then maybe fucking.

Because someone brought him condoms. And lube. *Thank you, Erik.*

Reaching out, he grabbed the bottle from the table. He popped open the top one-handed. Good invention, those pop-top caps. "Give me your hand."

Wild-eyed and desperate, Erik held out a shaky hand. Erik loved the humiliation of being made to finger himself in front of Winter. And it was his birthday, after all. Since it was very good lube, he'd only need a small squirt. Aiming carefully, he slicked up Erik's fingertips.

"Do you know what I want, slutty boy?"

Erik nodded.

Today it had taken forever to push Erik into the realm of subspace. The half-there, half-gone gaze indicated he'd arrived. His skin had that lovely flush bringing it to life, and those muscles... fuck. Just fuck. They rippled, actually *rippled*. *I do it for you...*

Jesus.

Winter could do this for Erik—grant him release. And not just sexual, but from whatever troubled him, if only for a short while. Hand still on Erik's knee, Winter pushed, forcing his leg up. Exposing Erik this way would drive his shy guy mad. "Pull your knees up. Show me that sweet, shaved hole." Winter liked Erik completely bare. And since Erik never got advance notice of a hookup, that meant he had to shave or wax *all* the time. Cruelty wasn't a lost art, after all.

Panting and moaning, Erik raised his knees. He really did have the most amazing ass. Especially with his fingers in it.

"Do you need directions? GPS coordinates?"

“No, sir,” he said, voice shaky as his knees.

“Then touch yourself, dirty boy. Stick your fingers in your ass for me. Show me how much you like it.”

Erik’s entire body shuddered. Winter tried not to wallow in the satisfaction, but he knew well how to push all Erik’s buttons. Which tripped all of his own. What a twisted pair they made. Good thing he’d braved the creepy exodus of the pod-children that day and not driven away like he was going to, or he would have missed finding his better half.

Out of all of Erik’s considerable and delightful attributes, Winter appreciated two more than he should. His hands. He had long fingers. Watching him stick one, or more, into that tight opening almost brought Winter to orgasm every time.

Denial—there was power in denial. There was!

*Be patient, only a few more hours...*

Pulling his balls up for better access with one hand, Erik slid his lubed-up fingers down over his taint and into the crack of his ass, smearing the slippery fluid everywhere. His slit leaked pre-cum all over those spectacular abs. “Ohhh,” Erik moaned as he ran his own fingers across that sweet opening.

“That’s it, my little slut, be a naughty boy and stick it in.”

“I don’t—I *shouldn’t*—”

“Oh, but you want to, don’t you? Do it now.”

Obedying, Erik nudged the tip of his index finger in. And gasped.

“Is it tight?”

“Yesss...”

“So nobody’s been fucking that hole?”

The sea-foam colored eyes sparked open. “No.” He looked genuinely surprised by the question. Interesting. “No one.”

“So it’s just my hole, then, is it?”

The answer to that question suddenly mattered more than anything. What if Erik said no? What if he'd waited too long? Blown his chance? What if he'd lost his kinky boy to someone with clean hands and a clear conscience?

"Yes," he whispered. "Yours."

The tense breath Winter had been holding burst out. Thank God. Or Guardian Angels. "Just mine?"

"Yes... I only want..." he made a small, strangled sound, "it to be yours."

Oh, God—*Erik*. "Then if it's my hole, I'd like to see more fingers in it."

"Oh, no... please no." Even when writhing, the boy had that strange, fluid grace. He was all over the couch, squirming. "I can't—don't make me."

*Ah, dear boy*. Winter seldom made Erik do anything. That was the kink in Erik's kinky. He needed to do... *whatever* to himself. As Winter watched. Matched Winter's kink perfectly. Although he did like to touch, too. And fuck. Fucking was good. Especially if he got to watch himself doing it at the same time. *Mirror, mirror on the wall... ceiling... change room door...*

*Okay, I think I'm losing it. Erik always says the crazy one's the last to know.*

"I want to see two fingers in the tight, sweet hole that's all mine." The digit Erik had in there was sinking deeper. Such *long* fingers. "Fill up that little hole, bratty boy. Shove them in."

"Are you gonna... watch?"

"Oh, yeah. You've got my attention now. Best show in town." The gloves were driving Winter crazy. Kind of distracting. To wear them and not make proper use of them was, almost, well, sacrilege. What about improper use, though? Winter slid the glove from Erik's knee onto his bulging thigh muscle. The gloves had left an interesting pattern behind on the pale skin of his knee. *Must spank...* No! Denial was a virtue. Or some such nonsense. Nonsense to be abandoned at three o'clock. "Come on my sexy boy-toy. Finger that hole."

Always took a little effort for Erik to get that second finger in. Additional proof not many men had plundered that loot. Sharky liked that idea—wouldn't

have to go to the trouble of finding an abandoned back yard to bury the bodies in.

Erik had two big fingers lined up, poised to enter. “You bad boy.” Looked so sexy. The lube was good quality, slipperier than hell, and Erik squeezed the pair in. Then went from squirming to utter stillness.

“No coming!”

“I’m trying! Please... I-I can’t hold back anymore.”

Didn’t look like he could, either. Hot little tremors of desperate need shook his powerful body. “Fuck yourself, baby. C’m on. If I like your performance, I’ll let you come.”

Despite Erik’s flexibility, that angle had to be awkward. The long fingers pumped in time with Erik’s panting breaths—a symphony. But his fingers were slipping. Maybe Winter should help? Could break-in the gloves... The lovely buckles kept rattling softly, like music. Letting the rough palms scratch and scrape over flushed skin, Winter slid his hand from Erik’s thigh to his crotch. Cheating had always served him well in business, why not now?

“Hard to... I can’t—”

Ah. Damn it. Winter was a sucker for boys in distress. He set his hand over Erik’s and guided the fingers deeper.

“Yes, oh yes,” Erik cried. “Like that.”

“Nasty boy.” And that was the best kind. An improper use for the gloves flitted in and out of Winter’s mind. It was Erik’s birthday, for Christ’s sake. “Want my finger in there with yours?”

With a gasp so hard Erik almost choked, he sputtered, “What?”

“There isn’t really room for so many... but you did pick these gloves. I should do it.”

Winter stole some of the lube from Erik’s fingers and swirled it on the tip of one gloved finger. The leather wasn’t going to go in easily. Oh, well.

“Please...” Erik moaned.

Yeah? “Please what? Want me to finger *my* little hole with the glove on? That what you want?”

“No!” he cried, shuddering, every muscle rippling. “That’s so dirty!”

“I know. But you’re a dirty kind of guy, aren’t you? Sprawled there like a whore with your undies around your ankles. I think I’ll finger-fuck you with these gloves on. Make them smell like you. *Taste* like you.” Although maybe he should have some decency and let Erik pull his fingers out first. Birthday boy, and all that. “Pull out now. I want mine in there.”

Erik gulped in air as he slipped his fingers out. He was a panting, shaking, sweaty mess. What a way to break in the couch. Teasing and tormenting, Winter wound a leisurely trail down Erik’s perineum until he reached the small, puckered entrance. He’d never actually inserted anything into Erik before. He always let Erik to do... *whatever* to himself.

Taking his time, he wiggled the leather-encased tip of his finger into the small opening, and then worked it further in, inch by almost-painful inch. Tight. Warm. *Amazing*. One hell of a way to cheat. “Like that, boy?”

“Ah... huh.” Erik had almost moved beyond words. But then, Winter was in a fine state of need himself. Heat travelled from Erik’s body through the glove, the leather channeling the warmth up his arm and into his chest. *Three. O’clock. Three...*

Enough slick finally coated the fine leather that his finger slid in and out without dry resistance. The buckles scraped the inside of Erik’s thigh, a gentle rasp. Winter liked the sight of the lacing on the inside, it reminded him of bondage. Of dreams of Erik in bondage. Now that he’d made it all the way in, he pumped—no, he *fucked*. The muscular body he loved to watch more than anything else contorted wildly in response.

“Please,” Erik moaned. “I have to... may I... come?”

“Soon,” he replied. “I want to watch two of my fingers filling your tight ass first.”

“No,” he gasped. “Not two!”

His eyes had gone glassy and wild. Perfect. “Definitely two—you asked for this, picking those undies. Gonna drill you good, baby. Those are really slutty panties, and they look so very good on you.”

“The leather, it... it—”

“Looks beautiful fucking your ass. Such a dirty, dirty boy you are. Wish you could see it.”

Fumbling and losing coordination, Winter reached for the lube. If he wanted to play with Erik more later today, he couldn’t have the leather ripping delicate tissues. Hallelujah for pop-caps. Never would have gotten it open otherwise. He squirted a liberal shot on his gloved fingers. *I’m not going to make it to three p.m. I’m going to come. Damn you, Erik.*

Two leather-covered fingers going in wouldn’t be very comfortable. *Then don’t do it. There’ll be other times.* Better to share this first time with his wilder half, anyway. “Come on, boy, give me your hand. Wanna see one of your long fingers in there with mine.” Erik slipped his shaky hand down beside Winter’s. “That’s it.” Winter pulled his finger almost out of Erik’s ass, making room for two. “Stick it in with mine.”

As they worked their two fingers in together, Erik whimpered and clawed the couch with his unoccupied hand. When his climax came, it would be intense, and Winter didn’t know what would happen then. Flames? Fireworks? Screaming... *God yes, please scream.* Unfortunately, the loss of sensation to his fingertip meant he couldn’t finesse Erik’s prostate like he wanted, but then, he wouldn’t have to. The boy was done. *Ting.* Like dinner.

And not just done, but soaring. No, not soaring. *Vaulting*—a double-front half-turn. A two-and-a-half-twist Yurchenko. Something high and incredible that took your breath away just watching. Forgetting about the glove’s spanking-rough palm, Winter reached for Erik’s hard, leaking cock as it bounced against the abs of stone, smearing pre-cum everywhere. Winter wrapped his fingers around the hot shaft. Not tightly, not jacking, just... waiting.

Erik's eyes snapped open. Brilliant green this time and lost in excitement. "Yesss..." he hissed. "Touch me."

"With pleasure." What the hell else could he say? Erik's cock looked stunning wrapped in his hand. Wet. Engorged. Winter glanced down to their conjoined fingers, his of black leather, Erik's pale and shiny with lube, thrusting deep into his ass. Winter had never been more turned-on in his life.

Firmly, but not cruelly—Winter only used pain to heighten pleasure, not for the joy of it in itself—he squeezed, and dragged the rough braided palm of the glove up the straining, hot length of Erik's magnificent erection. "Now," he panted. "Do it now."

"Thank you!" Erik shouted, thrusting his cock upward into Winter's fist. The first few unintelligible words became raw, incoherent cries as Erik climaxed, the sounds echoing sweetly in the old building. To keep from coming himself, Winter tried to focus all his attention on Erik's face and the pleasure consuming him, and not the spurts of cum spattering on those glorious abs, or landing on the dull sheen of leather. Still working their fingers in the tight grip of Erik's ass, Winter prolonged Erik's orgasm for what seemed like minutes.

When he couldn't force more sensation from Erik's shuddering, jerking body, Winter slowly worked their twined fingers back out. Jesus-fuck. Every time he hooked up with Erik, he swore he'd just seen the sexiest thing ever. Every single time. And then the next time, every single time, Erik did him one better.

What the hell was going on?

*You know it's because you're in love with him.*

*Motherfucker. In love? No I just... I just...*

*Okay, I am.*

Winter slumped against the couch and sucked in a deep breath. In love. No wonder he'd accomplished so much in such a short time. Lately, he'd been feeling like he could do anything. Be anything! Still lots of wrongs to be made

right, some that couldn't be made right, blood that would never wash away, but he'd make amends to the world somehow.

Shifting uncomfortably in his aching misery, Winter looked over at Erik's face. Absolutely beautiful. Winter was so aroused he could hardly suck in a breath. Parts of him hurt physically. Once again wrestling with his post-orgasm shame, Erik had his face turned away, his eyes closed. Still a work in progress, the getting him past that ridiculous emotion. "Hey, gorgeous," he said, voice shaky.

Back to feeling shy, Erik covered his face with his forearm. "Yeah?" he mumbled from underneath the corded muscle.

"Happy birthday."

\*\*\*\*

What the—

*How the heck does he know it's my birthday?* Were none of his secrets... *secret?* At the moment, Erik didn't give a crap. His forearm wasn't nearly big enough to hide under.

*Dirty boy.*

He'd really out-shamed himself this time. Worse than all the other times. The pink panties were still tangled around his ankles, and every few seconds, whether he thought of them directly or not, another bunch of aftershocks hit. An especially copious amount of cum coated his chest. Yep. Dirty.

*You sure put on a show this morning, you slut.*

Maybe it was because mystery man didn't just watch this time. He *touched*.

Heck, not just touched—put his finger *inside* him. Finger-fucked him. With the gloves on! And oh, how incredible that had felt, the thrust, the possession. Leather. In his ass. *With my finger in there at the same time...*

Sick and twisted.

*Just the way you like it.*



Why'd he save the best humiliation for last? Was this really it? Even humiliated to the core, Erik wanted more time with his dark-haired stranger. *No one else ever sees the real me, they just see the Erik they want to see.* That strange pain in his chest crept back for a repeat visit and really hurt this time, ripping away pieces of his heart with every inhalation.

No more scavenger hunts. No more fun clues to decipher. No more arriving breathless and excited at whatever secluded—or sometimes wide-open and risky—spot the hunt lead him to and finding someone waiting for him. Someone who liked the *real* him. The things that followed afterward were... *wow*. Scary, embarrassing, amazing, liberating and thrilling all at once.

It was going to be so lonely without him.

“Erik, please stop that.”

Sure. Stop hurting? Ha—no. But it was time to stop hiding behind his arm and get the hell gone. The cold cum on his belly had already gelled into a sticky mess. Ew, but at least he didn't have to scrape it off with his finger and lick it. This time.

Erik shifted slightly, testing his capacity for coordinated movement. Nope. Not yet. The panties rubbed against his ankles and reignited a fresh round of abdominal spasms. “I'll go soon... I just... can't get up, yet.”

“I don't recall saying you were allowed get up.”

What? “But...” *You're done with me.*

“Shh. Be still for a minute, okay? Just... *be still.*”

Erik tried to obey. That deep growly voice made him tremble more. His legs kept twitching, not bound tightly enough by the panties around his ankles. What did the guy want, anyway? The last few times they'd met up, he'd acted kind of strange. Like today, with more talking than usual, and questions, endless questions. Erik wondered if he'd failed some secret test by being his nerdy, stupid self.

Or was Mr. Denial waiting for the right time to say goodbye? It wasn't something that should be hard. In fact, he didn't even have to say it. *Just don't text me anymore.* Simple.

"That's better."

No it wasn't. Nothing had gotten better. Now that he wasn't panting and horny, Erik heard the zippers going down as his favorite mystery peeled the gloves off and tossed them on the giant slab of wood. God, they were a dark delight. But they were now on the table. Guess that meant he wasn't going to get spanked. Ever.

Mystery man reached between his feet and tugged off the lacy underwear. Not the—damn. Then he smiled, opened his suit jacket and tucked them into the inner pocket. Erik's hips gave a little lurch. Dirty! Dirty panties in his pocket.

Straightening his legs back out felt weird. His ass had a thing or two to say about the rough treatment. Leather—ouch. Should probably move soon. Or better yet, drag out the remaining minutes, not just because he was still a little shaky, but because that final goodbye was coming far too soon.

"Erik."

Like now.

"I'd like to talk to you," the man said, and brushed a lock of inky hair behind his ear. Erik was going to miss that hair, too. Had always wondered what it felt like. Stretching his dress shirt across what looked like a finely-chiselled chest, the man bent down and picked up his discarded boxers. It was part of the game. Play dress-up. He often helped Erik with his clothes—after. "It's a little distracting, though, seeing you like this. Naked and sweaty, and I don't want to be distracted. This is important."

Instead of handing them over for Erik to put on, his mystery man, well *his* for a precious few more minutes only, swiped the soft material across his abdomen, wiping away the congealing mess. Ew. Now he'd have to wear those home like that, smelling like sex and sticky with illicit pleasure. His dick twitched to life at the thought. Yep. Twisted.

Even if Erik found another man to play twisted games with, not that it would ever happen, it wouldn't be the same. Some people were simply irreplaceable. Despite the amazing orgasm, this birthday would go down in history as the worst on record.

"There." The boxers sailed by and landed near his tangled pants. What the heck? He needed those. "Sit up."

Sure. He could do that now, would do *better* than that now. Erik swung his legs off the couch, planted his feet, and stood up. Feeling a little wobbly, he kept his balance by sheer force of will. The corset, that strangely alluring mix of masculine black and lacy pink, caught his eye. Pretty. Too bad he never got to wear it. Or touch it.

Inching around the table, Erik sighed. Birthdays sucked.

"You're still fretting."

"Yeah, well..." Goodbyes sucked worse than birthdays. And what the hell, might as well say what he wanted to say, even if he'd be humiliating himself in the worst possible way in front of a man who at least had the decency to say *adios* in person, and not simply fire off a lousy text. Didn't mean he had to look at him. Taking a deep breath, Erik admitted, "I... I'm really going to miss you."

"Miss me?" A questioning furrow formed between the black brows.

Humiliation had many levels. Coming while someone had their leather covered finger in your ass rated pretty high on the scale. Maybe an eight or nine. Definitely a nine for coming while licking their boots. Crying—that had to be an eleven. The sting of unshed tears threatened regardless. Just one more minute—he could hang on that long.

"Something you want to say to me, Erik?"

"I already said it." Said more than enough. Erik had crept far enough around the table that his toe made contact with his pant leg. The patch of aqua had come to the fore in mystery man's eyes as the sun brightened the room. Erik couldn't help gawking. Of all the expressions he's seen on mystery man's face, confusion wasn't one of them, but there it was, plain to see. "I know I

shouldn't ask—I know you have your reasons—but I was wondering if, before I go, if you would..." Erik paused. Maybe it was better not knowing. "Never mind," he mumbled. It could stay a secret to the end.

Mystery man stepped closer. He was so handsome. And untouchable. But it wouldn't have mattered what he looked like, his appeal lay in his decisiveness, his power. Should've taken a picture anyway, before he'd lost his chance.

"Never mind what?" A tiny spark of anger glowed in the blue depths. "After everything we've done together, you can't talk to me?"

Sure. Talk. More humiliation, but fine, he'd talk. "We haven't done anything together!" Except today. But that was just another one-sided thing. More denial. Pants forgotten, Erik stepped back. The two of them were the same height, but mystery man seemed, somehow, bigger. Larger than life.

"Haven't we?"

What?

"Haven't we had fun together? Or are you going to tell me you didn't enjoy all the scavenger hunts? Figuring out all those clues? That you didn't find them a challenge, and that you don't love a challenge? I know you liked it. You raced through the door excited and happy every single time, and it was because you knew you'd won. That you did it yourself. That you earned it. Are you going to try and tell me otherwise?"

"No, of course not." The game was the best thing in his life—no, it was the opponent he played against who was the best thing. As he stood there naked in the morning light, the truth hit him. Yeah, they'd actually done a lot together hadn't they? In a round-about sort of way. It just didn't seem like it, because he'd been so focused on what happened after, the sex part. Because the man had seen him at his most private, Erik could tell him how he felt. He deserved the truth. "You're right. I did love it. All of it. Even when I didn't make it on time and you weren't there. I loved it even when I failed." Erik blinked away the burn behind his eyes. "Thank you. For doing that for me."

"You're welcome. But you know, I loved it, too."

“You did?”

“I like a good challenge just as much as you. I think I need it. I can’t stand being bored. I make spectacularly bad decisions when I get bored. Keeping you on your toes never bores me. Watching you never bores me.”

“Don’t you get tired of, you know, just watching?”

“Never.”

*Maybe we’re both crazy. Yep. That’s why we can’t see it in each other.* “I wish—” Erik took his eyes off the floor and looked him straight in the eye, “I wish you’d let me touch you. Just once.”

Mystery man smiled and it lit up his whole face. “Once would never be enough.”

“But does it have to be only once? What if we—” Jeez. Making a mess of things already. “I don’t understand why you don’t...” *Just ask and get it over with, it won’t kill you.* “Is it me?”

The smile faded from the man’s lips, but not his eyes. “No, it’s definitely not you. It’s because it’s not three o’clock yet.”

Right. That made sense. “What happens at, ah, three?”

“At three, I sign my life away.”

“And that’s a good thing?” Not that he’d ever heard.

“Oh, yes. Better than good. Because once I get rid of the old life, I can begin again with a new one, and this time, I have plans to do it right. I’ve been waiting a long time for this day to come.”

Now Erik knew what his mother meant when she called people cuckoo-bonkers. “Well, um, congratulations?”

“Don’t congratulate me yet. Wait until after three.”

But three was hours away. Erik would be long gone by then. “I, um... you want to... text me? At three?”

“Text you? Hell fucking, no.” Mystery man closed the space Erik had managed to put between them. “I want you to come with me.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I don’t see anyone else here, do you? Since you’ve had a lot to do with helping me get this far, it’s only fitting you be there. I want you there with me.”

“What do you mean? What did I have to do with... whatever?” And why did he have to be confused and naked at the same time? His pants were around here, somewhere. He took a step and found... wet and sticky. Ew.

Ice-man thawed a little and sighed, looking almost as confused as Erik felt. “Let me tell you a little story, and then maybe you’ll understand what I’m talking about.”

Erik let out a sigh of his own. A story would be good. Anything to steal a few more minutes from the weirdest goodbye ever. Ignoring the cum-smeared boxers under his toe, Erik bent down and retrieved his pants.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Startled, Erik dropped the pants. *Toppy bastard.*

The huge slab of a coffee table wasn’t going anywhere without six more men to move it, so mystery man shoved the couch back instead, flipped up the throw that had felt nice under his back, and took off the cushion from the far end. He set it on the floor, sat on the remaining cushion, and sprawled out like the world owed him everything.

*Does he expect me to sit there? On the floor, at his feet?* Erik stared at the cushion. Then at mystery man’s finger as he pointed at it. He had to be kidding.

“There’s nothing to think about, Mr. Healey, nothing to fret about. Just do it. On your knees.”

*I’m not fretting.* He wasn’t. This was just weird. Except his dick was growing hard again at being ordered about. Which was twisted, but he wasn’t going to think about that again today. Conscious of his mostly erect penis putting on a rather enthusiastic display, Erik crept over to the cushion and knelt. And instantly relaxed. Much more comfortable than the floor. But what

should he do with his hands? His icky, sticky hands in desperate need of a wash?

“Put them behind your back.”

“Oh.” Erik clasped one hand around the opposite wrist.

“Better?”

Yeah, it was. Which made about as much sense as kneeling for a man sitting on a couch above him. He nodded.

“Do you have any idea what I do for a living?”

*God please, not another test to fail.* Did he get a clue to decipher this time? But he only wanted one if it had nothing to do with weird-ass board games or dumb songs that got stuck in your head. “Uh... no. Something with land, I think. Assessments maybe? For the city? Or do you just buy and sell property for profit?”

“I knew you were a smart guy.”

Ha—no. Jordan had only been truthful when he said Erik wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed.

“I do, in fact, buy property. Not me, actually, the company buys it, I just find the right deal, and if it’s not the right deal and we still want it, I make it the right deal.”

Ha. There. Got something right.

“But not just any property will do, we’re very selective. We only want the properties where the owners are in distress. We hunt for the sinking ships, the failing businesses that can’t hang on, the builders who can’t sell what they’ve scrimped and saved to build. We buy foreclosures. Or we buy property that we will immediately foreclose on without notice.”

That didn’t sound very pleasant, but then, somebody had to do it, didn’t they?

“I can tell what you’re thinking, and it’s the same thing everyone thinks. It’s just business, and if we didn’t buy it, someone else would.”

“How did you know that’s what I was thinking?”

“You have a very expressive face.”

*I do?* Oh, no.

“Take a breath, Erik. I happen to love your expressive face.”

“But that way you can—”

“Yes.”

“Shit.”

Mystery man smiled and leaning forward, touched his cheek. “Now you know why I love to watch you so much.”

Heat raced up Erik’s back and went straight to his forehead. Okay, that just took the number twelve spot on the humiliation scale. Erik resisted the urge to brush the finger off his flaming cheek. Because, yeah, humiliation had many varied levels.

“I love it when you pink up like that.”

So did Erik’s dick, but he tried to ignore it brushing against his thigh, even as the finger brushed down toward his bottom lip, a touch he’d craved for months. Now might be a good time for a judicious change of subject. “So you snap up good deals? What’s wrong with that? You must have made a killing during the recession.”

“As a matter of fact, we did.”

Erik looked up at the slight change in the man’s tone of voice.

“We got greedy. Me and my partners, we... *competed*. With everyone. With each other. Viciously. To see who could work the better deal, make the bigger kill, make the most money.” The aqua patch vanished once again from the man’s eyes, leaving only stormy skies behind. “It got really ugly.”

“Yeah? Like, ugly-ugly? How bad?”

Some of the color—no, life—seemed to drain from mystery man’s face. “The ugliest. As you’ve probably guessed, I’m naturally competitive. Even as a kid, I had to rule the world. If I played a sport, I got hellish aggressive. I ran



slower kids into the ground and loved doing it. I lived to make them eat my dust. I had to get more A's than anyone else. If me and my friends made a tree fort in the backyard, guess who had the nicely painted one with the real shingles on the roof? I wasn't deliberately mean, but if my parents didn't keep my busy, I could turn into to a total tyrant."

*You don't say...* "Well, you know, you're still kind of... *domineering*."

"And don't you forget it."

Nope. Not possible.

A wavy lock of black hair fell over mystery man's forehead. Maybe if he just reached out and touched it for a second—damn. Too late. The man leaned back into the chair and pushed the hair back into the messy tangle. "So because I'm competitive, I usually won our group's little contests."

"Did that piss off your other... what do you call them? Partners?"

"Hell, no. I made us disgusting amounts of money."

"Then what was so ugly about it?"

"Because sometimes when you have your sights set on one goal, you can't see anything else. Soon, nothing else matters. *Nobody* else matters. And that's what started to happen to me. I could only see that I was winning. I no longer saw that someone had to lose so that I could win."

"But if people couldn't pay their mortgages, they couldn't help but lose. I mean, eventually. That doesn't make it your fault. The recession was horrible for everybody. We still can't afford to hire more help at the gym, and we're getting by okay. Still. I know I'm lucky to have my job."

Mystery man had always been a tad restless. As Erik watched, he began wagging his leg back and forth. "But there is such a thing as being allowed to lose gracefully. And that's what I lost sight of. I wanted to win. My partner Douglas, he's pretty good at what he does, and I both admire and hate him for it. And about a year ago, he was giving me a run for my money, and I do mean big money. His quarterly tally was going to kick mine to the curb and well, I couldn't have that, could I? So I pushed. There was this building we'd bought,

only the former owner wouldn't get out. She seemed a nice lady, but what was nice to me? I only wanted to win. She wanted time to make good with the payments, and really she only asked for six months, quite reasonable, actually. She wanted to buy back the building."

Clouds must have settled in overhead, because the room darkened. Freakishly in time. Erik was starting to get a sinking feeling about this so-called story. He cocked his head—*carry on*.

"But I didn't want to wait months. I didn't want Dougie to beat me." The man's other foot began to tap in agitation while the other kept wagging back and forth. Uh-oh. "So I got the lawyers to kick her out."

"Ouch."

"It was a dick move on my part. And unnecessary. Her husband was a real scumbag. Somebody should shoot him for the good of the world. He got them into the whole financial mess because he thought he was some big-shot gambler, and when he fucked everything up that could be fucked up, he left her to sort it out alone. He just took off and left her with the kids. She was divorcing the sorry sack of shit when all this went down."

Rules sucked. Like birthdays. So Erik broke one and unclasped his hands so he could set them on the toe of the wildly tapping shoe. Mystery man gave him a cross look, but didn't chastise him. Maybe he needed the touch he always denied himself?

"I didn't know it at the time, and I doubt I would have cared anyway, but the lady had recently lost both her mother and her father within a few months of each other, and then that piece of shit excuse for a husband left her with a mountain of debt, and well, she was barely holding it together."

Erik pressed harder on the shoe. He could feel the man's leg vibrating through the leather. "What happened?" Because something obviously had.

"She killed herself. In that same building I wanted so badly, just so I could beat Dougie and the measly hundred grand profit he had on me."

"Oh, God! She killed herself? I'm so sorry."

“And she took her two little kids with her.”

Ho—fuck. Harsh. The kids too? Why would anyone do that? How could anyone do that? “Jesus—I don’t know what to say—sorry. That’s awful. Those poor kids.”

“Don’t say sorry to *me*. I don’t deserve it. Their blood is on my hands, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“But it wasn’t your fault! You didn’t do it. She did. She murdered her own kids. You didn’t kill anyone.”

“Not directly, no. But if I hadn’t been such a heartless bastard, if I’d just given her the time she asked for, she might not have done it.”

Hindsight sucked. Like listening to Jordan and his stupid insults. “And maybe she would have done it anyway.”

“But that’s the thing. I’ll never know. All I can do now is change myself, since I can’t change the past.”

The toe under Erik’s hands finally quit tapping. Erik let it go and reclasped his hands behind his back. He might not know what to say, but for once he knew what to do with his hands. Which was kind of nice, not having to think about it. “So is that what you meant earlier when you said you were signing your life away? You’re quitting?”

A slow smile curved on mystery man’s lips. “Yep. I am indeed. The partners are buying me out and I’m gonna strike out on my own, be my own boss. I can compete against myself all I want and not hurt anyone. I like to think I can learn from my mistakes. I’m going to take everything I’ve learned and use it to do some good for a switch. I’ll still make money, still win, but it won’t be because I couldn’t let someone else lose gracefully. I’m gonna get it right, Erik. Starting at three o’clock.”

“And you want me to go with you? When you sign everything at the lawyers? Really?”

“Yes, really. It would mean a lot to me if you’d come.”

“Okay. I’ll go.” Kind of a no-brainer, really. Of course he’d go. “And what happens after three o’clock? After you’ve signed everything?”

The slow smile turned into a wicked smile. Frick. No, fuck. “What happens after that? I’ll tell you.” He leaned in so close, Erik could see that the sunny aqua patches had returned to his ringed eyes. “After that, boy, I’ll deny myself no more.”

\*\*\*\*

Just because Erik said he’d go, didn’t mean Winter was going to go easy on him or anything. Hell, no. They both needed a challenge—this was a stressful day for both of them. Part of Erik’s immediate challenge was breathing properly after Winter pulled the corset off the coffee table and onto his lap. Erik, and his abs of steel, looked positively stunning waiting on that cushion, legs spread, hands behind his back, obeying sweetly. And hyperventilating.

“Do you need your inhaler?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you need me to bend you back into shape?”

“Um... no?”

“Then take a deep breath and relax. I don’t know how you can handle a full scale invasion of the creepy, cloned pod-children, yet go to pieces over a bit of pink lace.”

“Pod-children?” He looked adorable confused.

“Whatever they were, all those kids that looked alike. The ones all wearing the exact same shirt. That day I first met you.”

Erik’s eyes narrowed. “We do not speak of that event.”

“No? What event is that?”

Erik’s left eye twitched. “Parents of Multiples Day.”

“Ah. That explains the cloning. All natural, it seems.” Winter raised one brow. “I must say that I, for one, am rather thankful for this... Parents of Multiples Day you don’t wish to speak of.”

Ducking his head, Erik mumbled something at the floor.

“Pardon me?”

“You took advantage of my stressed-out weakness.”

Erik was so sweet. “Didn’t I just tell you I was an over-competitive, domineering shark?”

“Didn’t you just tell me you were changing your ways?”

Cheeky little brat. “Did I ever mention I was fond of gags?”

The sun had reappeared from behind the clouds, bathing the room in a golden light that made Erik’s big, shocked eyes look bluer. They sparkled. Oh, yes. Definitely had to try a gag out on the boy. Not that he wasn’t also fond of screaming. “Stand up.”

Same fluid grace. Guardian Angels must have a perverted sense of humor, giving him a very flexible gymnast to play with. Really, it was almost obscene. “Since we have oh, I dunno—” he glanced at his watch, “—two hours and a bit to fritter away before my appointment, I think you should provide some amusement while I start unpacking my new office.”

Erik froze. “Amuse you?” He swallowed visibly. “New office?”

Winter chuckled. “Yes, this is my new office. Great, isn’t it? And I think I’d like to see you wearing this pretty little ensemble while I unpack the boxes you’re going to carry down from upstairs for me. In fact, I think you can keep on wearing it when we go visit the Law Offices of Snooty, Snooty and Charge Big Bucks. I think I’ll very much enjoy knowing what you have on underneath that oh-so-thin workout gear you wore over here.” That hadn’t been part of the plan, but Winter could improvise; it was part of his much-sought-after skill-set. “I wonder if anyone else will notice you’re wearing lacy pink underwear and a tightly laced corset under your clothes.”

Horried, Erik almost fell back down to his cushion. Better be careful and not fall on that massive boner—that could hurt. He sputtered incoherently for a moment, before choking out, “No—just *no*.”

“Yes—just *yes*.” Erik didn’t really know the meaning of humiliation. But he’d learn. “First things first, though.” The panties. They were burning a hole in his jacket pocket. They were just that hot. He set the corset aside, plucked the teensy scrap of lace from his pocket and held it out. “Put these back on. And do it nice and slow, as I watch.”

Doing a reverse striptease with shaky hands and that delightful, hard cock, Erik pulled them on. They barely fit over those bulging thighs. Or the bulging cock. Winter prayed the corset would fit. Erik was so fucking ripped, everything he put on had to fit tightly. Waiting until three o’clock—no, three *thirty*—was going to fucking kill Winter.

But those two dead kids didn’t get a reward and neither would Winter, not until he came clean.

Winter picked up the corset again. Damn those perverted Guardian Angels. “I think this was your best pick of all, Mr. Healey. You ready?”

Erik nodded stupidly, practically drooling. Soaring already. Good thing carrying boxes didn’t take that many brain cells. But how to get the thing on... that was the dilemma. It wasn’t going to go over those wide shoulders. No way. Maybe if Erik stepped into it...? Winter eyed Erik’s incredible legs. Nah. Those thighs. *Huge*. Putting the corset on was going to take longer than taking it off. *Guaranteed*. “I’m going to have to take the laces right out and put it on you before rethreading them.”

Erik’s body gave an involuntary little lurch.

“You won’t be coming for *hours*, boy. So don’t get overly excited.”

“I won’t come. I promise I won’t.”

“Excellent.” Lacing Erik into the thing took forever. He couldn’t seem to get his fingers to work properly. At about the half-way point, Winter wondered if he’d need to use Erik’s inhaler. Then he had to undo two sets of holes because he’d mislaced it in his haste. Before he tied the ends off, he tightened

each section, like he would do up skates, until it fit around both Erik's trim waist and his muscled chest and back. Winter spun Erik around since he didn't think he could do it himself without stumbling.

God. So fucking hot. "You look beautiful."

"Y-you... like... it?" Erik's voice hitched on every word.

"No. I don't like it. I *love* it. Love you like this."

"Really?"

"Definitely, my slutty boy." It was crazy tempting to reach out and give that straining lump under the lacy panties a firm squeeze, but no. Later. After three. He'd made a vow, and he wasn't breaking it. Winter stepped back to admire Erik better from a little distance, but Erik's hand followed him. He didn't touch him, just yearned to do it—Winter felt the ache. Understood it. Cheating a little, because it would be heartless not to, Winter twined their fingers together.

"Is this... this isn't the last time, is it?"

Ah. Shit. No wonder Erik had fretted away all morning. Winter would have to be more careful with how he said things. Sometimes he had a thoughtless tongue and not just a cruel one. "No, Erik. This isn't the last time." Winter steadied himself for what his shark had been very much afraid of. He squeezed Erik's fingers tightly. "I'm hoping there'll never be a last time for us." The time had come to speak of what he wanted. Winter took a deep breath. No risk, no reward, right? "Is... *forever* something I might interest you in?"

If Winter thought Erik was gorgeous before this moment, he was dead wrong. The smile that lit up Erik's face made the sun seem dull and impotent. Pale in comparison. "Yes, Sir. I might be interested."

Winter closed his eyes. *Yes!* He finally won the one contest that mattered. Kind of embarrassing how it took him so long to figure everything out. Or maybe it just took Erik.

"But I do have one question."

*Only one?*

“If we’re going to do this—you and me, then I should probably ask—”

“I’ll tell you anything, Erik. Anything you want to know.” Winter’s heart was Erik’s for the taking. Whatever he wanted. Feeling like he was soaring to new heights himself, Winter opened his eyes. He was ready.

Tilting his head, Erik gave him his best, shy smile.

God, how he loved that smile. Winter waited to hear Erik’s question.

“What’s your name?”

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Finn Marlowe is a paralegal by day and erotic M/M romance novelist by night. She believes daydreaming is a vastly underrated pastime and probably spends way too much time at it. Her kids no longer ask what's wrong when they spy her staring off into space—they just assume she's writing a scene from her next novel and they're probably right. Finn calls British Columbia home and when she's not enjoying the beautiful outdoors, she's inside reading or resenting the fact her kids are better video game players than she is. If there were more hours in the day, she'd like to become a better artist and a greener gardener. Since she believes all dreams are possible if you don't give up on them, she expects to regain her video game hi-scores, naturally vanquish all garden pests and finally paint what lives inside her imagination.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Blog](#)