

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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THE TOUCH OF HOPE

Brandon Shire

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE TOUCH OF HOPE

By Brandon Shire

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.

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Photo Description

Two slightly lanky, dark-haired boys are embraced, one behind the other. One boy has his hands inside the pockets of the hoodie of the boy in front of him. This small gesture hints at an unfamiliar reassurance that he plans to make his intimacy more than words will allow.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I got tired of my dad using me as a punching bag, so I packed some clothes and left our apartment one day while he was at work. Life is tough, but I learned that living on the streets is even tougher.

When I thought things couldn't get much worse, Erik suddenly appeared before me, just like an angel. Is this a dream or are the drugs making me hallucinate? What is he running from? Why won't he tell me about his past? Can I trust him?

Sincerely,

Nancy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: young adult, coming of age, barely legal, first-time, hurt/comfort, homophobia, HFN

Content warning: teens having sex and inferred small-time drug dealing.

Word Count: 13,911

THE TOUCH OF HOPE

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CHAPTER 1

“Don’t do that.”

Jonathan looked over his shoulder at the boy leaning against the telephone pole. “Don’t do what?” he asked.

“You’re thinking about going into the police station and telling them you need help.”

Jonathan glanced at the door again and swung his gaze back to the boy who had so accurately read his mind. “They won’t help?”

“Hell, no. They’ll send you back to your parents, and if they don’t want you, the cops will stick you in juvie.”

“They can’t do that. I’m eighteen,” Jonathan muttered as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m eighteen,” the boy stated. “You’re not. Which would take them about two seconds to find out,” he added, pointing at the police station. “How old are you, really?”

Jonathan looked down at his well-worn Vans. “Sixteen.”

“You hungry?” the boy asked.

Jonathan glanced up through his thick lashes and brown hair. The heat crept across his face with his admission. “Yeah, kinda.”

“Come on.” The boy straightened up and jerked his head in the opposite direction. “You’re going to have to learn how to find something to eat; may as well start now.”

Jonathan quickened his step until he fell in beside the boy. He glanced at him cautiously. He had shaggy dark hair that looked like it needed to be washed, a nose that had been busted once or twice, and a wide mouth which

broke into a huge grin when he smiled. His eyes were a deep, dark blue, unlike Jonathan's, which were so gray they seemed almost white in the bright sun.

"You gonna keep staring at me?" the boy asked, still looking ahead.

Jonathan jerked his eyes forward. "Sorry. It's just... not many people have been too helpful."

"Did you really expect them to be?"

"Well, kind of, yeah. Or at least nicer than my dad was."

"Man you are a newb, aren't you?"

"What's that mean?" Jonathan asked as he halted to a stop. He didn't like the sound of it at all. He was new to the street, but he wasn't stupid.

The boy stopped and looked back at him. "Means you're probably going to get hurt, or raped, or killed. Or all of them if you don't learn how to survive."

Raped, killed. The words seared themselves into his head. His worst fears given voice. He had thought some of his friends would be able to help when he ran away, and they did, but only on a temporary basis. Maybe he should have thought things out more, planned better. But he hadn't had time. His father's last punch resulted in a fat lip and, when he dared to look in the mirror the next day, his father walked by the bathroom and smirked, just as he pressed his fingers against it and winced. It was at that exact moment he made the decision to leave. Enough was enough.

"Sorry, it's just my dad..." he said as he realized the boy was still watching him.

"Yeah, he hates you, kicked your ass a few times. He's a loser, a drunk, liked to grope you at night, didn't like that you were gay, beats your mom... Should I keep going?"

Jonathan's face burned. He shook his head and looked down at the ground. If this was supposed to be helping, he would hate to see what the opposite was like.

The boy came back to him and lifted his chin, looking directly into Jonathan's eyes. His face, which had been hard and seemed to be on the verge of violence, softened immediately. "Whoa. Your eyes..."

Jonathan jerked his face to the side and looked down at the ground again. His mother's eyes. He hated them. They had been his curse for the last sixteen years. "Yeah," he answered without looking up.

"So you hungry or what?" the boy asked again, his tone much softer than before.

Jonathan nodded.

The boy brushed Jonathan's fingers with his own and intertwined them slightly, urging Jonathan to follow. He let them go when Jonathan looked up and began to walk a pace behind.

"Can't talk to you back there." He stopped suddenly, then started walking when Jonathan stepped beside him. "That's better. What's your name?"

"Jonathan. You?"

"Erik, but they call me Special K."

"Why?" Jonathan asked.

Erik rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I'll tell you about it sometime. Right now, let's get some grub. I'm starving." He stopped again and looked at Jonathan. "By the way, you got any money on you?"

"I think I have a dollar and some change left. Not much," Jonathan answered as he reached into his pocket. He brought out a wrinkled dollar bill and a couple of loose coins. Erik swiped them from his hand and stuffed them into his own pocket.

"Hey!"

"The answer is always *no*. Now you'll remember it," Erik said as he started walking away.

"Dickhead," Jonathan mumbled.

“I heard that.” Erik laughed as he continued walking. “You coming, or what?”

Six blocks later, they stood across the street from a Krispy Kreme. Erik looked over at him and frowned. “You need to get rid of that stupid book bag.”

“It has all my stuff in it,” Jonathan argued.

“It makes you a walking target,” Erik told him. He waved it away. “We’ll find somewhere to stash your stuff later. Come on,” he said as he started across the street.

“Is that why you were following me?” Jonathan asked.

Erik pulled his foot back onto the sidewalk and studied him curiously. “Not as stupid as you seem, are you?”

“I’m *not* stupid.” Jonathan seethed, hearing his father’s voice in Erik’s words. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

Erik looked over at the donut shop before he answered. “Yeah, that’s why I was following you.”

“You want my dirty socks?” Jonathan demanded as he flung the bag off his shoulder and held it out to Erik. “Here. Take it. Have fun. Hope you enjoy them.” He dropped the bag on the ground and started to walk away, tears building in his eyes. He was so frustrated with everything and everyone. He had tried and tried but kept getting nowhere fast.

“Jonathan,” Erik called out with a small bark of laughter. He seemed surprised by his outburst. “Jonathan. Wait.”

He ran around Jonathan, stopped in front of him, and held the bag out. “I was hungry, all right. Just like you. But it’s easier for two people to survive together than a single person on his own. It’s just the street, it was nothing personal. You’ve got to hustle to survive or you *don’t* survive.”

“Well, you seem like you’re doing pretty good,” Jonathan snapped, his eyes still shining with indignity as he glared at Erik.

“Yeah,” Erik scoffed. “I’m so great at surviving that I was about to steal your dirty underwear to buy a donut.”

Jonathan smirked. He couldn’t help it. He instantly pictured Erik pulling his dirty drawers from his bag and handing them to a horrified cashier.

“You are cute when you pout. Pretty smile too,” Erik added as a grin came to his face.

Jonathan blushed and looked away.

“Take your underwear and nasty socks,” Erik said as he pushed the bag back into Jonathan’s arms. “Can we get a freaking donut now?” he asked once Jonathan had slung the bag back over his shoulder.

“I don’t think a dollar is going to get us much,” Jonathan said as they started across the street again.

“Man, we aren’t going to *buy* anything. You’re going to use those beautiful eyes of yours to get us some for free.”

“I am?” Jonathan asked. He glanced over at Erik, and quickly looked away when their eyes met.

“Hell yeah, and then when we get done, we’re going to take your nasty drawers down to Tenth Street and see if we can find some perv to buy them from us.”

Jonathan turned and stared at him with his mouth open.

“I’m just messing with you.” Erik laughed as he wrapped his arm around Jonathan’s neck and walked them around the passing cars. “But someone would buy them.”

“I don’t want to know,” Jonathan said. “Just tell me how to get us some donuts.”

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting on the curb with half a box of glazed donuts gone. “That was easy,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, well. They catch on pretty quick,” Erik said. “The sad-face only works once or twice before they run you out. And you look the part.”

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked as he licked the stickiness from his fingers.

Erik’s eyes locked on Jonathan’s tongue, watching him lick the sugar off. It cupped around his fingers as he sucked them into his mouth. “Erik?” Jonathan asked when he popped his finger out.

“Huh?” He looked into Jonathan’s eyes.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked again.

“About what?”

“I look the part,” Jonathan repeated.

“Oh, nothing.” Erik shook his head dismissively. “You still have your schoolboy shine is all. It will be gone in a few weeks. Then you’ll be as jaded and fucked up as I am.”

“You don’t seem jaded,” Jonathan replied quietly. A blush crept up from under his collar and he looked away.

Erik was staring off into the distance when Jonathan got up the courage to glance at him again. “You don’t know me,” Erik said with barely a whisper.

His tone seemed resigned, even if quiet, and Jonathan didn’t understand what he’d said wrong. “Did you mean it when you said two could survive better than one?”

Erik shrugged. “Yeah, you can look out for one another and watch each other’s back. It just makes life easier sometimes. It’s a lot safer, that’s for sure.”

“Did you mean, um, like, with me?” Jonathan asked tentatively.

Erik leaned forward and swiveled his gaze up and down the street. “I don’t see anyone else toting around skid-marked underwear and week-old socks. Besides that, you have the donuts,” Erik said as he reached into the box in Jonathan’s lap.

Jonathan smiled and put the box in Erik's lap. He pulled another donut from it and looked around the neighborhood. "This neighborhood looks nice."

"*Now* it does. In about five hours, this place will be crawling with crack whores. If you're not selling your ass or looking for some, you don't want to be here."

Jonathan froze; a worried look in his eyes. "Where is everyone now?"

Erik shrugged. "It's early yet. They're probably sleeping last night off, dunno really. Don't care. This is about the only time of day it's safe to be around here, but you still have to keep a sharp lookout."

Jonathan whipped his head around, trying to look in all directions at once.

"Not like that." Erik laughed. "Keep it casual. Alert, but casual."

"How do you do that?" Jonathan asked.

"Man, how long you been on the street?"

"A few days," Jonathan answered quietly. "I was staying at a friend's but his dad said I had to go..."

"He was sorry but he couldn't take responsibility for a minor blah, blah, blah. Am I right?" Erik asked as he glanced at Jonathan again.

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

Jonathan turned away. "Heard it before. A lot. Anyway, let's get out of here before the curb crawlers come out. Most of them are pretty nasty," he added as he stood.

"Why?"

"You always ask so many questions?"

Jonathan shrugged. "Does it bother you?"

Erik shook his head in amusement. "Come on. Let's go dump your underwear off somewhere and see what we can scrounge up for later."

"Can I ask you something?" Jonathan queried as he got to his feet.

“No. No more questions. And if you’re asking about me, the answer is always *no*.” He started down the sidewalk and turned slightly when he noticed that Jonathan wasn’t beside him. “Do I have to hold your hand, too?” he called back over his shoulder.

Jonathan blushed again thinking about the softness of his grasp and how his fingers felt when they brushed against his own. “You’re not like... I don’t know, a psychopath or something, are you?”

Erik burst out laughing. He stopped when he noticed that Jonathan was somewhat serious and put his hands on his hips. “No, I’m just trying to survive like everyone else out here.”

Jonathan nodded, and gave him a hesitant smile that faded almost as fast as it appeared.

“That easy, huh? You know most psychopaths are going to lie to you, don’t you?” Erik asked as he waggled his eyebrows. “I might just be saying that to lure you off somewhere and get in your pants.”

He smirked as Jonathan blanched.

“I, uh... never...” Jonathan stuttered as he dropped his gaze and tugged at his shirt.

“So you’re gay?”

Jonathan nodded slowly, not meeting his gaze, and seriously uncertain if he should be so truthful. For all he knew, Erik would beat the crap out of him for it. Yet somehow, he didn’t think he was that type of guy, not the way he had so casually reached for his hand.

“Are you a virgin, too?” Erik asked.

Jonathan jerked his eyes up in surprise. He blushed a deep crimson and looked down at the sidewalk. “I just never... I mean...” he snapped his mouth closed, wondering why he ever opened it at all, and especially about *that* subject.

Erik chuckled. “Come on. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover yet.” He turned and started walking.

Jonathan watched him for a moment and then ran up to his side, avoiding eye contact. “Where we going?” he asked.

“Back to my place first, so we can dump off your bag. Then we need to get our hustle on, if we’re going to have some fun tonight.”

“Fun?”

Erik rolled his eyes. He grabbed Jonathan’s forearm and stopped, turning Jonathan to face him. “Listen, you’re just going to have to follow my lead, or go follow someone else. Okay? I can’t explain every little thing to you all the time. If you want to stick around, keep quiet and watch. That’s the best way to learn. You open your mouth and you make yourself a target. Listen and learn. Got it?”

Jonathan nodded silently.

“See how easy that is? Now come on.”

They arrived outside an old, boarded-up house that appeared to have been condemned many years before. The blue paint was fading, the porch sagged, and each side was covered in graffiti. Every door and window was completely sealed with plywood except for one window on the second story which allowed a small portion of the glass to be exposed. The house seemed a stark contrast to the gleaming skyscrapers towering behind it.

Jonathan glanced sideways at Erik and recognized from his posture that he seemed somehow proud of the house in front of them.

“Not much,” Erik said as he watched Jonathan look it over. “But it keeps me from sleeping on the sidewalk.”

“Anyone else stay here?” Jonathan asked.

“On and off. This way.” They went around the back of the house and Erik pried a piece of plywood back from one of the ground floor windows. He directed Jonathan inside.

“It’s dark in here,” Jonathan murmured as he stood still and waited for Erik.

“Let your eyes adjust.” Erik grabbed Jonathan’s hand and led him upstairs. “Careful, that one isn’t safe.” He pointed at the stair he stepped over when they were about halfway up.

“This it?” Jonathan asked when they stood at the door of a bedroom at the top of the stairs. Heaps of clothes and trash filled the room along with an obnoxious smell that wafted down from one of the other rooms. The whole of the house was dark and damp and musty. This room was no exception. The one benefit it had was that this was the room with the half window exposed, allowing in some sunlight.

“You got someplace better?” Erik asked, seeming a little wounded at his response. “If you do, let me know.”

Jonathan shook his head. “No,” he answered quietly.

Erik glanced at him for a moment before he squatted and started digging a space under the clothes. He took Jonathan’s backpack and buried it.

“You have soft hands,” Erik said as he tossed clothes into a mismanaged heap to hide Jonathan’s bag.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said, flipping his hair out of his eyes. He put his hands behind his back, tucking them away. *Girly hands* his dad called them. They went along with his mother’s eyes, the constant reminder that brought about his father’s wrath. When they stepped back into the hall, he noticed that the odor got stronger.

“What’s that smell?” Jonathan asked.

“The bathroom, or that’s what some people use it for,” Erik said nodding towards the end of the hall. “Don’t go in unless you *really* have to go and then you’ll probably want to run in and out.”

“Isn’t there a real bathroom?”

“Duh, it doesn’t work. And even if we had water, we don’t have pipes anymore. They were all stolen,” Erik added with a hint of anger in his voice.

“Can’t you just go outside?” Jonathan asked.

Erik smirked. “That’s what I do. And if I have to take a shit, I’ll stop by a fast food restaurant or something.” He slipped his hand into Jonathan’s again, his grasp a little firmer.

“Don’t go in that room, either,” Erik said as he nodded across the hall.

“What’s in there?” Jonathan asked, noting that it was the only room to still have a battered door on the frame.

Erik shrugged in response, his eyes going to it with an emotion Jonathan couldn’t place. “Just stuff. Come on,” he said leading Jonathan down the stairs again.

“Where are we going?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m going to show you the town.”

Forty minutes later, Erik motioned with a nod of his head.

Jonathan turned to follow his gaze and saw a run-down building with a large fence around it.

“Food pantry,” Erik explained. “You can get stuff here for free. Most of it we can’t use because we don’t have anything to cook on. Over there,” he pointed to the opposite side of the street, “is a homeless shelter and outreach center. You can get lunch there every day. Just get in line and don’t answer any questions from anyone.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked.

“Because it isn’t a safe place for you. Too many cops and busybodies poking around there. Eat and leave, that’s it. Come on,” he said as he led the way across the street.

There was a line around the far side of the building. Erik and Jonathan joined the queue. When they finally got inside, they were each offered a plate with a piece of chicken, some vegetables and a slice of bread. Erik took a table at the corner of the room and put his back to the wall so he could see everyone in the place.

Jonathan looked around as they ate, noting all the religious paraphernalia. Several notices for services were hanging on the walls, as well as a large mural of smiling faces entering a church.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked Erik suddenly.

Erik stopped chewing and his mouth became pinched as he swallowed. “Do you?”

“I don’t know. I was just curious,” Jonathan said as he looked around the room again.

“I don’t,” Erik answered firmly. “Never have. Never will.”

Jonathan glanced at him. “You sound angry.”

Erik scoffed. “The only difference between the guys that would jump you on the street and the people that run this place is that this gang has more people and more money. They’re just ambushing your mind, instead of your body.”

Jonathan didn’t think that to be true at all, but it was obviously an issue for Erik so he dropped the subject and started eating again.

CHAPTER 2

When Jonathan woke, his head was still fuzzy. After only a week with Erik, this was becoming a routine. Erik was sleeping beside him on the old mattress on the bedroom floor. He was dressed only in his boxers. Jonathan didn't remember anything about the previous night. The last thing that came to mind was Erik handing him a pill and telling him not to be a wuss. After the pill, all he had were flashes of people, colored lights, and *really* loud music. And the latter felt like it was still thumping in his head.

He climbed over Erik, trying not to disturb him. Jonathan groped for his pants while he looked over Erik's body in the growing light. Erik had morning wood, and it stood firm against his boxers. The outline of Erik's dick made Jonathan ache. He paused and held his hand above Erik's groin, excited by the warmth he radiated. Stealing a glance to make sure he was still asleep, Jonathan leaned over Erik's chest and inhaled. He wasn't sure what to compare the smell to but he liked it, even if it was a little on the sweaty side of unwashed. He kept his hand hovering in place for a moment longer but suddenly became embarrassed for peeping on Erik while he was asleep. He dropped his hand and stood.

Wuss, he told himself. It was obvious they wanted each other. Every time Erik glanced at him, Jonathan's dick got hard, and he thought Erik's may have as well. So why was he being a prude? It wasn't as if there was anyone around to stop them. He'd wanted a boyfriend since... forever, and now he had a near-naked boy right next to him. Hell, they slept together. On that first night, when Erik reached out to him, he pushed back against the wall, horny, but terrified too. Erik had been dumbfounded at his reaction, but he backed off and gave Jonathan the space his response required.

Because you're a wuss, he heard his father's voice echo in his head. *Can't even get laid.*

I'm not a wuss, he argued back. *I'm saving myself*, he reasoned as he searched for his shirt. He slipped his shoes on and looked down at Erik again, noticing that the view of Erik's dick was even better from this angle. He

reached down and adjusted himself as he grew hard yet again. If he'd had the courage, they would have had sex already; he would know what it was like. He shook his head. *Saving myself, yeah right. That was a lie.*

He was really just afraid because he didn't know a thing about sex, or what he was supposed to do, or what role he was supposed to play, or... anything. He was sure Erik could teach him, but he didn't want Erik to know just how dumb he was when it came to all that. It was bad enough that he was following him around like a lost puppy, but dumb about sex, at his age? There was no way he would ever live *that* down. Even the thought of Erik finding out made him glow with embarrassment.

And, he reasoned as his bladder became more insistent, if he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure he wanted to go that far with Erik. Not yet anyway. There was still something bothering him about Erik and he noticed it more and more as they spent time together.

Erik was a different person for everyone he met. Almost as if he segregated himself into different parts which he brought out only when a particular interaction required it. But then, maybe that was just a facet of his survival skills for the streets.

Jonathan shrugged as he stepped out the door and made his way downstairs. Whatever it was, or whatever motive Erik had for doing it, it made Jonathan leery for a reason he couldn't explain.

CHAPTER 3

Erik told Jonathan to wait on the corner while he attended to business. He sat on a low retaining wall and casually remained aware of his surroundings, just as Erik had instructed him. It was a seedy neighborhood and he wondered whether he blended in. Two weeks living on the street with Erik and he was beginning to understand how the dynamics worked more than he ever would have on his own.

A prostitute working across the street waved and smiled. Jonathan waved back, but having seen him walk up with Erik, he assumed that she realized he wasn't interested, and was only making a show for a pimp he couldn't see. Down the road a little further, there were two older homeless men wearing camouflage jackets and holding flags for sale.

Veterans, Jonathan thought as he watched them for a moment, and probably not friendly to gay people. At least that had been his experience with people of their generation.

He pulled his cell phone out and looked at it. The day before he met Erik, the service had stopped. That was one of the events of that day which had prompted him to stand in front of the police station and consider returning home. The face of it was still blank and he was wondering why he even kept it. It was his father's phone, not his. He had swiped it from the kitchen table the day he took off because his father had forgotten it. Now, it was just a weight in his pocket, one he hadn't even shown to Erik yet.

Erik would just want to sell it, but Jonathan still had an attachment to it, hoping, maybe, that his dad might restart the service and call to ask him to come home. It was a pathetic notion. He knew that. He didn't even have the ability to keep it charged, much less wait for a call that would never come. Besides, his asshole father had probably gone out to celebrate when he realized that Jonathan took off. How many times had he told Jonathan that he would have to get out the day he turned eighteen? Jonathan's early departure had only given him what he wanted, two years sooner than expected.

When he swung his head left, he noted two older boys walking down the street who had turned onto the sidewalk from a nearby side street. Their dress and swagger looked like trouble and they were already too close for him to move across the road without attracting their attention. One kid was tall, thin, and black, and the other was a white kid with very short blond hair and a baseball cap tilted on his head. *Gangbangers*, he registered instantly. He met the blond boy's eyes, but not before he saw him nudge his buddy and call attention to where Jonathan sat.

Jonathan looked around, hoping to see Erik returning, but he was nowhere in sight. "Fuck," he said under his breath. He tucked the phone back into his pocket and stood to walk off, but it was too late. They were already on top of him.

"You know whose turf you're on, faggot?" the white kid demanded.

Jonathan looked back and forth between the two of them. "I don't want any trouble."

"Then you should have kept your bitch ass out of my neighborhood," the black boy said, inching closer. "We don't allow faggots around here."

Jonathan glanced around quickly. Erik still wasn't anywhere in sight. He bolted, hopping up on the wall and taking off around the building he had been sitting in front of. The two boys gave chase immediately.

Jonathan turned right, darting through a small alley, and came out on the opposite side of the building. He knew Erik would be back shortly, or at least he hoped so, and he turned again to start racing up the side of the same building, knowing that it would bring him out a little further from where he had been sitting.

He realized too late that there was a fence between him and the sidewalk. He was trapped. He turned to face the boys chasing him and pressed against the fence. "I don't have anything. I'm just waiting for my friend."

"Faggots don't have friends," the white boy barked as they strutted up the alley together.

“Least not ’round here,” the black boy chimed. “You in the wrong fucking neighborhood, faggot.”

“I don’t have anything,” Jonathan repeated, holding his empty hands in front of him.

The two boys looked at each other and smirked. “What about that phone we saw you with?”

“It doesn’t work,” Jonathan said.

“Give it to me,” the black boy said, snapping his palm out.

Jonathan reached into his pocket and placed the phone in his outstretched hand. “See, it doesn’t work. It’s dead. I don’t even have a charger for it.”

The boy fiddled with it for a moment then slipped it into his pocket. “What else you got?”

“Nothing.”

“Faggot come to our neighborhood, he better have something or he gets a beat down,” the white boy said in a menacing voice.

Jonathan gulped. “I don’t have anything. I told you.”

The boys looked at each other and smirked. The white boy led the charge, slamming into Jonathan’s jaw with a right hook that dropped him to the ground. When he hit the pavement, they started kicking him as he curled into a ball. The white boy knelt and began pelting him with punches while he screamed homophobic slurs.

Jonathan saw Erik and heard him scream at them.

“All right, that’s enough.”

The white boy glanced over his shoulder. He stood with his fist clenched as Erik approached. “Fuck you, faggot.”

Erik covered the remaining space between them in a second. Before Jonathan could blink, Erik had kicked the boy in the nuts twice, and then hit him in the face a few more times before he doubled over and fell to the ground.

The black boy jumped over Jonathan and caught Erik in the jaw. Erik fell, but rolled to his feet immediately. He began trading blows with the black kid and did not give an inch as they fought back and forth. Erik held his own until the black kid had enough and backed off, huffing for breath. He took one look at the blond kid still groaning on the ground, then took off in the opposite direction.

Erik watched him for a moment and then turned to help Jonathan to his feet. "You okay?" he asked as he wiped the blood from his lip.

Jonathan nodded. "They took my phone."

"What phone?" Erik asked as he lifted Jonathan's shirt. He pressed his fingers against the scrapes and watched how Jonathan winced. "Nothing broken, but it's going to hurt like hell for a few days," he advised.

Jonathan pushed his shirt down, staring at Erik and near tears. "How'd you find me?"

Erik shot a hard glance at the kid on the ground. "Heard him yelling."

"Fucking asshole," Jonathan blurted as he kicked the boy in the back.

Erik smirked at him. "Feel better?"

"No."

"Come on. I don't think anyone called the cops, but it's best if we're not here in case the black dude comes back with friends."

Jonathan looked around wildly, expecting to see a group of gangbangers descending on them. He followed Erik out of the alley and fell in beside him as he twisted his elbow around, trying to stem the flow of blood from where he went down. Frustrated that he had nothing to clean it with, he reached up and touched his lip instead. It was the same spot his father had fattened a few weeks before.

"Hurt?" Erik asked.

Jonathan sighed. “No worse than when my dad hit me. I’ll survive.” He glanced down at the sidewalk, ashamed that Erik had to come to his rescue. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

“No sweat,” Erik said. “What phone were you talking about?”

“The one I swiped from my dad when I left,” Jonathan answered. “He turned the service off, but I still had it.”

“We could have sold it.”

Jonathan shrugged. It was useless to worry about it now, and he certainly didn’t want to share with Erik that he had been hoping for some miraculous change in his father.

Erik wrapped his arm around Jonathan’s neck and touched their heads together. “Don’t worry about it,” he said as he released him.

They walked two more blocks and turned when someone called out Erik’s name. Jonathan saw a man approaching them who looked to be in his early twenties. He was short, with black hair, and had a cute, boyish face. He glanced at Jonathan curiously as he approached.

“Hey Erik, you got anything?”

“Not until later tonight,” Erik answered.

“Who’s your friend?”

“Jonathan, this is Roger. Roger, this is Jonathan,” Erik introduced them.

They nodded at each other, and Jonathan took note of how Roger’s eyes swept up and down his body, then focused on his swelling lip. He reached up to dab at it again with his sleeve.

Roger looked back at Erik. “So tonight... you’re going to be around?”

“I’ll be around,” Erik said.

“Okay, I’ll be looking for you,” Roger said. He nodded at Jonathan again and crossed back to the other side of the street.

“Roger?” Jonathan asked.

Erik shrugged. “That’s his street name. Don’t know what his real name is, like most of these guys out here.”

“He’s a prostitute?” Jonathan asked, his eyes shifting back to Roger as he crossed the centerline of the road.

“Yeah, lots of guys hustle sex to survive,” Erik explained.

Jonathan stepped up beside him and they continued walking. “Have you, like, you know, ever?”

Erik burst out laughing, an incredulous look on his face. “Of course I have.”

“I mean...” Jonathan's eyes darted away.

“What?” Erik asked in a tone that would not allow condescension.

“With like, older guys?” Jonathan asked cautiously.

“They usually have the cash,” Erik informed him in a not-so-light tone. “Wasn’t anything though,” Erik shrugged. “Just quick, easy money.”

“Do you still?”

Erik tilted his head slightly and studied him as they walked. “No, those were more desperate times. I’ve got my own hustle now. If I had to,” he mused and nodded. “I’d do it again. But only if I had to.”

“Maybe I...” Jonathan began.

“No,” Erik interrupted immediately.

Jonathan frowned. “Why do you say it like that?”

Erik stared at him for a moment, turning something over in his head before he spoke. “You can’t do it, and you’d get hurt if you tried.”

Jonathan’s mouth fell open. “Why do you say that?” he demanded.

“Jonathan, we haven’t even had sex yet and we’re sleeping in the same bed, well, mattress, but you get my drift? Now, picture yourself with a total stranger,” Erik replied. “Besides, you’ve got no fight game and one of these

fuckers would end up hurting you or whoring you out. No,” he reiterated. “No way.”

CHAPTER 4

Jonathan lay down but couldn't go to sleep. Erik had gone out, claiming he had business to attend to, and that Jonathan would scare off his customers.

"Just stay here until I get back," Erik told him as he slipped out of the house.

That was six or seven hours ago. The sun had gone down and Jonathan was sitting in the dark, afraid to leave the house, and even more afraid of being in it by himself.

"Where are you?" Jonathan asked the dark, empty room.

He froze when the stairs creaked, not sure if he should call out or simply keep his mouth shut and his presence unknown. He moved silently and pressed himself against the wall, hoping to go unnoticed if it was anyone other than Erik.

Shoes, he thought, grabbing for them and slipping them on his feet. If it wasn't Erik, he was out of there. There was no way he was staying in a dark, boarded up house with a stranger.

"Jonathan," he heard Erik whisper.

He let out a huge sigh of relief. "Yeah, up here."

"Why are you in the dark? You should have lit a candle," Erik said as Jonathan searched around for the matches and lit the candle again.

"I had one lit earlier, but I didn't want to waste it," Jonathan admitted quietly.

Erik looked at him curiously for a moment and then came over and sat beside him on the mattress. "I brought you something."

"Good, I'm starving."

"Oh, sorry," Erik reached into the pocket of his hoodie and brought out a sandwich wrapped in white deli paper. He reached into his opposite pocket and pulled out a can of soda pop, placing it in front of Jonathan as he ripped into the sandwich.

“Mm, good.” Jonathan nodded around a mouthful.

Erik smiled slightly and wiped away a spot of mayonnaise from the corner of Jonathan’s mouth with his fingertip. He popped it into his own mouth and licked the mayo off as he smiled. Jonathan watched him closely, then slowly lowered his sandwich. He pulled Erik’s finger from his mouth and, as he looked Erik in the eye, placed it in his own. He sucked on it gently.

“Jesus,” Erik whispered, his eyes locked on Jonathan’s lips.

The word curbed Jonathan’s impulse. He released Erik’s hand and stuffed the sandwich into his mouth instead. “Sorry,” he mumbled when he glanced down and noticed his pants were tented. He hoped Erik didn’t notice.

“Why?” Erik asked.

Jonathan shrugged and took another bite of the sandwich. “This is good. Where’d you get it?”

“New shop over on Eleventh Street,” Erik answered after a moment of awkward silence. “I was talking with the manager and she kind of offered me a job, I think. I don’t know for sure yet. I’ve got to go talk to her tomorrow.”

“Really?”

Erik nodded, pleased with himself. “It ain’t much, but...” He shrugged again. “Could lead to better things.”

“That’s great,” Jonathan said enthusiastically. He wrapped his arm around Erik and squeezed him. “I’m so happy for you.”

“You might be able get in there too,” Erik suggested.

“Do you think so?” Jonathan asked cautiously.

“Could be, you’re old enough to work. If you give her a good sob story, you might be able to talk yourself into a job.”

“A sob story?” Jonathan asked, his initial excitement at the prospect fading.

“They usually want experience,” Erik explained. “But you could just tell her it’s your first job and you’re saving up for a car, or you want to go to

college or something.” He shrugged. “It’s better than telling her you’re homeless. She’d be less likely to hire you.”

Jonathan snorted, dismissing the idea of giving her a story. He had much more immediate needs than college or a car. And hadn’t finished high school yet, so that lie would only hurt him when the truth came out. “Just having a place with water would be nice,” he said. He finished off the sandwich and opened the soda, downing half of it before he turned to Erik again. “I couldn’t go like this anyway. I’m dirty and I smell.”

“Me too.” Erik smiled. “But I’ve brought something back to fix that.” He took the can from Jonathan’s hand, reached under the mattress for the penlight, and after he had instructed him to take the candle, led Jonathan downstairs. When he turned into the kitchen, he shone the light across the room at the rickety counter.

“Water?” Jonathan asked as he looked at the plastic five gallon container.

“It was a bitch getting back here,” Erik proclaimed. “You don’t realize how heavy that shit is until you have to lug it ten blocks.”

“You brought that all the way back here so we could wash up? What about our clothes?” Jonathan asked.

Erik shrugged one shoulder. “We’ll figure it out in the morning. She said not to come by until three, so we should be able to wash some clothes down at the Laundromat. Cost us a couple bucks.”

Jonathan beamed at him. “That is so cool.” He leaned over and kissed Erik without even thinking about it, his lips registering an electric tingle as soon as they met Erik’s. He pulled away and gulped, looking into Erik’s eyes.

Jonathan turned away and heard Erik sigh with more than a little frustration. Erik’s lips were so soft, softer than he’d thought they would be. He sighed internally and glanced back at Erik. “Sorry,” he offered quietly. He saw Erik’s disappointment harden and he was surprised when Erik grabbed the back of his head and brought their lips together with some force. He struggled against him for a moment, his hands coming up to push against Erik’s chest. But his struggle weakened quickly.

“Are you afraid of me?” Erik asked when he released Jonathan. He pressed their foreheads together and looked into Jonathan’s eyes.

“No,” came Jonathan’s breathless lie.

“Yes you are,” Erik said, nodding to himself. He was gentler the second time and held Jonathan’s gaze as he brushed his lips and slowly began nibbling at his lower lip. When Jonathan’s eyes fluttered, his mouth opened and Erik slipped his tongue in, drawing Jonathan tightly against him.

Jonathan panted when Erik released him and looked at him with wide eyes.

Erik’s face lit up with a knowing smirk as he dug into his pocket. “Oh, I almost forgot.” He pulled something from his pocket and held it up in front of Jonathan’s eyes, shining the flashlight through it.

“What is it?” Jonathan asked as he took the necklace from his hand and looked at it closer.

“It’s amber,” Erik explained. “You can’t really see it in this light but there’s an angel carved into it.” He pulled it from Jonathan’s grasp and pressed it against the penlight so the light could shine through.

Jonathan looked closely and could just make out the carving etched into the flattened backside. It was golden in color and felt warm against his hand when he touched it.

Erik offered it to him. “It’s for you.”

“For me?” Jonathan asked in surprise, looking up at him as a smile spread across his face. “Where’d you get it?”

Erik shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. The guy said once you get the string wet, you won’t ever be able to take it off without cutting it and breaking the spell, or something like that.”

“It’s beautiful, thank you,” Jonathan said as he took it from his hand. He placed the odd string over his head but had to fold his ears down to get it on. He reached up to stroke it, the carving of the angel seeming more defined as he allowed his fingers to caress the polished surface.

He glanced over at the water container. “Will you help me get it wet?” he asked.

“Are you sure?” Erik asked as he stepped closer and slipped his hand down to the small of Jonathan’s back.

Jonathan bit his bottom lip, looked into Erik’s eyes and nodded hesitantly. He turned his head slightly and focused on Erik’s lips as he pressed closer. “You have to tell me what the spell is first,” he murmured before he met Erik with a light kiss. *So soft*, he thought as he pressed against him harder.

“You have an irresistible way of getting information,” Erik murmured as he brushed his lips across Jonathan’s once more.

Jonathan smiled. “I have my moments. So what’s the spell?”

Erik shrugged, not wavering his gaze as he whispered. “He said the amber was from the tears of twenty-six angels and the spell it carried would help you find your soul mate.”

“How does it do that?” Jonathan asked quietly, looking into his eyes.

“I don’t know. He said only you would know.” He slid his hands up Jonathan’s torso, drawing him closer as he leaned in to kiss him again.

Jonathan shivered under his touch and smiled as Erik pulled away. “I think it’s working already.”

“You didn’t even get it wet yet.” Erik smirked.

Jonathan took a step back, put the candle down, and pulled off his T-shirt as Erik watched. He blushed slightly and looked down at the floor as he unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down. When he reached out to balance himself Erik grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Let me do it?” he asked.

Jonathan opened his mouth, but couldn’t find the words to refuse him. He nodded and balanced himself on Erik’s shoulders as Erik knelt in front of him and helped slide his jeans off his feet.

Erik stood with a noticeable bulge in his pants and led Jonathan over to the water jug. He bent and shone the penlight into a space that used to be a cupboard. "I think there might even be some... ah," he exclaimed, pulling out a small sliver of soap from under the space that used to hold the kitchen sink. He glanced around with some frustration, and then pulled his shirt over his head. He shrugged. "Sorry, there's nothing to wash with. This will have to do."

Jonathan nodded, chewing on his bottom lip again, as he realized that Erik intended to bathe him.

Erik balled his shirt up, drenched it in water, and then rubbed it vigorously with the soap until he had a lather. He began at Jonathan's forehead, gently rubbing away the grime he had accumulated since the last time he'd had a shower.

Jonathan's boxers started poking out immediately and he colored in the semi-darkness. Erik's touch was too gentle, too hot. Even through the wet shirt, Jonathan was still aware of the heat of his touch.

He grabbed Erik's forearm with both his hands, stopping him as he moved down to his chest. "I, um..."

Erik leaned into him and kissed away his protest. When he pulled back, he quickly shed his own jeans and tossed them to the side. His boxers were tented and he pointed down to make sure Jonathan saw it. "Nothing to be ashamed of," he said with a smirk.

Jonathan looked away, unable to meet his smile.

"Why are you so shy?" Erik asked, wetting his T-shirt again and running it gently across Jonathan's chest.

Scrawny, he answered in his head before he shrugged. Erik's body had some definition to it. Jonathan's had nothing. His entire body was a flat board. The only two things that stuck out were his dick and his nose, and even those didn't extend too far.

Erik cupped the bottom of his chin and brought his face back so that their eyes met again. “You have a beautiful body. You shouldn’t be ashamed of it.”

He met Erik’s gaze for a moment and then dropped his eyes. His boxers were getting wet and becoming almost sheer with the water running down his chest. But it hid the wet spot that had been growing there. He stared up at the ceiling to avoid the hungry look in Erik’s eyes.

“Turn around and hold your arms out,” Erik instructed. “Got to make sure you’re clean,” he added with a smile against Jonathan’s ear as he bumped his erection into Jonathan’s backside.

Jonathan blushed again, his nose twitching as the odor from his armpits rose into his face. He was so dirty. He didn’t know what Erik saw in him, not like this anyway.

He began to relax as Erik scrubbed his underarms and his sides, twisting into his touch as Erik squeezed his torso for a quick tickle. “Don’t.” He laughed.

Erik stepped up behind him, pressing his erection against his butt again. He whispered into Jonathan’s ear, as he put his thumbs on Jonathan’s waistband and slowly began to slide them down. “Okay?” Erik asked.

Jonathan froze. He was a fraction of a second from telling Erik to stop. He nodded hesitantly, and lifted his feet as Erik stooped to slip his boxers completely off.

“You are so beautiful,” Erik whispered when he stood again.

He stepped closer and Jonathan recognized the length of Erik’s naked penis pressed against the crack of his butt as Erik leaned into his neck with a kiss. He tilted his head and moaned. He couldn’t help it.

Erik wove their fingers together and wrapped their arms around Jonathan’s waist, pulling Jonathan back against his hard cock as he groaned into Jonathan’s neck. He let out a long breath and moaned in resignation before he stepped back and reached for his wet shirt. When he had rinsed it out and

lathered it up again, he tapped against Jonathan's legs until he widened his stance, and began washing them from bottom to top.

Jonathan shuddered when Erik's hand brushed against his balls. His cock was rock hard and he kept waiting for Erik to reach around him and wash it with the soapy shirt. But he didn't. Instead, Erik put the shirt aside, lathered up his hands and slid one finger into the crack of Jonathan's ass as his other hand took a firm grip around the root of his cock.

Jonathan gasped immediately, afraid that he would cum right then. But after a few quick strokes, Erik quickly splashed water over Jonathan to rinse him off. The chill of it instantly quenched Jonathan's self-muted yearning.

Erik lathered his hands again and moved behind Jonathan, his breath heavy and hot on Jonathan's neck. He slid one soapy hand down into the crack of Jonathan's ass and the other teased the head of his cock.

"Erik," Jonathan moaned as Erik slowly began to masturbate him. He groaned as his orgasm began to rise. "I'm going to cum."

They were the wrong words. Erik began to pump his cock furiously, his grip firm, his thumb swiping the tip of his cock as Jonathan squirmed under his touch. He pushed his finger into Jonathan, searching for his prostate.

"Cum for me baby," he whispered when Jonathan moaned and a long spurt of cum shot onto the floor. He bit at Jonathan's shoulder as he continued to jerk him, his finger rubbing the nub deep in Jonathan's ass.

Jonathan's legs buckled and Erik adjusted his grip, leaning back against the counter so he could take both their weights. Erik pulled his finger out, holding Jonathan around the waist as he stroked him to a finish. "How was that?"

Jonathan nodded, out of breath. He turned in Erik's arms and kissed him deeply, locking his arms around his neck as he ground his belly against Erik's stiff erection.

"Why don't you go up and lay down. I can wash myself," Erik said.

Jonathan touched the necklace and rubbed it between his fingers. “You sure?” He was wavering, uncertain if he wanted to wait for Erik upstairs or wash him as erotically as he’d just had done to his own body.

Erik nodded and splashed more water on Jonathan to rinse him off again. “I’ve done this plenty of times.”

Desire rose in Jonathan like it had never before. He pulled Erik away from the counter and looked down at his cock. Erik watched him closely. He touched Erik gently, exploring the soft heat of his cock, the hard width of it against his palm. He looked into Erik’s eyes. “I’ll be waiting,” he said as he trailed his fingers down to the tip and turned for the stairs.

Erik’s brow went up in surprise and he nodded quickly. “Okay.”

The candle flickered in the corner of the room, throwing soft shadows over the bed. “Scared?” Erik asked after he lay down and brushed his hand lightly across Jonathan’s temple.

Jonathan looked down the blanket they had scrounged up and saw his toes poking out, he wiggled them. “No,” he lied, his heart pounding in his chest. Downstairs his desires had all but knocked him sideways, but now he was scared again.

Before Jonathan could over-think his decision, Erik planted his mouth on his lips. He pressed hard, his appetite whetted from the activities in the kitchen. He climbed over Jonathan and straddled his waist with his legs, never breaking contact with his lips.

He gasped as he pulled away and looked down at Jonathan. “God, you are so fucking beautiful.”

He put his arms on each side of Jonathan’s head and looked down at him before he moved in more slowly and touched their lips together again. Jonathan’s arms came up as if by reflex and wrapped around Erik’s shoulders. He could feel Erik’s cock rubbing against his own.

It felt so... right. He tightened his grip, and then ran his hand through Erik's hair as they kissed.

Erik broke the kiss first, breathed deeply, then began a trail of butterfly kisses down to Jonathan's navel. His eyes met Jonathan's as he flicked his tongue across the tip of Jonathan's cock. "I want to make you cum, and cum, and cum, and then I want to fuck you and make you cum again. Are you okay with that?"

Erik didn't give him time to answer. He swallowed Jonathan's cock as Jonathan grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled his breath in through clenched teeth.

"Yes," Jonathan answered as his back arched off the bed.

Erik sat up on his knees and turned his body allowing Jonathan to take his cock if he wanted to.

He did. Jonathan maneuvered himself directly under Erik and began sucking on him immediately. One hand was milking Erik's shaft, the other was playing up and down his ass. He could think of nothing he wanted more than having Erik cum in his mouth.

"I'm going to cum," Erik warned after a few minutes.

Jonathan attacked his cock with renewed vigor, but gagged when Erik thrust deep into his throat and began to cum. He tried to push him off but it was no use. Erik blasted into his throat twice before he pulled back and finished on Jonathan's tongue.

"Oh my God," Erik moaned.

Jonathan turned his head and released Erik from his mouth.

"Not yet, baby. Put it back in your mouth and get me ready to fuck you," Erik instructed, looking back at Jonathan.

Jonathan took Erik's cock back in his mouth and began to suck on it gently as Erik went to work on him again.

Erik swelled in his mouth after a few moments. But this time Jonathan had the mind to explore Erik's body and mimicked exactly what Erik was doing. He licked at the tip of Erik's cock, swirled his tongue around the head, and then nuzzled his nose into his balls.

"Erik," he whispered in warning.

Erik pulled off of him immediately. "Not yet, baby." He turned, placing his body between Jonathan's legs. He spread them wide and began licking the inside of Jonathan's thighs, slowly working his way around his balls, up his shaft, and back down again until he lifted Jonathan's legs in the air and folded them back. When he jammed his tongue into Jonathan's ass, Jonathan moaned and slammed his hands down to the mattress, gripping the sheet and twisting it in his hands.

"Fuck," he gasped.

Erik glanced up at him and chuckled. "You like that?"

Jonathan wasn't sure if he did or not. It seemed kind of gross, but it felt... "Oh my God," he murmured when Erik jabbed his tongue into him again. It sent a shiver through his whole body.

Erik reached under a nearby pile of clothes and grabbed the lube. Squirting some onto Jonathan's hole, he slipped a finger into him and began to loosen his rectum. "You're so fucking tight. I can't wait to get in that ass," he said as he started licking Jonathan's cock. He kept whispering as he licked, never taking Jonathan's penis fully into his mouth. He only teased him with his tongue.

"I'm gonna fuck you raw, baby. You want that?" he asked as he slid a second finger in.

Jonathan squirmed beneath him. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes." It felt so good; so right. He wanted Erik to fuck him. He wanted it bad. He gasped and locked his legs together when Erik slid his third finger in. The last one was a little painful and he glanced down at Erik with a question on his face.

“Just relax, baby. Ride through it,” he offered as he took the tip of Jonathan’s cock in his mouth. “That’s it,” he said as Jonathan relaxed his legs and spread them open again. “Nice and easy. We have all night.”

When he reached over him and grabbed a condom, Jonathan watched as he rolled it on and lubed it up. He lifted Jonathan’s legs and squirted more lube on Jonathan’s hole. “It’s going to hurt a little when I go in,” he said as he positioned his cock. “Just ride through it. I guarantee you’ll like it after a minute or two. Ready?”

Jonathan nodded hesitantly. Erik looked at him for a moment, gentling his lust, and leaned forward to kiss him. He took Jonathan’s legs and pressed them down on the mattress near his shoulders.

Jonathan winced as soon as Erik’s cock put pressure on his hole.

“Easy, baby” Erik said. “Once the head is in, I’ll stop for a sec and let you get used to it.”

Jonathan pulled a breath in through his teeth as Erik pushed in.

“Fuck you’re tight,” Erik gasped. “There we go.” He looked into Jonathan’s eyes and gave him a gentle smile before bending his neck to kiss him.

When Jonathan gave him the go-ahead, Erik began to move, sliding slowly in and out of him until Jonathan was beginning to pant in Erik’s ear.

“Okay?” Erik asked.

Jonathan moaned in response.

“Tight,” Erik growled as he began to build a rhythm. “So fucking tight.”

He put more force behind his thrusts and soon Jonathan was meeting them, pushing his ass back at Erik’s thrust, waiting for it, then riding as far down his shaft as he could go. He started panting as he felt another orgasm building. “You’re going to make me cum again,” Jonathan gasped between breaths.

Erik lifted his torso away from Jonathan's body and began slamming his cock into him. He locked his eyes on Jonathan's and pushed himself deep with each thrust. "Come for me, baby. Cum with my cock buried in you."

When Jonathan's ass squeezed his cock with his next orgasm, Erik grunted in pleasure, pounding away until he had filled the condom. He pushed one last time and fell on top of Jonathan, out of breath.

"Fuck, that was good."

Jonathan smiled and wrapped his arms around Erik. He glowed with the thought that he was no longer a virgin, and wondered why in the hell he had been so worried about it to begin with. He nuzzled into Erik's neck, drifting off to sleep with Erik still on top of him.

CHAPTER 5

Erik was gone when he woke up in the morning, but Jonathan smiled as he caressed the amber around his neck. He pulled it away from his chest and studied it in the light that crept through the top of the window, noting how intricate the carving was and how delicate the angel's wings looked as they fanned out.

He sighed and smiled, rolling onto his tummy and laughing, because he felt the sun immediately start warming his butt cheeks as he lay on the mattress completely nude. "Erik," he called out, hoping he would come back to the room and find him poised on the mattress, waiting for a repeat of last night. Before he left, Jonathan had felt Erik's rekindled desire pressed up against his backside. In a hazy sleep, he registered the kiss on his temple as Erik climbed over him and dressed in the darkness.

"Erik," he called out again. There was no answer. He sighed and got up, reaching for his boxers and collecting the rest of his clothes so he could go outside and take a piss behind the big bush in the back yard. He was always worried that someone from a high-rise around them would be watching him, but that morning the thought didn't really seem to bother him as much.

When he came back in, he realized that something had changed last night and it wasn't just his virginity. He had started to think of the house as *theirs*. He smiled at the thought.

Their house. It would be just he and Erik taking on the world together. They didn't have much, but they had each other and that was worth more than anything he could think of.

He started cleaning the house, just small things at first; there really wasn't much he could do in this place. But it was enough to make him feel a sense of accomplishment when he was finished. But they didn't want it too clean either. Erik had already warned him that too much organization would only invite trouble if someone wandered in. If the house looked like shit, people would be more willing to move on than not. Nobody wanted to stay in a place like this if they didn't have to, and Erik was big on trying to make sure they didn't have

to. Or so he claimed. Jonathan hadn't seen anyone come near the house other than a few kids with spray cans. In fact, he hadn't seen any other homeless people in this part of the city at all, which now that he thought about it, was kind of odd. Maybe it was the proximity to the high-rises around them. It definitely wasn't a homeless-friendly neighborhood.

"Oh well," he said aloud. The thought didn't bother him one bit. If anything, the idea that no one else would be scampering through the window made him feel safer.

He tapped his foot, looking around and wondering what else he could do. He paused when he went upstairs and saw the door on the room across the hall. He tilted his head to the side, suddenly curious as to why Erik had warned him off. He reached for the handle and glanced over his shoulder again. He knew Erik was gone and not likely to be back for hours yet, but he was apprehensive anyway. This was the only room in the house with a door on it and Erik had never explained why. He had only forbidden Jonathan's entry.

He reached into his pocket and took out the penlight as the door swung open. His brow folded in confusion as he looked around. The room was as dark as the rest of the house, but unlike every other room, this room could almost be considered clean, even though it was covered with a thick dust that made him sneeze as soon as he stepped in. There was a mattress on the floor with a faded bedspread tucked neatly over it. A weathered dresser stood across the room, and beside the mattress was a nightstand which appeared to be near rotted. He swung the light into the closet and noticed a few dresses hanging in the door-less shadows.

Strange, he thought. It didn't make sense, not against the disaster the rest of the house was. *Why aren't we sleeping in here?* he wondered. Surely the door would be an added level of security for them. But it was kind of creepy too. Maybe that was why Erik had them sleeping across the hall.

He glanced nervously over his shoulder again and stepped in farther, walking to the nightstand, drawn by the picture frame he saw there. He gasped when he picked it up, his head whipping around the room and trying to take all of it in at once.

“Erik,” he whispered as he stared at the young boy in the photo. He pulled his sleeve over his hand and rubbed the glass to wipe away the dust. There was a woman with her arms wrapped around Erik, and they were both smiling beside a ride in a theme park. Jonathan thought Erik looked to be seven or eight, but not much older than ten. Behind them, he could see crowds passing on a long pier. It looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place it. It was nowhere near this city, he was sure.

He put the frame down and walked around the room, his fingers tracing across the top of the dresser as he stopped and looked at the small mementoes atop it, covered with dust. He picked up a dusty hand mirror and glanced at his own reflection. When he turned it slightly, he saw Erik standing in the doorway behind him, his chest swelling in outrage at the intrusion. He whipped around to face him, almost dropping the mirror in the process.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Erik demanded. “I fucking told you *not* to come in here,” Erik screamed.

Jonathan’s eyes went wide as Erik stomped over to him. “I’m sorry. It just... I...”

“Get out!” Erik screamed, snatching the mirror from his hand and pushing him away from the dresser.

Jonathan stared and stepped to the side, pressing his back against the wall.

“I said get the fuck out,” Erik screamed again. He grabbed Jonathan by the arm, pulled him off the wall and shoved him into the hallway. “Get your stuff and get the fuck out.”

“Erik, I’m sorry,” Jonathan pleaded. “I didn’t mean to...”

Erik ran up to him, only centimeters from his face, his fists clenched. His breath was hot and rank. “I said, get the fuck out. I’m not going to say it again,” he growled in a low, dangerous voice.

Jonathan backed up a step, with his hands up in front of him, waiting for a blow. He took a few more steps before he turned into their bedroom and quickly started grabbing his stuff. He grabbed his book bag and began shoving

his clothes into it. He glanced over his shoulder as Erik stared and ran his hand through his hair. He seemed unable to take in the cleanliness of the room.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“I...” Jonathan stuttered.

Erik dropped his hand and glared at Jonathan, his nostrils flaring. “Undo it, put everything back.”

Jonathan didn’t understand. “Put it back? I just picked up a little. I thought if we were going to wash...”

“Put it back!” Erik shouted.

Jonathan blanched. “I’m sorry...” he said as he started pushing piles over. Tears were forming and falling over his long lashes. How could this day be so different from last night?

Erik rushed over and grabbed one pile after another, flinging them around the room. Jonathan had disposed of the trash so he only had clothes to toss around.

“I said put them back.” Erik whirled and screamed at Jonathan before the clothes settled around the room. “You think we’re playing house here. Is that it? You think you’re going to be my boyfriend, and we’ll just live happily ever after in this fucking dump?”

“No. I... I... was just trying to make it nice for you.”

“Nice?” Erik barked. “The fuck do you know about nice?” Erik snapped at him. “You keep running around here like I’m supposed to be protecting you. That’s not my fucking job, you know?”

“I didn’t say it was,” Jonathan argued halfheartedly.

“Yeah,” he sneered. “I’m supposed to feel sorry for you. Couldn’t hang with daddy so you took off.” He mimicked Jonathan’s voice. “I feel so fucking sorry for you. Really, I do. You know what I had?” he demanded. “I had a nutcase for a mom and a dad who said fuck it all and left us behind when he

blew his brains out. He couldn't hang either." He sneered. "Your pathetic sob story ain't shit, so stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"I... I didn't say it was," Jonathan murmured, shocked at his response and unsure what had caused his tirade. The tears were flowing freely now and he wiped at them with the back of his hand.

"Yeah, that's it, cry. Fucking wuss," Erik continued as if Jonathan hadn't spoken. "You don't know shit about what life is like. You need to go back to your daddy and hope he takes you in."

Jonathan shook his head not wanting to hear any more. "Why are you acting like this?"

"It's not an act, you little wuss," Erik growled as he charged up to Jonathan and barked in his face. "You need to stop acting like such a pussy."

He could tell Erik was high on something, now that he was up close. His pupils were dilated and he smelled of a chemical sweat. "I'm sorry," he said as he backed away. "Whatever I did, I'm sorry."

"*I'm sorry. I'm sorry,*" Erik mimed derisively. "You're right. You are fucking sorry. Now get the fuck out."

Jonathan felt the wall come up against his back. He looked to the side and saw the doorway just to his left. Now he understood who Special K was, just a younger version of his father. Before he could even think about it, he ran down the stairs, thoughts of his father, and how much Erik sounded like him, clouding his eyes. When he glanced up the stairs one last time, he saw Erik cross the hall and stomp into his mother's bedroom. A boom echoed through the house as he slammed the door.

Jonathan made his way outside and sank to the concrete walkway, leaning against the house. It felt warm against his back as he wiped his tears away. He was confused and angry. Erik had stopped him from going into the police station, but what Erik didn't seem to understand was that Jonathan had been there by necessity. It hadn't been a choice. He'd been hopeless. And he certainly hadn't wanted to return home. The reason he had left hadn't changed,

his understanding had. He knew that he could not survive on the street. But there hadn't been any other options for him. He had to return home.

And then, Erik appeared, giving him a glimmer of hope. And throughout their whole short conversation, Jonathan kept hearing his grandmother's voice, telling him how sometimes God put people into your life for a reason.

He blew out a long breath and pushed himself to his feet, looking at the high-rises a few blocks over. Maybe Erik was right. Maybe he *had* looked to Erik to be his savior. Maybe that notion had given him romantic ideas about making a home together.

He shook his head and when he got down to the sidewalk, he turned and looked up at the house. He hadn't meant any harm, he was just curious. But now he understood Erik a little more, and he wondered if maybe *that* was the reason Erik had flown into such a rage.

He sighed again, and looked up and down the street. He had the twenty dollars in his pocket that Erik had given him for an emergency and, now, thanks to Erik, a small clue about how to survive. "I can do this," he told himself. He glanced up at the house one last time, caressed the amber around his neck, and whispered another apology as he looked at the boarded up windows.

A week later, he was standing in front of the police station again. He looked around but there was no one to stop him this time. Even if there was, he doubted they would be able to convince him that he'd be better off on the street.

His shoulders slumped when he realized how accurate Erik had unwittingly been. He didn't know if his dad would allow him to return, or not. He probably would. He'd probably let him in the house and not say a single word until he got drunk again, and then he would start telling him how much of a loser he was and how he *knew* Jonathan would come crawling back. And on and on it would go, until the blows started coming again. Until Jonathan had been cowed to the point that he reminded his father how much like his mother he

was. How his eyes brought back all the old wounds his mother had inflicted upon them when she walked out and disappeared from their lives.

But there was no one else, and he had nowhere to go. He hadn't eaten in three days, and he'd almost been caught at the convenience store trying to steal a candy bar. He could go back home on his own and face his failure at life, or he could wait until he got caught and let the cops drag him back. Although, knowing his father, he would probably tell the police to lock him up for a while so it would toughen him up.

He resigned himself to that fate and put one foot on the pavement beside the curb. He was about to step onto the street, when a pair of arms folded around him and pulled him back to the sidewalk.

"I knew you'd come back here," Erik whispered into his ear.

He wanted to protest, wanted to demand that Erik release him, but he melted back against his chest and let Erik take his weight with a deep, internal sigh. He was so relieved to feel his touch again, so happy, but so tired, and so alone. "I didn't think you wanted me, and I can't do this by myself. You were right. I'm a wuss."

Erik kissed him behind the ear. "No, you're not. I'm just an asshole, and it's been so long since I could trust anyone that..." He paused and let out a long breath. "I'm sorry."

"I never meant to hurt you," Jonathan said as he turned in Erik's arms. "I was just curious."

Erik's jaw clenched for just a second. "It's a touchy subject," he admitted. "But that's no excuse. My mom hasn't been there for me since that picture and..." He shrugged. "Would you like to meet her?"

"She's still alive?" Jonathan asked in surprise. He had been sure from Erik's reaction that she had died sometime in the recent past.

"You could say that. Come on," he insisted as he wrapped his fingers around Jonathan's and tugged him along until he fell into step beside him.

An hour later, they were standing in front of an abandoned hotel. It was so dilapidated Jonathan couldn't even read the name on the building. There were no doors or windows at all. It was just a big, brick husk of some bygone era, covered in kudzu. There was a weathered danger notice from the city hooked to a broken fence that warned people away but Erik took no notice of it and led him to the front entrance.

He felt Erik squeeze his hand once as if to bolster himself and then he led Jonathan up the steps and into the cavernous foyer. Jonathan paused and looked around as Erik glanced over his shoulder and tugged him along.

"It's just up here," he said as they rounded a corner that led up a flight of crumbling cement stairs.

Erik stopped in front of an interior room with no windows and called out quietly. "Mom? You here? It's Erik." He glanced over at Jonathan, cleared his throat, and called out to her again. "Mom, you here?"

The woman who came out of the shadows looked nothing like the picture Jonathan had seen. Her face was haggard and drawn, and she was stooped like a woman many times her age, whatever that was. And she smelled terribly. Her hair was a wild mess and her face was covered with dirt. Jonathan wanted to turn away, but he saw Erik watching him out of the corner of his eye. He made a move to step forward and put his hand out to her but Erik grabbed him immediately and pulled him back, shaking his head. "Don't do that. Just stay here."

"It's me, Mom," Erik said again as he slowly went towards her.

She looked between the two of them, her eyes narrowing on Jonathan. "Who's he?" she demanded, her voice raspy and harsh.

Her whole countenance seemed off somehow, and Jonathan immediately felt sorry for both her and Erik. He'd thought she was a drug addict at first, but as he studied her, he understood that she was mentally ill. His heart went out to Erik immediately. No wonder he had reacted so violently.

“Just a friend, Mom. He won’t come any closer,” Erik said as he shifted himself so that he blocked her line of sight to Jonathan. He reached into his pocket. “I brought you some food. Are you hungry?”

Jonathan saw her dart her head around Erik and glance at him before she spoke again. “Not hungry. You bring anything else?”

“Just food,” Erik said with resignation.

She grunted in disinterest and started to recede into the shadows again.

There was a chair nearby and Erik went to it and knelt down, making a show of putting the sandwich on the seat. “I’m going to leave it here for you, don’t forget about it, okay?”

She grunted again from the darkness and Erik turned to look Jonathan in the eye. A long, frustrated sigh followed as he stood and peered into the darkness. “I’m going, Mom. You want me to bring anything next time?”

“No,” she barked out of the darkness. “Just tell that lazy ass father of yours to pay the light bill. I’m tired of being in the dark.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll tell him,” he said as he took Jonathan’s hand and led him out of the building.

Erik paused when they reached the gate and looked back over his shoulder. “That’s my mom,” he offered as he rubbed the back of his neck and glanced at Jonathan.

“I’m sorry. Is there anything we can do?”

Erik blew out a breath weighted with anguish. “No. She’s not a danger to anyone so they wouldn’t commit her without insurance. The only other option would be prison.” He paused as he glanced at the building again. “After my dad....” He shook his head as if he could push the past away with his words. “She’s getting worse every year,” he admitted. “I don’t know what to do anymore.”

He took a deep breath and reached for both of Jonathan’s hands. He held Jonathan’s eye with his own as he spoke. “I know I ain’t much; probably won’t ever be, but you’re the only sane thing I have in my life right now.” The

words seemed too heavy for his gaze and he glanced down at the dirt between them. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to go. It's just... She's been my secret for so long. I didn't know how to react." He stopped again as his forehead furrowed. "I want you to stay," he said as he looked up, directly into Jonathan's eyes. "We'll find somewhere else to stay besides that stupid house. She's never going to come back," he added as his eyes flicked to the building for a moment.

Jonathan nodded silently when Erik's eyes touched on him again. "We'll figure something out." He stepped into Erik's embrace and held still as Erik squeezed the breath out of him.

THE END

Author Bio

*Award winning writer **Brandon Shire** has been writing for 15 years and has only recently begun to publish his work. Genres include contemporary gay fiction, m/m romance, horror, and science fiction. Ten percent of the proceeds from the sales of his books are donated to LGBT Youth charities combatting homelessness.*

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